



# Discussing Design

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION  
& COLLABORATION THROUGH CRITIQUE

Adam Connor & Aaron Irizarry

Foreword by Russ Unger

## Discussing Design

Real critique has become a lost skill among teams today. Critique is intended to help teams strengthen their designs, products, and services, rather than be used to assert authority or push agendas under the guise of "feedback." In this practical guide, Adam Connor and Aaron Irizarry teach you techniques and tools for helping members of your team give and receive critique.

Using firsthand lessons from prominent figures in the design community, this book examines the good, the bad, and the ugly of feedback. You'll come away with tips, actionable insights, and activities for making critique a part of your collaborative process.

### Topics Include:

- Best practices (and anti-patterns) for giving and receiving critique
- Cultural aspects that influence your ability to critique constructively
- When, how much, and how often to use critique in the creative process
- Facilitation techniques for making critiques timely and more effective
- Strategies for dealing with difficult people and challenging situations

**Adam Connor**, VP of Organizational Design at Mad\*Pow, helps teams improve their own ability to create and collaborate effectively.

**Aaron Irizarry**, Director of User Experience for Nasdaq Product Design, provides workshops to help product teams improve the discussion around product design.

“I have personally been able to leverage many of the valuable insights and takeaways they shared with my team at Disney to structure formal design critique sessions, and it has helped to make our design process even more effective.”

—**Priyanka Kakar**  
User Experience Director  
at The Walt Disney Company

“Adam and Aaron are creating a great dialogue around the importance of critique and how to do it well. I haven't seen anyone else really bring this topic to the forefront. I'll be recommending their book to all my clients.”

—**Jared Spool**  
Founding Principal,  
User Interface Engineering

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# Discussing Design

*Improving Communication and  
Collaboration Through Critique*

Adam Connor and Aaron Irizarry

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## Discussing Design

by Adam Connor and Aaron Irizarry

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## [ *Foreword* ]

Critique requires an investment.

This investment certainly comes from the person who provides the critique; he has an obligation upon accepting the request to provide you with an ability to act and/or react to his input. (There is a bit of beauty here in that you get to decide how to act and/or react to his input, and that can be to do nothing with it. You should, of course, be prepared to explain why you did nothing with it.)

Your investment (and your responsibility), however, is much, much greater. It is you who are obligated to set up your audience to provide you the critique that you want and need through a structured request. It is you who needs to provide people a proper context—the scope and goals for the critique—to set the proper expectations and to frame the critique that allow you to explore possible improvements.

This might sound simple enough; however, the reality is that most people don't operate under any formal rules of critique. Instead, a lot of times designs are shared over email, through project management software or other design-sharing services, in chat, or through other rather narrow communication channels. Reactions and responses turn up in Reply All bullet points, fragments of disjointed and combined discussion threads, and even worse, piecemeal over a period of time.

Indeed, hell can be other people.

In many cases, we're to blame.

Designers have to not only respond and react, they also have to try to organize and coordinate discussions, thoughts, and debates and then try to iterate. And then, the process is repeated again (and sometimes again, and again) as a new draft is sent around again, bereft of context or explanation of what's been updated.

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This is time consuming and fraught with potential mistakes and out-of-scope requests. And, for the love of all things holy, think of the timelines and budgets!

Unfortunately, this really isn't uncommon. It's possible that you were just nodding your head in agreement while you were reading that, thinking of that one project that was such a tremendous pain at that one employer where the client, the boss, and everyone else were so impossible to work with. I get it. I've been there in the thick of that trap, and I've perpetuated it, too.

It doesn't have to be any of these ways, and picking up this book is your first step toward ensuring that those vicious cycles stop happening around—or worse, because of—you. The most successful designers know that good, structured critique guides them through the design process and helps them to produce their best work. They know that they bear the burden of ensuring they get what they need from others involved in the project in order to make a design work, and they know that this helps make it a lot easier to sell their work to their clients.

Read this book. Read every last page of its critique-detailing goodness. And then apply it to your design practice. You'll make some mistakes along the way; however, you'll also find yourself improving at critique from your very first attempt. Before you know it, you won't consider any other way to create your best work.

Adam and Aaron are two of the best designers I know, and this is largely due to their focus on unlocking the vault that holds all the secrets to good, structured critique. They're not only great designers, they're also kind and generous souls who are sharing all that they've learned with us so that we, too, can be better designers and serve our clients and our purpose as best as we can.

I've been lucky—I've been able to witness Aaron and Adam as they've gone through the exploration of critique. What started as a joint presentation turned into a website. That then turned into workshops at some of the best-known conferences around the globe, which then turned into a detailed book proposal, which finally turned into the book you're holding in your hands. I've learned so much along the way, and I've improved my own practices and approach to design critique along the way. I've been able to work with teams where we invested a very small percentage of our time in critique and in turn felt that the investment



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was returned incrementally. I've put their practices into use in the practice of design and also in content creation, presentations, teaching, and more.

This critique stuff works.

This book is a lot like reliving Adam and Aaron's journey for me, and it's a reminder of all the things that I can still do better through the practice of proper critique. I look forward to hearing your stories about how critique has helped change and improve all that you do, too.

**—RUSS UNGER**  
**JANUARY 2015**



## The Lost Skill of Critique

“Make it pop some more.”

“I don’t really like it... I am not sure why, but this isn’t it... I’ll know it when I see it.”

“What the hell is this?”

“Can you make it look like Apple?”

“You should move that text to the top of the page and make all of the buttons icons.”

If you have spent any time building, designing, or crafting something—or working with those who do—you have probably heard something along the lines of these statements, which are often followed by something like, “Well, I’m just giving you some feedback.”

Or, perhaps you were part of a program in school that included critique where your professor tried to “break you down” for your own good. Although this is not the situation in all academic settings, some schools and educators use critique and feedback sessions as a way to prepare students for the “real world,” but often they just leave students upset and with some bad memories.

There is a lot of ambiguity around feedback and why we share it with others. When feedback lacks a focus and appropriate purpose it is counterproductive and can even be harmful at times. Even in social interactions we see this type of feedback being used to express opinions. So often, when a new product is released or updated, before you know it the masses are providing 140 characters of opinion about what should have been done or created.

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The more we hear stories (and experience situations ourselves) of out-of-context opinions, harsh phrases, and directional statements shared as feedback, we've seen that the real value and utility of feedback as part of design and creative processes being lost.

In short, we've forgotten how to critique. Because of this—and because of how feedback often is used—we harm not only the products and services we create, but our teams, organizations, and working relationships, as well.

Critique is supposed to be helpful. It should be an analysis that helps us understand what is working and what isn't and whether we are on the right track toward reaching our goals. But the critique and feedback we see in so many teams doesn't do this. Instead it's often used as a way for individuals to assert their own authority or push their own perspectives and objectives. It could be someone trying show expertise to others in the room by pointing out all of a design's faults without the real intention to help the design get better. I have also seen individuals pick a design apart as a way to eliminate any competition between the design being reviewed and their design.

The practice of real critique has become a lost skill.

The lines have become blurred in relation to feedback, critique, and how we communicate while working together. So the questions arise. What can we do to better understand the issues that are keeping us from productively talking about what we are designing and ensuring that it meets the goals that were set for it? How can we improve the way in which we give and receive critique so that it is helpful?

## **What This Book Is About**

This books sets out to answer these questions in a way that provides individuals, teams, and organizations with techniques, tools, and resources that will help them improve the quality and usefulness of the conversations surrounding ideas and designs within their teams and with their clients.

We will analyze and define critique and examine the good, the bad, and the ugly of both giving and receiving it. We'll examine the cultural aspects that support or hinder critique. And, we will provide tips and insights on how to integrate critique as a part of your process.

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## Why We Wrote This Book

This book was born from many conversations that Adam and I were having separately with our peers on the topics of feedback and how we would like to see it improve in our practices and community. A mutual friend, Whitney Hess, gave us the idea to collaborate on this content together. Before long a blog post turned into a conference submission, which in turn grew into many talks and workshops at conferences and for companies across the United States.

The more we heard individuals' stories and were asked about how this content could be worked into various teams and environments it became clear that putting together a book that could be used both as an examination of critique and communication as well as a reference for advice and tips would prove helpful.

That is the core of why we wrote this book. We have been there. We have heard the harsh feedback and tried to work with a lack of useful comments and "suggestions." We have felt the nervousness of presenting designs to teams and clients for feedback and we have had our designs shredded and picked apart, leaving us feeling defeated.

We have also felt the satisfaction that comes from having productive conversations about what we are designing, feeling like you can do something actionable with the insights gathered. We wrote this book to help teams better communicate about what they are designing together, to improve collaboration, and establish a framework for productive critiques.

## Who Should Read This Book

Maybe you're thinking, "That's all well and good, but I'm not a designer or artist. Why should I read this book?"

To that, we'd look you dead in the eye and say something like, "Designers and artists don't own critique. Critique is for anyone who wants to improve anything that they are building or doing. Critique isn't a 'design' skill, it's a life skill."

This book has been written based on experiences that included multiple roles within teams and organizations: product owners, project managers, designers, developers, executives, marketing professionals, and more. If you are a part of a team or project working to design or create something, you are a part of the conversation surrounding it. This book

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serves as a reference for anyone who is a part of the process and can help team members work to improve how they communicate and collaborate with one another.

## Terms We Use

Though we have written this book for anyone who is a part of building something, we are using some general terms throughout the book for the sake of consistency.

We will use *designer* to refer to anyone who has come up with an idea or works on the creation of an idea in any way.

We will use the term *product* to refer to whatever it is that is being created or is being proposed.

*Critique* and *feedback* are often seen as interchangeable terms, and to some extent they are; we will explore common misunderstandings of these terms and how they work together best.

## How This Book Is Organized

This book will cover the various aspects of critique, its definition, and how we interact with one another in critique settings.

### Chapter 1: Understanding Critique

In Chapter 1, we explain the various forms of feedback that are often seen in a critique setting, the challenges that come from specific forms of feedback, and the types of feedback we should look to gather. We will also discuss the various perceptions associated with critique.

### Chapter 2: What Critique Looks Like

In the second chapter, we talk about what critique looks like and the importance of intent in the critique process. We also cover best practices for giving and receiving critique and tips on how to know when you are not giving good critique.

### Chapter 3: Culture and Critique

Chapter 3 explores aspects of our individual and organizational cultures that influence our ability to effectively critique. We also look at some of the common barriers that you can encounter when trying to establish a productive critique practice.

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In addition, we discuss the foundational elements that teams can use to effectively critique any effort, such as goals, principles, and scenarios.

#### **Chapter 4: Making Critique a Part of Your Process**

In Chapter 4, we talk through making critique a part of your process, and some of the challenges that come with this effort. We will cover things to remember when making critique a part of your process. We will also cover the areas where we see critique taking place (standalone critiques, design reviews, and collaborative activities) and their differences. Chapter 4 also covers when, how much, and how often we should critique.

#### **Chapter 5: Facilitating Critique**

Facilitation plays a key role in critique. In Chapter 5, we dive into this skill and how to use it to keep critiques effective and on track.

We share rules that you can use to help participants understand how a critique session is supposed to run and what to avoid doing to help make the session productive.

Chapter 5 also covers how to prepare for, kick off, run, and follow up after a critique. It includes tips on who to include as participants, advice for presenting designs, and making sure everyone understands not only the goals of the product but the goals of the critique session.

#### **Chapter 6: Critiquing with Difficult People and in Challenging Situations**

It's inevitable that as you work to improve collaboration, communication, and critique, you'll encounter situations and individuals that present a challenge. In Chapter 6, we examine some common challenging situations and strategies we can use to work through them.

We'll also discuss what to do when people become difficult in a critique, providing tips and techniques for dealing with them and still salvaging the critique. If you've ever experienced someone giving you a list of changes or a design showing what they want instead of feedback, we explain how to respond and get back on a path to critique.

We hope that the breakout of these chapters will not only provide a solid understanding of critique as you read through it, but that they are broken out in such a way that they can be used as a reference when needed.

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## Chapter 7: Summary: Critique Is At The Core Of Great Collaboration

We circle back around and summarize main points from each chapter, putting a nice bow on everything and preparing you to get out there and improve the design conversations you have with your teams.

### Acknowledgments

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# Understanding Critique

## Conversations Matter

Whether you're a developer, project manager, designer, business analyst, and so on, it's more than likely that you've been in a meeting in which the topic of "design" has come up explicitly or otherwise. No matter what you're designing—a tool, a service, a product, a brochure, a logo, whatever it might be—you're going to be involved in conversations about how it works, what it can do, what it contains, how it looks, and more.

Collaboration and coordination are critical elements in the success of projects in most (if not all) modern organizations. There isn't a single individual who is responsible for coming up with an idea, designing it, building it, selling it, and supporting it. Instead, these responsibilities and the expertise that come with them are divided among a variety of contributors who each bring knowledge to the team. So, we need to work together, combining our skills and know-how. And to work together, we need to talk with one another. We need to discuss what it is we're designing, why we're creating it, and how it will all come together.

But as many of us have experienced, conversations about design can turn painful. At a minimum, when these discussions go wrong, they delay progress. They seem to go nowhere. People disagree, argue, and team members walk away not sure what to do next.

Although individual instances like this might not seem like a huge deal, it's the culmination of discussions that go this way that really affects a team. Over time, delays accumulate; the resulting lack of momentum and repeated questioning of what to do next gives rise to a sense that none of the team members seem to agree, which has a tremendous negative impact on people. They stop wanting to collaborate

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and they begin to care less and less about the project. In some cases they begin to silo themselves, feeling that because they can only control their own output, it will be their sole focus without regard to the other team members and how it effects them.

In some cases, though, these conversations can become much worse. As people talk about what they think should or should not be a part of the design, it's not uncommon for individuals to become emotional. For some, this can be difficult to control, which can lead to people getting defensive, tempers flaring, yelling, berating, and lines being crossed.

The intent of this book is to help make the conversations that happen as a part of projects more effective and productive with regard to their objectives. These discussions are always happening. Sometimes, they take place in a formal setting such as a meeting. Sometimes, they're more informal, perhaps when we're standing in line to pay for a cup of coffee. No matter where these conversations occur, we need to be able to discuss our work.

Unfortunately, we don't often take time to examine these conversations and understand what makes them good or bad. This book looks at the elements of these conversations and the patterns through which they arise. It also describes best practices for making these conversations more productive to projects and toward strengthening a team's ability to collaborate through incorporation of critique, an often-overlooked component of the design process.

## The Problem with Asking for “Feedback”

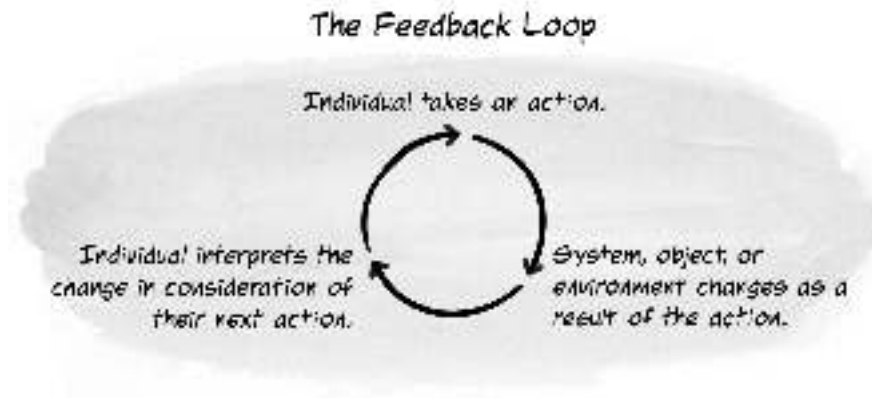
Requesting feedback on a design or idea is one of the most common ways design discussions are initiated. Feedback is a common element and activity in not just our workplace cultures, but in many social cultures, as well. “Feedback” is a word that's become ingrained in our vocabulary. We use it all the time, à la “I'd love to get your feedback on something...”

During a project, a designer might just grab someone at a nearby desk because she wants to take a break from putting her design together and think about what she's done so far. Or the feedback request might be part of a planned milestone or date in the project's timeline, often called *Design Reviews*.

It's not that either of these is a bad time to get other opinions. Rather, the real problems we encounter come from the word "feedback" itself, what it means, and how we ask for it.

### WHAT IS FEEDBACK?

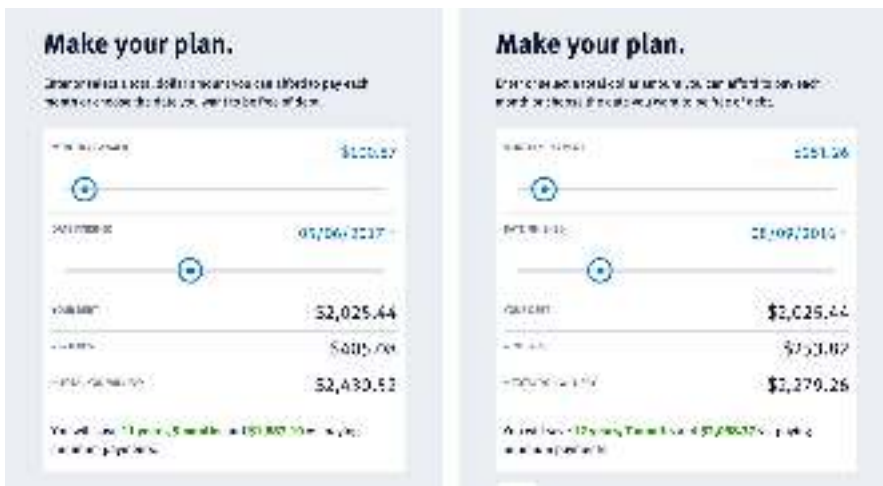
The issue with feedback lies in how nonspecific it is. Feedback itself is nothing more than a reaction or response. Designers talk about feedback and feedback loops as an important element in design all the time. In a feedback loop, after an individual takes an action, the object or environment on or in which that action has taken place changes (or reacts). The individual then interprets that change or reaction in consideration of what they'll do next. (See Figure 1-1.)



**FIGURE 1-1**

The three stages of a feedback loop

Figure 1-2 depicts a feedback loop designed by the team at Ready For Zero. In it, as a user manipulates the sliders or values of the various fields in the form to figure out her payment plan on a credit card, the other values all adjust instantaneously. This allows the user to see the effect that adjusting a value, like her monthly payment amount, will have on the total amount she pays and how much she might save.



**FIGURE 1-2**  
Example of a feedback loop in UI design from Ready For Zero

That reaction—the noticeable change in the appearance or state of the system—is the feedback. It is the system’s response to what the user has done. Feedback is a reaction that occurs as a result of the user doing something.

In human-to-human interactions such as the conversations we have in our projects, the feedback we receive might be nothing more than a gut reaction to whatever is being presented. And to be quite honest, even though we might not want to admit it, that’s often all it is.

Someone’s reaction tells us a bit about how he feels regarding what has happened or been designed, which can be useful in some cases, but also presents us with some challenges. Chapter 2 points out that a reaction on its own doesn’t go far enough to be helpful in allowing us to improve our designs and move forward in our projects. Not only that, the reaction might be based upon the personal biases and preferences of the individual who is reacting, which might or might not align with a mindset representative of the audience for our product.

There is a popular saying in many design communities: “You are not the user.” It’s important to keep that in mind when we’re discussing the things we’re designing and deciding what should or shouldn’t be a part of them. It’s not that we only want feedback from users, but when collecting feedback from people in other roles we need to ensure that the user’s needs, goals, and contexts are kept in mind.

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The problem with asking for feedback is that, most times, we aren't being specific enough in describing what we want feedback on and why we are asking for it. Sometimes, the feedback we receive might just be a gut reaction. Some times, we might get back a list of instructions or suggestions on what to change. Sometimes, we might get comments that describe how what we've designed doesn't match what the critic would have designed. We sort through all of that feedback to try to determine what's useful, so that we can do what will help us identify the aspects of our design that we should iterate upon—can be a struggle.

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## Central Idea

Feedback is an important part of the design process, but the term itself and the way we often ask for it is very broad and can produce conversations that aren't useful. We can improve these conversations by understanding what feedback is and how we use it.

### THREE KINDS OF FEEDBACK

There are three forms of feedback, all of which vary in their degree of usefulness to us in the design process. Understanding these three kinds of feedback can help us understand the conversations we have with our teams and improve our own ability to react to and use feedback to strengthen our designs.

#### The first two types of feedback

Figure 1-3 illustrates how reaction-based feedback tends to be emotional or visceral. It happens quickly and instinctively. This type of feedback is often filled with passion. It's driven by someone's personal expectations, desires, and values. Essentially, it's a gut reaction.



**FIGURE 1-3**  
An example of reactive feedback

There is another kind of reaction-based feedback that is driven by the individual's understanding of what they are expected to say, typically driven by a cultural understanding or what they think the presenter wants to hear. In this case, the reaction itself isn't in regard to what's being presented; rather, it's in response to simply being asked for feedback in the first place. Examples of this kind of feedback often take the form of "That's wonderful! Great work!" or "I love what you did with..."

**Why it can be an issue**

At best, this kind of feedback informs us about the subconscious reaction the viewer has to what you've designed. These kinds of reactions are something we do want to understand when designing a product or service. It's not ideal to try to sell something potential customers or users cringe at or grumble about the second they see it. But are the people from whom you've asked for feedback reflective of your design's actual audience? Are they looking at it the same way your potential users would? Does this reaction divulge anything specific about any of the design decisions you've made so far or their effectiveness?



