

Telling your Friends They Have a Mary-Sue

Your best friend comes up to you, fidgeting with a journal or a stack of paper, paper-clipped and stapled together, and asks you to read their story and give them some feedback. You're probably thinking, "Sure, anything for my best friend. This should be no big deal." Immediately, when you start reading, you notice a problem. A huge problem. Your best friend's characters might be Mary-Sue, and you don't know how to tell them without putting your friendship at risk. And yes, some friendships have been ruined over criticism, no matter how much sugar-coating was sprinkled over it. You want to help them improve, but you don't want to hurt their feelings in the process, so where is the middle ground? How do you give constructive criticism to your friend?

1. Do NOT mention Mary-Sue, Martha-Sue, Gary-Stu, Larry-Stu, Marty-Stu, Marty-Sam, Wesley-Stu, Anti-Sue or any of the other variations in your critique.

This is the most important rule in this guide, and here's why: the term "Mary-Sue" is just a shortcut to frustration. It's not a critique at all, but people still use it as if it is—as if it explains everything. So if you tell yourself from the beginning not to use the term at all, you'll give a more thought-provoking critique, and not only that, what if your friend doesn't know what a Mary-Sue is in the first place? You just saying what they have is a Mary-Sue will leave them confused, and when they go and look up "Mary-Sue" they'll get frustrated because everyone has a different opinion of what a Mary-Sue is.

Oh, a Mary-Sue is a perfect character? Then I'll give my characters more flaws even though I already did.

Oh, a Mary-Sue is a character that's too colorful? Then I'll tone them down even though this character has a bright personality and is naturally colorful and creative.

Oh, a Mary-Sue is a character that has too many powers and knows too many languages? Fine, I'll get rid of a few powers even though this character is immortal and has been alive since practically the big bang, so they would have had more time to learn all this stuff.

Oh, a Mary-Sue is a character with a tragic past? Fine, I'll change it to a happy past even though this would change my entire character drastically.

What? A Mary-Sue is a normal character now? That's so confusing! Aren't "normal" characters supposed to be realistic?

Then, when your friend digs around even more, they find a "Mary-Sue Test" and starts testing their story and characters. Whether the character is really a Mary-Sue or not, the person will more than likely get a high score, and then gets frustrated because the number tells them to kill their character without telling them why or how to fix it. A number can't tell them anything.

They might look into Mary-Sues even further and read that other writers have written successful stories with Mary-Sues and asks themselves, "If Mary-Sues are such a bad thing, why are these people getting so much money?" Then when they say that other people write Mary-Sues, which means they can too, they get shot down because they aren't "good enough" to write that well. So Mary-Sues are a good thing?

Mary-Sues are circles and cycles of one contradiction after another. There are too many definitions and opinions about them, and not to mention a lot of people just like to give bad critiques because it makes them feel good bringing people down, especially over the internet.

The only time you should mention Mary-Sues is if you know your friend knows about them, are conscious about them, and specifically asks you for your opinion on whether or not their story or characters are Mary-Sue, and even then, avoid the term until the very end in the conclusion if they truly want to know. There should never be "Mary-Sue" or "Gary-Stu" in the body of your critique. If your friend has never heard of the term, leave them blissfully unaware. They really don't need to know.

2. Instead, tell them what makes their character or story Mary-Sue.

Yes, still without using the term, describe why the story, universe, writing style, and characters are underdeveloped. Of course, keep in mind of what genre and age rating they plan their story to be. Children's books are usually of the Looney Tunes or fairy tales category where anything and everything can happen and they don't have to explain it. If that's the case, the only question that needs to be asked is if it's entertaining and appropriate for children. Daffy Duck gets shot all the time, but they don't show any blood or gore, and the character lives through it with no problem. The Brothers Grimm fairy tales were definitely not for children, but they still revolve around the nostalgic fairy tale universe that adults would still enjoy. However, if the story is obviously supposed to be closer to the realistic realm, maybe with a few exceptions, the basic questions you need to ask yourself when reading their story are:

- Is their universe straightened out and consistent?
- Does their plot follow at least the three basic stages of the Hero's Cycle (the calling, the trials, and the return)?
- Are their spelling, word choice, grammar, capitalization, punctuation, and use of paragraphs up to par?
- Do their characters stay in character, but still develop and change over the course of the story?
- If the story is fan fiction, do the canon characters stay in character?

Of course there should be sub-questions to ask yourself, but I think you'll figure it out when you get to it. While reading, you may want to write down your questions about the story so you can ask them after you finish. Questions are a great way of getting an author thinking without you providing all of the answers, and they may have missed a plot hole while writing. Basically, jot down anything you think is necessary.

3. Provide examples

If there is a word that your friend frequently misspells, it's OK to let them know and correct them. It goes the same with punctuation use and capitalization.

Inconsistencies between universe, plot and characters need to be pointed out specifically, providing a page and paragraph number, and help with an example on what you would do to make it better if you were writing something like their story.

4. Your opinion does matter, but the way you say it matters even more.

Otherwise, why would they ask you?

Instead of saying, "*You* need to do this in order for your characters to be better," say, "*I* think something like this can make your character better because . . ." The first sounds like an order, while the latter sounds like an opinion, which is what you're giving.

And remember to say that it's only a suggestion and that it is completely up to them whether to change their story or not.

It also doesn't hurt to suggest that the story would work better under a different age group and maybe even under a different genre if this is appropriate. It may actually work out better this way because there are different audiences for every genre.

5. The conclusion

If they specifically ask for a Mary-Sue report, then, yes, give them your honesty. Which characters need work, why, and at which point? Is the universe straightened out and consistent? Whatever gives you the impression and degree of Mary-Sue, if you think that it's absolutely necessary at all. If they don't want to hear the term, "Mary-Sue" at all, don't use it because you really don't need it. The conclusion is used to

state whether or not you liked the story and summarize why and why not, and summarize some things to watch out for while they make their editions, if they decide to edit their work. If your friend doesn't know what a Mary-Sue is, don't use it.

Of course, even if you are careful, your best friend may still get angry with you—I can't guarantee a positive result—but this should help lessen those chances. Don't be fooled by the title, whether you're critiquing your best friend's work, or for some stranger over the internet, these five steps can do wonders. Please also keep in mind that if you really want to judge a story for Mary-Sueism, please wait until the story is finished. If you've read my other guides, then you probably know that I think it's impossible to officially call a character or story a Mary-Sue unless the story is finished because the future chapters may hold more information that can exonerate the characters or story.