

Supplemental Information: G2 Essay Forum

By Rafael Olivas, Essay Forum committee member, May 2007

Questions

How can criticism be offered that doesn't alienate someone?

A good start is to make sure that criticism is restricted to specific behaviors and actions, and not aimed at people's characters. This is not always easy, but it is worth attempting, especially in the G2 context. Also, criticism that is overly broad, vague, or extreme is not helpful, and worse, can be outright malicious. Here are examples of unacceptable and acceptable criticism for a fictional homeowner called "Adam":

- Unacceptable: "Adam is power crazed! He couldn't wait to get on the board so he could wield power. I know he's out to get the renters!"
- Marginally acceptable: "Adam's actions on the board have left much to be desired. He's always siding against renters."
- More acceptable: "Adam's votes and remarks he has made on the board do not usually take renters' concerns into account."

The first example is a personal attack assailing Adam's character without supporting evidence. The second avoids the character assassination, but is still vague with regard to actions, and makes a broad claim that connotes bad motives. Broad claims require significant evidence. The third example is more specific with regard to actions (votes and remarks are actions that can be observed). It also removes hints at motive, and substitutes "usually" for "always" as a way of reducing extremity. This third example also suggests something constructive: if Adam were to make more effort to listen to renters' concerns some suspicion might be reduced. Curiously, the first two examples will tend to alienate many readers, while the less-strident third example will more likely be accepted.

I wrote what I felt was a "measured" criticism (and the committee also agreed). But the person I criticized still took it personally. What now?

Even when criticism is responsibly offered and does not succumb to tendencies to make it personal, there are still some people who will take it personally. And even if the criticism is valid, the author may still feel bad about hurting someone's feelings. This is natural.

But let us consider this: a community that will not tolerate or use criticism to improve, especially from within, cannot grow well. The same goes for individuals. The author of this proposal is hoping that the G2 community can engage in civil discourse, including criticism, in a responsible way.

I am not advocating watering down criticism to accommodate sensitive residents—quite the contrary. I prefer that we call "strikes and fouls" the way we see them, and not pretend they're something else. Let us have the courage to accept criticism in order to grow.

What if I disagree with a posted essay? Can I respond?

Yes, you can respond. The response must follow the same essay guidelines that the original posting had to meet: Brevity, Authorship, Relevance, and Civility.

If you disagree with an essay you can write a rebuttal. You can challenge assumptions and recollections of behavior, but take care to avoid attacking someone's character (unless you have strong evidence). If you have evidence to support your case, present it.

Can we use supplemental material?

Yes, as long as the source is credited so others can review it. Newspaper or online articles may be used as reference. Contributors are also free to quote the *CC&Rs* or the *Bylaws*. You can use other web sites or texts, as long as they are relevant to the topic and can be readily found by others. Please identify URLs or specific references in your essay.

Can this proposal be done without the committee middleman?

Maybe, but first consider what a forum committee offers. The main challenge with the no-committee approach is that each contributor is left to follow his or her own conscience. Careful and responsible writers may need little guidance. But what about contributors who indiscriminately lash out? What about essays that attack other people without evidence? How should the group respond in such cases? It seems reasonable that after a few such incidents the group would respond with guidelines and moderators to alleviate such problems.

One suggestion is to begin with a moderated group, and see how well it functions. If, after some time the group demonstrates that it can carry on discussions, even criticism, in a respectful way, perhaps the group can remove the moderator function.

The no-committee approach is simpler and easier, but offers no well-defined process to handle problems and no built-in arbiter of community standards.

As of May 2007, the G2 HOA Board authorized the Essay Committee with three members. Dave Holsonback and Rafael Olivas volunteered and approved, and agreed to find a third member.

What if there are only a few essays submitted?

That would be strange indeed since a number of G2 residents and onlookers continue to present adamant opinions. A poor showing might mean that community members—even those with strongly held opinions—cannot find the energy or time to commit their ideas, criticisms, or suggestions to paper. Or it might show that even minimal guidelines are too great a barrier for some to overcome. Or it might indicate something else. We can only wait and see.

Recommendations for writing a compelling essay

Think through your own point of view. What assumptions do you make? Challenge yourself before others may challenge you. And carefully consider your audience and the purpose of our essay.

Come to the point quickly. If you can't come to the point quickly perhaps it's because you haven't thought it through enough. Your audience will appreciate your effort if you can clearly set a direction and arrive at a coherent conclusion in a few paragraphs.

Organize your essay. Prepare an outline by starting with short key points and arranging them to see connections. Organize your points so that a reader will best appreciate your position, suggestion, or criticism. A few well-developed paragraphs will be more effective than a longer, rambling, disorganized mass of prose.

Use simple, direct language. If your audience does not understand what you are trying to say, perhaps it is due to a lack of precision. Remember: if you cannot say what you mean, then you cannot mean what you say.

Edit and revise. Read it back to yourself. Do you understand what you are trying to say? Test your draft with a trusted colleague. What do they understand after reading it? Use this feedback to edit and revise your essay.

Check for brevity. Microsoft Word can quickly provide a word count. Look under the Tools menu, and then select Word Count. If it fits on three pages or less you've probably met the "1500 words or less" requirement.

Prepare for criticism. If you are adventurous enough to write an essay, please be courageous enough to accept criticism. This is, in fact, a main idea behind the Forum. Just as you may have felt strongly about your assertions, try to understand that others may strongly disagree. If responders offer contrasting points and evidence to your own, that is an opportunity to learn.

Avoid fallacies. It is tempting to use fallacious arguments because they are expedient, not because they are correct. We are all vulnerable to using—and being persuaded by—fallacious arguments. There are many online sources where anyone can learn about fallacious arguments. Among the most common fallacies possible are:

- **Attacking the person** instead of attacking the argument itself. (Ad Hominem fallacy, Poisoning the Well)

Example: "Von Daniken's books about ancient astronauts are worthless because he is a convicted forger and embezzler." (Von Daniken may indeed be a convicted criminal, but that is not why the books are worthless. The books must be shown to be worthless based on their own merits, not those of the author.)

- **Exaggerating** or misrepresenting your opponent's position. (Straw Man fallacy)

Example: "Board member Jones says that we should not fund construction of a restroom in the common area. I disagree entirely. I can't understand why he wants to destroy all possibility of cultural programming there." (The allegation is exaggerated from Jones' more limited statement. The allegation that Jones is attempting a broader objective requires more evidence or direct statements attributed to Jones.)

- **Oversimplifying** the argument. (Closely related to using an exaggerated claim)
Example: Political slogans such as “*Taxation is Theft.*”
- **Prejudicing** a source. This means to claim that a particular source automatically makes an argument right (or wrong). The idea is that things from a privileged origin have virtue, and that things from a challenged origin lack virtue. In either case, the fallacy is to suggest that details of the argument can be overlooked, since correctness can be decided merely on the basis of the source, without any need to listen or think about the merits of the argument itself. (Related to Argument from Authority, Guilt by Association, and the Ad Hominem fallacy)

Example: “The original vision that we fostered was pure and noble. It’s just as true now and we should continue to follow it, despite our different circumstances.” (The original vision may indeed have been noble, but this argument implies that this is due to an unassailable privileged source—some particular visionaries—that can still be trusted as the correct source of that vision. A related problem is the claim that despite changes in circumstance, the original vision retains its nobility. This may or may not be the case, but is not proven by this argument.)

Sources

Fallacies

A Google search for “common fallacies” will yield many web sites with lists, definitions, and examples. This is just one:

- Handout on common logical fallacies. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/fallacies.html>

Writing good essays

A Google search for “essay guidelines” will yield excellent sources of advice that usually mention organization, brevity, and error avoidance.

- ‘This I Believe’ Essay-Writing Instructions, from NPR. Although provided for contributors to the NPR radio program, the guidelines are generally appropriate for essays about G2 where personal belief is a main component.
<http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/guide.html>