

# The Case for Critique

*Why We Need Constructive Criticism to Make Great Ads*

## Befriending the Beast

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As a professor of advertising, I begin each semester with the same statement: “Most advertising stinks.” That doesn’t mean there isn’t plenty of terrific brand building, perception shaping, and hard-selling stuff on the airwaves and in the award books. But the vast majority of advertising is as invisible as wallpaper. Or as annoyingly offensive as gum on your shoe. At its worst, advertising can seem like a big, stinky beast that forces itself down our throats and leaves an ugly taste in our mouths. Consumers are inundated. Promoters become more beastly aggressive. We begin to lose sight of what we’re looking at. This is bad. By definition, bad advertising is advertising that’s ineffective. And ineffective means that it hasn’t met its strategic objectives. By that measure, most would agree that there’s more bad stuff out there than good. In other words, most advertising stinks.

This point must be made right upfront. Otherwise, you will be destined to mimic the advertising that we all experience in the real world and add to the pile of dreck that already exists. Of course, we’re bound to do that to some degree anyway. Nobody’s perfect. But if we can acknowledge this framework right upfront, it will begin to reshape our thinking.

Actually, most people are pretty relieved when an expert tells them that most advertising stinks because it pretty much confirms their own suspicions as everyday consumers. But it also begs the question: If bad advertising isn’t effective, why is there so much of it? The answer is almost too obvious. The reason most advertising is bad is because it’s really, really hard to create advertising that’s good.

That’s the simple truth. Good advertising is really hard to do. It relies on smart collaboration. Fresh strategic insight. And lots of creativity. Advertising can falter anywhere along the way. But the biggest wild card of all is the creativity part. It’s unpredictable. Elusive. Difficult to evaluate. And yet creativity is so essential that campaigns can’t survive without it. Without an ability to grab your attention and hold it, the message is just pen on paper. Therefore, creativity really *must* be a beast. Not a stinky beast, mind you. That would be bad. But a smart, feisty beast that roars.

This is what we call the “creative imperative.” Creativity is not a discretionary component of advertising but part and parcel of it. But not everyone’s ecstatic about this. Certainly the marketer’s life would be so much easier if this weren’t the case. This would make it easier to measure. Easier to predict. Easier to formulate. That’s why business-minded people sometimes espouse reasons to dismiss the importance or even the need for creativity. Marketing textbooks warn management students to be wary of creativity. Many client meetings end with admonitions such as, “Don’t let your creative people run amok!” Or, “We’re not trying to win awards—we’re here to sell the product!” Clients who say these sorts of things (you’ll rarely hear these kinds of statements from Creative Directors) are usually less concerned about the particular weaknesses of any work than about a general fear of creativity itself. Wouldn’t we all just be better off if we found some highly scientific, quantifiable way to execute advertising so all this “loosey goosey” stuff could just go away? Well, no. Anyone who truly feels this way has never understood the reasons behind the creative imperative. And unless you fully appreciate the creative imperative, you won’t find the value in developing the skills of critique. So let’s be unambiguous here. Advertising really does need creativity in order to work effectively. Bill Bernbach, a founder of the legendary ad agency Doyle Dane Bernbach, said it best himself:

The truth isn’t the truth  
until people believe you,  
  
and they can’t believe you  
if they don’t know what you’re saying,  
  
and they can’t know what you’re saying  
if they don’t listen to you,  
  
and they won’t listen to you  
if you’re not interesting,  
  
and you won’t be interesting  
unless you say things  
imaginatively,  
originally,  
freshly.

This is irrefutable logic, don’t you think? Bill Bernbach was a genius. An amazingly creative, astutely logical genius. As father of advertising’s “Creative Revolution” back in the sixties, it’s not surprising that he could make such an eloquent case for creativity; he came up from the creative side of the business, starting his career as a Copywriter. What’s surprising is that the ironclad logic of this quote embodies another great truth about advertising: The best creative minds are astutely logical—which may seem counterintuitive to some people. Indeed, some think the hallmark of creativity is *illogic*. Not true, not in advertising. Logic

may not always be immediately evident in the work, but ultimately there must be some explainable reason for why anything is verbalized, visualized, or experienced in advertising. Meaningful creativity should never be explained by “whatever.” Or “it’s subjective.” That’s a copout. Hearing such arbitrary comments over the years has justifiably filled business-minded people with fear whenever creative people enter the room. They fear that creativity has no boundaries. And worse: that creativity has no meaning. But when that’s the case, the work shouldn’t be defined as “creative”; it should be defined as bad. Creativity just tends to take the rap for it. That’s not only unfair but also a huge reason for the vast management/creative divide.

So now we’ve got two main, truly fundamental points on the table. First: In advertising, creativity is imperative. Second: Being creative doesn’t equal total freedom. Art Directors are not fine artists designing ads to express their inner angst. Copywriters are not toiling away to create the next great American novel. They should be a disciplined lot beholden to their client, the consumer, and their fresh imaginations—all at the same time. This means that both sides of the divide need to recalibrate their expectations to some extent. Businesspeople need to embrace creativity, not dismiss it. Creative people need to know, quite definitively, that they can’t be arbitrary; there is no “whatever” in advertising. Asking the two sides to shake hands and agree on these fundamental points may be asking too much, too early in the book. It would require an enormous leap of faith. And why leap when the chasm still seems so wide? However, if both sides had a shared skill—or shared language—perhaps they could more easily reach their shared goals. Perhaps they could bridge the chasm. Then these fundamental points could not only be agreed upon but also truly believed in.

That skill is called critique.

## What Exactly Is Critique?

Critique is basically a discussion-based evaluation of work. Most people, however, don’t know exactly what that means. Unless you’ve done a stint in art college where “crits” are a fundamental element of your studio classes, you may have never experienced a facilitated or formal critique in school. Instead, when most students write a term paper, it’s submitted directly to the teacher. That’s a private act. And the feedback is more or less private through comments directly on the work, in the form of an evaluation rubric, or perhaps during a face-to-face meeting. Throughout your life as a student, it’s rare to publicly discuss work in progress alongside its creator. The very thought of that can be mortifying, which this book will explore in great detail. But before tackling all that, the first hurdle to overcome is understanding what critique is. Nearly everyone gets it all wrong. Most think that critiquing is synonymous with being negative. And in the context of advertising, that sounds pretty appropriate. Everyone’s a critic of advertising, right? That’s very true. However, it’s not what we’re talking about here.

There’s an enormous difference between “critique,” in which one deconstructs an ad in order to understand it and construct something better, and “criticism,” in which one complains about a commercial that’s just interrupted his or her favorite TV show. Critiquing

an ad or campaign concept is to talk about it meaningfully. Critique pulls the work apart, examines it, and determines if the elements make sense and if the whole comes together. It's about discussing whether strategic goals have been creatively and appropriately translated into engaging content. Critique enables constructive dialogue. It's key to the collaboration that defines the Art Director–Copywriter relationship. It's what happens when work is presented up and down the line within the Creative Department. It's what all those creative types do while they're drinking a beer after work and paying more attention to the ads on the TV set over the bartender's head. Critique is, quite simply, how work gets better.

Being good at critique doesn't just make the work better, it's also the reason why seasoned Art Directors and Copywriters have so much to say during creative presentations. They're used to talking about the work and what makes it effective. They may not even know that what they're doing is called critique, but it is. Indeed, it's so organic to them that they can't quite figure out why everyone else isn't as good at it. On the other side of the table, clients can be literally speechless after a creative presentation. They're not used to talking about creative work in a public forum. It's a skill that they've never really been taught, much less practiced. Imagine how disconcerting it must be for a high-level businessperson, who is used to being in command at business meetings, to suddenly lack fluency in a marketing matter of such importance. This is damaging not just to the psyche but also to the work. Without an ability to critique the work, there can be no real dialogue. It's as though both sides of the table are suddenly speaking different languages. The process becomes less productive. Relationships strain. The work suffers.

Anyone who's been to his or her share of presentations has seen this sort of management/creative interaction play out again and again. Creatives speak fluently about the work. Management folks look decidedly less comfortable. The industry has accepted these roles as a given without questioning whether anything could or even should be different. Where does this institutional mind-set begin? In the classroom. At any given moment, advertising professors across the country are showing samples of ad campaigns to their students and asking a simple question: "What makes this campaign work?" Chances are the response to that question will be pretty much the same: crickets. Or maybe students forget the academic setting and suddenly volunteer personal opinions—"Oh! I love that ad!" or "That's the worst!" The quality of the commentary usually degenerates from there as even the quietest students in the room start mimicking lines or goofy performances from their favorite commercials. From above the idle chatter, the professor tries to wrestle back control of the discussion by asking, "Why? Why do you think these commercials are effective?" Again, the response is crickets, only this time the silence is more deafening because the class had been so animated just seconds before. Frustrated, professors usually offer up their own critique or retreat to the safety of the textbook.

This scenario is common, yet it still leaves instructors peeved. In an age when so many students can recite the lines to their favorite commercials backwards and forwards, you'd assume that they're also gleaning some meaning from them—especially if they've chosen advertising as their college major. Yet when students are asked some pointed questions in an academic setting, silence prevails. What gives? Three things. First, like the future brand managers and account executives that many of them will become, they don't have a lot of critique experience to draw from. Second, no one has instructed them on the role or value of critique. And, finally, no one's actually taught them HOW to do it. As immersed as we all

are in pop culture, the analysis of it is not a given. Indeed, because it's such a fun pastime to chat about advertising—it's the standard water-cooler conversation of our time—it's easy to confuse such chats with real critique. To complicate the issue, advertising seems averse to analysis; it's silly to think deeply about something as "silly" as advertising, even if the profession requires us to take it seriously. On top of all this, our culture has become so fast paced that we are less inclined to be reflective about *anything* of consequence—public policy, great literature, or art. Therefore, whether students are creative by nature or more business minded, instructors must truly force the issue. The ability to critique is not innate. It requires explicit instruction.

In addition to explicit instruction, the value of critique should be introduced at the very beginning of an advertising curriculum and then applied with each level of academic development. The critique muscle needs to be constantly exercised in order to get stronger. And it needs to be strong because critique gets harder as students move from theory to practice, from critiquing existing case studies to critiquing original work in progress. What exactly does that mean? Well, keep in mind that most people equate critiquing with being negative and mean. Most students hate to be mean—especially to their fellow students. So while most of us take a certain delight in anonymously bashing or yakking away about advertising that already exists on the airwaves or in print, once we start looking at work in progress in front of the person responsible for creating it, our impulse to bash or be loquacious transforms into a desire to be supportive or reticent. I can't tell you how many times I've listened to students totally decimate a long-running and effective advertising campaign yet conclusively say "I like it" to student work that has been given 3 minutes of thought on the subway ride up to school. Clearly, then, critique has progressive degrees of complexity and nuance. So if the theory of critique is not advanced with more involved and in-process forms of applied critique, the results will be . . . well, just academic.

## Critique Is a Skill, Not a Talent . . .

Because creative professionals tend to be better at critique than business-minded professionals, we tend to think of critique as a talent and not a skill. But that just lets most people off the hook. If you're not born with it, why bother, right? However, critique is really a lot like presentation; it's an indispensable part of how we interact with the work and each other. Yet no one would dispute the need to teach presentation skills to students and professionals alike. The ad industry puts an enormous emphasis on presentation skills—with good reason. Even a great idea can die if it is not compellingly presented. That's why academic institutions teach presentation skills at all levels of their curricula. Once you've entered the field, presentation workshops top the list of professional development programs. But without complementing critique skills, a great presentation never reaches its full potential. Currently, most presentation training treats presentation as a static end point and one-way form of communication. That's wrong. The truth is, presentation is often part of a dynamic relationship with critique as its partner. Critique makes a presentation interactive and collaborative, making the audience participants as much as spectators.

Of course, many formal presentations only work well as one-way communication with a person at the podium and the audience at silent attention. But how many presentations do you go to in a day that really work like this? Most are touch points for collaboration and opportunities for dialogue. Without critique skills, we're not truly seizing these opportunities. The industry may give a lot of lip service to the importance of collaboration, but collaboration can't happen when the players don't all possess the same basic skill set. Being able to present the work is great. But without critique, it's just a performance and not part of a process. So we need to strengthen both sides of this dynamic relationship. And since it's commonly accepted that we can teach presentation skills, it's not a giant leap to believe that critique skills can be taught, too.

### ... So Let's Teach It

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Now here's the good news. While the ability to critique is often the exclusive domain of the Creative Department, it's not an innate ability like creativity itself. The fact is, critique can be learned. Most business executives don't know this. Few business schools teach it. Experience fools many into believing that it's the native language of creative professionals. So let's be clear: It's not. Even Art Directors and Copywriters must be trained in it. Art Directors are immersed in it during design school where critique is a natural function of studio classes. Copywriters learn from being exposed to it in the Creative Department. Both Art Directors and writers hone their critique skills through the team partnership where ideas are constantly bounced around, discussed, dissected, rejected, and reinterpreted. It's no wonder that critique seems to come so easily to them. Of course, most business professionals will never need to develop a critique muscle as strong as their creative colleagues. But here's the really critical thing to know: We're all capable of it. With a little specialized training, business-minded professionals can not only become quite proficient at judging the creative product, but they can more meaningfully contribute to the process itself. The simple truth is that if every person responsible for the advertising were fluent in the language of critique, then everyone would have the tools to make the work better.

Whenever I teach a course in advertising, whether it's a creative course or a management course, I always emphasize three major aspects of the business: content generation (such as research, strategizing, conceptualizing, and execution), presentation, and critique. Students are familiar with the first two, but when I tell them that critique will be an integral part of the course, they usually freak out. Once, a student literally broke down and cried. "I can't do it. I hate to be mean to people!" she said. After I gave her a clear definition of what critique was and explained its value, she calmed down and asked the most perfect question of all: "Will you give us a language to work with?"

Little did she know that this is exactly at the core of critique. Acquiring that language and building a vocabulary requires a conscientious approach that needs to be explicitly taught. Then it needs to be put into practice, not just over the course of the semester but throughout any advertising curriculum. Only by actually participating in a facilitated critique week after week will students develop the skills essential to being a functioning advertising practitioner upon graduation. Otherwise, some will embark on their

advertising careers, struggling in their jobs until they “get it”—eventually. Others will always struggle and remain mostly silent in meetings, delegating the lion’s share of the discussion to others. Don’t let that be you. Learn critique and take charge of your destiny.

## Print: The Ground Zero of Critique

Why is *Ad Critique* so fixated on print? These days, there’s no shortage of advertising vehicles out there. Television, digital, phone apps, in-game advertising, micro-blogging, product placement, experiential, viral, and on and on. Indeed, it’s sort of like the Wild West out there. New media is being created, revised, and reworked and becoming obsolete all the time. Agencies, clients, and consumers struggle with all the changes, opportunities, and distractions. Our laws that regulate and codify these emerging forms of communication are lagging woefully behind. Even popular culture, which links identity to consumption, is on overload. While it would be totally inaccurate to call the traditional media of print and broadcast “antiquated,” many would have no problem calling them “quaint.”

So why the focus on print here? Not because of a personal bias, or because it’s still one of the most effective means of mass communication—even though it is. The reason is because it’s simply the best teaching tool for understanding the basic elements of advertising, the creative process, and the skills of critique. Here’s why.

### Print Is the Conceptual Bedrock of Advertising

Most Art Directors and Copywriters will tell you that they cut their creative teeth on print. To them, it’s where visual and text come together to create communication magic. It’s the blank page demanding a clever solution. It’s where discipline is born. Essentially, if you want to understand the mechanics of creative thinking, studying print is like looking under the hood.

### Print Is Touchable and Intimate

There should be a reason for selecting any particular communication vehicle. When it comes to print, there’s nothing like the tactile feel of the paper, the reader’s ability to control how close or far away his or her nose is from the paper, the opportunity to rip it out of a magazine and tape it to the wall. Readers feel like they “own” a print ad in a way they never feel with a TV commercial or a digital ad. As a student of critique, the closer you can get to your subject matter, the better.

### Print Has the Power to Stop and Hold a Gaze

If a print ad is effective, the reader stops what he or she is doing and spends a little time with it. It’s an interesting dynamic. On one hand, it reveals the strength of the ad. On the other, it gives the reader an amazing amount of control. Being able to evaluate this power is critical to appreciating the effectiveness of a strategic message and a creative concept.

## Print Is Pure: It Doesn't Dance or Sing—Except in Your Mind

One of the reasons that print is such a great teaching tool is that it demands clarity of communication. There's little space and few dimensions to work with. This makes it a purer and simpler evaluative vehicle. As a student of critique, it's easier to understand the basic principles of effectiveness and the creative process that leads to it. It's easier to identify success or failure. Unlike other more collaborative media, such as television or digital, there are fewer distractions: no moving parts, no acting issues, no special effects, no jingles. When learning how to critique, print is like riding with training wheels. You need to get good at it before moving on to more acrobatic forms of advertising.

## The Critique Paradox

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The purpose of this book is to teach you how to become an expert at critique. But the more of an expert you become, the less able you are to respond to an ad like a typical consumer. Losing touch with the end user of your “product” is never a good thing. So in order for critique to be truly practical in the advertising world, you must be able to operate on a few contradictory levels at once. Welcome to the “critique paradox.” As a professional, you need to take lots of time deconstructing the elements of an ad to determine if they make sense. Meetings about the meaning and effectiveness of an ad can take hours. The consumer, on the other hand, should get the gist of an ad's message within moments. This means that during a productive critique, you need to lavish time on the work while always being cognizant of the fact that the consumer should not.

As an expert in ad critique, you have a sharpened skill set and vocabulary that's very particular to marketing. While the general skills may be useful to you in other ways—being good at critique, for example, makes someone a great little league coach or parent—you're truly a specialist. The knowledge that you have about ads isn't shared by the general population. In a way, taking part in an ad critique is like speaking to ourselves. There's nothing wrong with that. Critique is crucial to the process. But the notion of “speaking to ourselves” can make people nervous because we'd never want our advertising to be like that. So we have to think like an expert and see like an amateur. And vice versa. Quite a paradox, eh?

As we learn critique, we must be mindful that there's no reason for consumers to be good at it. Being able to identify an ad's concept or target or strategy is critically important to us but not to our audience; indeed, saying that an ad's “strategy is showing” (meaning even the consumer can spot it) is considered an insult to the creative team. The better the ad, the less visible all the marketing mumbo jumbo is to the untrained eye. So if you see examples in the book and wonder if consumers would get any of this, you're right—they won't. This level of critique is really intended for professionals, even though the advertising itself is intended for the consumer. The trick here is to make friends with the paradox: Aspire to become as much of an omniscient expert as possible while still holding on to a piece of the unknowing consumer in your heart. It's no easy task but something else you'll need to master, or at least recognize, if you want to get the most out of critique.



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## Critique Basics

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**WHAT IS IT:** A discussion-based evaluation of work, both in-process and post-process.

**WHAT YOU GET OUT OF IT:** Critique is a two-way street. It advances both the viewer's and the creator's understanding of the work. Which, in turn, advances the work.

*Insight.* The act of articulation is very powerful. It lays bare a work's strengths and weaknesses. Being able to put into words why a work is powerful confirms its power. On the other hand, being unable to articulate a work's worth can reveal its weaknesses. Discussion puts insights on the table for everyone to examine—sometimes in ways that had never been considered before. This leads to greater insight into both the work and process at hand.

*Development.* To some Art Directors and Copywriters, exposing work at certain points in the process is considered a necessary evil. Necessary because no advertising project exists in a vacuum. Evil because most of the comments made during these “check-ins” range from inane to insulting. However, productive critique is healthy to the development of a project. It's a time to share suggestions and refine the work. A meaningful critique moves the process forward in a constructive way, even if the work needs to be revised.

*Access and collaboration.* Anyone, from fellow creative colleagues to Account Managers, who knows how to offer valuable critique is not just tolerated but invited into the collaboration. Therefore, critique is the best way to ensure access not just to the product but to the process.

*Communication.* Critique gives the creative team a chance not only to talk about their thought processes but also to articulate how the work meets strategic objectives. In this way, critique bridges the chasm between strategic goals and artistic expression.

*Persuasion.* Advertising is about persuasion. Critique is an opportunity to convince an audience about the effectiveness of the work, thereby improving the skills of persuasion.

*Thinking.* Class critiques give students the opportunity to answer questions and respond to the comments in real time. This improves one's ability to look at creative work, to measure it against strategy, and to discuss it in an intelligent, organized, and constructive manner; in other words, you get better at critique. But that also leads to a greater understanding of people, process, and product. Such skills enable students to succeed not only as advertising professionals but in any field and any life endeavor.

*Leadership.* The person who can best articulate a true understanding of the work on the table takes on the leadership role in the room. People admire those who “get it,” and the best way to prove that knowledge is through a meaningful critique.

**HOW TO DO IT:** Continue reading *Ad Critique*.

## Further Reading

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While this book focuses on the practical matter of critiquing ads *in process*, the study of ads with the intention of finding meaning has long been of scholarly interest.

For a greater understanding of how ads have been analyzed and decoded for various purposes and throughout history, read *ADText: Advertising Curriculum*, published by the Advertising Educational Foundation and distributed by Johns Hopkins University Press Project MUSE. The chapter on “The Interpretation of Advertising” by William M. O’Barr is particularly apt: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/asr/v007/7.3unit09.html>.

To fully appreciate the value of critique in advertising, it would be helpful to consider the more general role of observation and thoughtful analysis in everyday life. *The Accidental Masterpiece* by Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic of *The New York Times*, is a reflection on seeing the world with a more observant eye and illustrates how critique enriches experience.



Visit the student study site at [www.sagepub.com/tagstudy](http://www.sagepub.com/tagstudy) for additional online resources including web links, video clips, and recommended readings to learn more about advertising and the creative process.

## Critique Exercises

1. Go watch a recent blockbuster movie and write a 250-word critique of it. Read three movie reviews of the same movie, and list different aspects of the film that are critiqued and how deeply each aspect is discussed. Compare with your own critique.
2. In teams of two, interview each other on your qualifications to succeed in this class. Make a 2-minute presentation of the person you interviewed. Allow the class to critique your presentation, evaluating style, and content. Then let the person you interviewed critique you: How well did you capture this person?
3. Why is Bill Bernbach considered the father of the Creative Revolution? Look into that and present five ads created by Doyle Dane Bernbach in the sixties and explain why they represent a sea change in the industry.