

An introduction to Critique Writing for Judges

What is a Critique?

As a judge, a critique is a way to express your written opinion on the dogs you judged and your reasons behind your placing. It gives you an opportunity to explain what you saw as each dog's virtues and to highlight aspects which you felt were less than ideal, when compared with the Breed Standard.

It is generally accepted that many judges will also include a short preamble where they offer an overall view of the entry they judged and their conclusions on the "state of the breed" from that evidence. Such a preamble is not essential, but can provide a useful perspective on the breed when written by a knowledgeable person.

Exhibitors look forward to reading a judge's critique; not only of their dog, but also others present. They draw conclusions about a judge's competence and integrity from the critique; can the judge explain their placing in relation to the Breed Standard and do the descriptions match what everyone else believed they saw from the ringside? [*Was I at the same show as this judge?*]

The Kennel Club's requirements

It is a part of every judge's contract of appointment that they are required to submit a written critique to the dog press. This requirement will be written into a judge's letter offering the appointment and failure to submit a critique should result in the judge being reported to the KC for breach of contract. The KC will investigate such breaches and the usual penalty is a £50 fine and an embarrassing announcement in the Kennel Gazette.

A Breed Club's invitation to judge will usually also state that the critique must be submitted within 6-8 weeks of the appointment and a copy should be sent to the Club Secretary as proof. It's not unheard of that the dog papers have lost copies of critiques and sending a copy to the Club Secretary provides reassurance that the contract has been fulfilled.

What makes a good critique?

In his book **Take Them Round Please**, Tom Horner says:

In writing reports, caustic criticism is no more called for than extravagant praise which cannot be justified. A good report does not need to be too detailed but it should be graphic. If classes are mixed it should mention sex (unless that is obvious from the name), breed (if in a variety class), colour (if it varies in the breed), and it should give a brief description of type and relevant details. It should explain why the animal won or lost and mention any outstanding features or faults if there are any.

People, especially the exhibitors concerned, look forward to these reports and hundreds of others are interested in what the judges have to say, so it should be written and sent off as soon as possible. It is most disappointing to have a good win and then find no report on your breed among the others when the papers come out.

Each dog's critique should be unique to that dog, primarily describing its virtues and perhaps highlighting aspects you feel would make the dog more compliant with the Breed Standard. Although not essential, describing why one dog scored its placing over the next dog can provide an alternative way of highlighting the faults of a lower-placed dog.

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Not everyone is a gifted writer, so recording your observations into a digital or tape recorder enables you to listen to your audio “notes” before typing them into a critique. It's far easier to speak into a recorder and simply describe what you see in front of you, than to try to write a critique there and then. Similarly, if you feel you wish to take digital photographs of your class winners these can help jog your memory when it comes time to write your critique. After all, they say a picture paints a thousand words. Your critique will probably be longer and more descriptive if you adopt either of these approaches.

Some examples of good critiques

Each of the following is a **complete critique** of an individual dog:

- s Promising puppy with a good dark brindle coat. Correct size. Good front. Top-line running up slightly at present, not helped by tail-set, Good front movement; not so good behind. Lovely temperament.
- s Quality fawn of different type to 1st. Strong masculine head to be admired. Presents a well-balanced picture with correctly constructed fore and hindquarters and, as to be expected from his quality of conformation, moves out freely and keeps his shape well in profile.
- s Far better moving than stood. Strides out well and holds a firm top-line. Super head, eye and expression. Long neck, so clean through the shoulders. Upper arm OK. Good body and rib. Superb coat. Very well made behind. Perhaps a touch long in back and lost top-line stood, but moving it firms and she shortens. Not far away from higher awards.
- w Strong dog with excellent amount of forechest but more upright in shoulder and not the front construction of 1. Close to ideal proportions for length to height, and showing adequate ground covering movement. Good hind feet and moved parallel going away from me.
- s Found him better constructed in front than 1 with good tight-fitting elbows and better width between his front legs. True, parallel movement coming towards me. Good underline. Slightly round in eye. His topline was not as firm on the move as 1.

Things to avoid

In English lessons at school, probably most of us were told to avoid using the word “nice”, yet it appears with monotonous regularity in critiques.

The worst examples are those of the “nice head and eye” or “nice outline” variety, which tell us very little about the dog.

You can't write a good critique if you don't understand the Breed Standard

Other descriptions such as “enjoying his day out”, “well turned out”, well-handled” may be appropriate, but should not just be used as ways of avoiding saying a dog was badly behaved, or it was of such poor quality that only the presentation or handling was worth mentioning!

Here are some not so good examples, each of which is also the **complete critique** of individual dogs who were class winners at Championship Shows!

Just 6 months, very much a baby

Feminine red brindle of correct type

Lovely youngster, stood four-square.

Yet another of lovely type. Well constructed powerful mover.

Baby who loved her day out, nice overall picture, should have a promising future.

Well balanced, nice size.

Nicely balanced for age. Full sister to MPD winner

Good length of neck. Level topline. Well-presented and handled

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How much should you write?

There is no right answer to this question, but you will be more likely to be criticised by your readers for a short critique. Very few exhibitors will complain about a long critique (providing it is sound and knowledgeable).

If you're worried about how much you're writing, try this...

For each dog you have written about, add up the number of words you have used to describe each dog, excluding its age, sex or colour (so, "18 month brindle dog" would not be counted). Work out the average number of words you have used in your total report by adding the word count for all the dogs together and dividing by the number of dogs critiqued. For example:

Dog 1 = 8 words, Dog 2 = 10 words, Dog 3 = 12 words, Dog 4 = 10 words
Average for this critique is $8+10+12+10$ divided by $4 = 10$ words per critique

If your average is less than 15, most people will probably think your critique is too short. Between 25 and 35 words per dog will be better. Critiques of 35-50 words per dog are not so common, but are often much more interesting to read because they can demonstrate a real insight into the breed and the Breed Standard. The average word count in the examples of "good critiques" above is around 45 words per dog

Do and Don't – Dog press advice

Although it is a Kennel Club requirement, we know that it takes dedication and commitment to write a useful and helpful report from which exhibitors will benefit. We are very pleased to accept judging reports in any format but more and more of them are arriving either as e-mails or files attached to e-mails. You will no doubt know how easy it is to go to the catalogue printers' websites and just copy and paste the results into your preferred word processor (or direct into an e-mail) so that you can just add your personal comments to the owners and dogs names. This is excellent as it enables us to process speedily and get them into the newspaper and on to the Internet more quickly. However, when the reports arrive, even by email, they come in lots of different forms so one of the things that we have to do in the Our Dogs office is to go through them and make sure they conform to our house 'style'. Doing this makes them all look tidy and reduces the space required. It would speed things up greatly if they arrived in the format that we could use to print them directly. Here is a recent report in the style we use:

Bearded Collie: *A very enjoyable day, a good entry with a reassuring depth of quality. All exhibits were clean and well presented and on the whole temperaments appeared good. I did find a few with level mouths, whilst not a major concern it does need watching when breeding on. One thing that did disappoint was the very poor conditioning on some exhibits. Beardies are a working breed and as such should be shown in good hard condition. Many were excessively overweight, flabby and devoid of any kind of muscle tone. Several exhibits that had great appeal when stacked were let down by poor conditioning and were unable to move as their construction suggested they should. I know much emphasis is put on a big glamorous coat these days and letting your dog run freely does put this at risk, but there has to be a sensible balance. Lean and supple the Standard says and that is what I look for. It was great to see my two Veteran winners again, I have given both CC's in the past and it was lovely to see them both again, looking so good and in such fabulous condition. Thank-you*

VD (4 1) 1 Christie Ch Brenriga's Give'n'Take For Ruartha JW *Have liked him in the past and he remains a favourite. So well made and balanced. Very elegant outline. Super head, good pigment and very appealing expression. In good hard condition and well handled. Moved out well, but just lacked the suppleness of the younger ones to day. 2 Dumbrell and Lindsay Ch Bethlyntee Bannock Sh Ch* *Lovely brown boy of great appeal. Good angles, very good in ribs. Liked his head and expression. In excellent condition for his 11 years and moved very soundly and true. 3 Kedzierski Brodarty Midsummer Sunrise. PD (3 1) 1 Bodingtons Braddabrook Voyager For Kitesover* *Very exciting youngster with much to offer. Good outline, well constructed and free of exaggerations. Lovely head an expression and very much everything as it should be at this age. Quite amazing on the move for his age, powered around the ring with big easy strides. Definitely one to watch. Best Puppy 2 Cornthwaite Braddabrook Firstfooter* *Litter brother to 1st and very similar in many departments. Balanced angles, correct shape of ribcage, but lacked the length of his brother. Pleasing expression. Moved soundly but lacked the drive and panache of 1st. 3 Harrison Hisnhers Diamond Geezer At Anfranjo*

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You will see that the class name just uses initial letters in block capitals (P, MP, and J instead of Puppy, Minor Puppy, and Junior etc) which is followed by the number of dogs and the number of absentees entered in brackets i.e. (4 1).

The next number is the placing followed by the owners' name first and then the name of the dog before the actual report. It is helpful if the names of the owners and the dogs are in this style (which is called Title Case rather than in CAPITAL LETTERS).

The two main catalogue printers, Higham Press and Fosse Data put the owners' names in capital letters but this would unnecessarily take up a great deal of space in the newspaper so we have to change them to Title Case. If you use Microsoft Word then there is a button on the title bar that enables you to change the type style from CAPITAL to Title Case very easily. It is under the drop-down menu 'Format' and you need the link to 'Change case'. The easiest way to do it is to change the case to 'All Cap's and then click on 'Title Case'

Remember, showing is a hobby and a dog show is supposed to be an enjoyable day out. Most judges are exhibitors as well and they know how much they enjoy reading about their own dogs in a critique. A short, badly written critique just adds to exhibitors' annoyance! A well-written critique adds to the exhibitors' enjoyment and will almost certainly be cut out and kept to remember the show and the judge.

Tongue in cheek

To get the maximum benefit when reading critiques you have to understand not only what is written, but what is possibly left out. It's a bit like reading the particulars presented by an Estate Agent; you have to read between the lines and appreciate the alternative possible perspectives.

So, let's have a not so serious look at the other side of the Judge's Report...

| | What the judge might have said... |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What the judge actually said... | |
| He has been campaigned sparingly | He has only been shown under friends |
| I had a small, but very select, entry when I judged the breed last year | Most people know I'm crooked and I might as well have posted the CCs out before I judged |
| She excels in movement, holding her head proudly, looking at all those around the ring as she races past | Nervous of everything, she moves as if she can't wait to get out of the ring |
| He has great length | His length comes from short ribbing and a long loin |
| Temperaments are not all they could be | Temperaments are appalling |
| This dog looks superb when stacked by his clever handler | This dog falls apart on the move and there is no way to disguise its appalling top-line and atrocious movement |
| There are very few dogs that have made a significant impact on the breed recently | I don't like the top-winning dog in the breed and I can't stand the current top breeders |
| Some exhibitors have taken to stringing their dogs up when moving, to give the impression of flashy movement | Exhibitors who string their dogs up when moving them are often trying to hide bad front construction or nervous temperaments, or both |
| Some lines are a little bit timid on the judging table | There are some nervous wrecks that should never be shown |

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