

CRITIQUE GROUP INFORMATION

Material compiled by SCBWI CenCal

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These pages are optional resources offered to assist SCBWI CenCal members in the process of forming and managing critique groups. This may be suitable for Writers and/or Illustrators/Visual Artists who are willing to encourage each other and provide regular help to each other by offering constructive criticism of each other's work. To help you with many aspects of setting up and getting the most out of a critique group, we offer lists, suggestions, questions, and etiquette and other guidelines for all aspects of critiquing both Writers and Illustrators/Visual Artists.

CRITIQUE GROUPS 101

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HOW TO CRITIQUE

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- How-To Critique Guidelines for Illustrators/Visual Artists

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(Special thanks to the Carolinas Chapter who put this resource together and was happy to let us use it for our CenCal members, with our modifications. Additional sources are cited in each section.)

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Please note that while we are happy to help assist you in pursuing your interest in joining (or forming) a critique group, by your utilizing SCBWI or SCBWI-CenCal information you are acknowledging that you are solely responsible for all related outcomes including but not limited to such activities related to forming and/or participating in/and or managing critique groups. Neither SCBWI nor SCBWI-CenCal creates/monitors/controls critique groups. That is up to you as individuals.

Setting Up a Critique Group

Need help thinking through how to form a critique group?

Whether you are writers or illustrators, you want to create a group that works. A critique group is not a static group; they evolve as you get to know each other, and as your own writing/art skills increase. And, it's not permanent. As you change, so may your own needs and that of others in your group.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

WHERE TO MEET?

What local places in your community might be a good spot for a regular group meeting? List five local places in your community that might be a good spot for a regular group meeting.

What kind of genre do you want as a focus? What would be the pros and cons of a single genre group? Does the group want to be only about picture books? Or maybe MG/YA?

What would be the pros and cons of a mixed level group? (i.e., do you want only pre-published members, or only published ones, or a mix? remember there are benefits to each type).

How many members do you want in your group? You can start a group with just two. Three is better. Do you want to cap the number? What would that be? (Many groups cap at 4 or 5 members to make the meeting duration reasonable and then may adjust later.)

How do you plan to handle new members? (Vote, see their work, have them come to a few sessions to see if it works both ways?) While it's good to have guidelines up front, be open to change in the way you handle new members.

MEETING TIMES AND DATES?

What days would you like to meet? Weekends? Weekdays?

How often would you like to meet? Monthly? Bi-weekly?

How much time do you want to spend? Remember that giving time to each member to read and receive feedback takes time. Fifteen minutes each for four members is well over an hour. Consider this when setting up your times. Also, some groups require that their members email the individual manuscripts a week to several days before the meetup so that members can pre-read and bring their prepared comments to the meetup.

DO YOU NEED A GROUP MISSION STATEMENT?

What is the goal or intention of the group? A group mission statement can help your group keep on track in providing feedback for each member.

What do you hope members will gain from being a member of your group? This is really useful in that it helps you think through your own goals.

WHAT ABOUT GROUP GUIDELINES?

How much work will you allow for submission, per meeting? This can be # of pages or words (i.e., 500 words for a Picture book or a double-page spread of artwork; or one chapter for MG or YA). Remember to keep it to the guideline that will allow each person a turn to be critiqued at each meeting—unless you plan to rotate turns at each meeting.

How will you submit your work for critiques? See a few options below.

- Will you require that members forward their manuscripts via email X days before the meetup to save reading time at the meeting?
- If not, will the author read his/her own work aloud while members take real-time notes to share when the reading is done? (Make sure the author speaks loudly and reads slowly enough for members to take notes, perhaps pausing on occasion.)
- Or will you require the author to bring a copy for each member to read silently and make notes before commenting?

How will your group provide feedback?

- Do you want to use the Critique Group Notes and Talking Points?
- Will it be just verbal?
- Can you write on the manuscript itself, share it out loud, then hand the edited version back to the author afterwards?

How will your group provide feedback?

- Will you request each member provide live feedback every time?
- If someone has to miss a meeting, will s/he be required to email his/her feedback to the author/artist via email by a certain time?

Other important considerations:

- How many meetings can be missed? Remember life situations will come up so keep it reasonable but something that works for the dynamics of the group.
- Are you open to writers outside the SCBWI membership?
- What possible reasons could you think of for asking a member to leave your group? Again, very useful and will save a lot of grief later.
- What other guidelines are important for the group?

CONSIDER PROVIDING:

- Providing guidelines for giving a critique (create a new-member handout)
- Providing guidelines for receiving a critique (create a new-member handout)

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(Kind thanks to SCBWI Carolinas and New Jersey for the helpful information. Additional edits by CenCal.)

How To Choose a Critique Group

You choose a group as much as the group chooses you. Here are some guidelines to think about when choosing a critique group:

GUIDELINE #1

Does the group have a clearly defined goal, preferably in writing?

Can the group state what they want from the critiquing process, verbally or in writing? This can be as simple as, "we want to see something new from each writer at each meeting," or as elaborate as a mission statement. However, if the members of the group haven't taken the time to define their purpose, they probably don't know where they are going, and neither will you.

An example of a goal statement: *Our main goal is to help each other get published. We will do this by presenting and participating in workshops, by reading and critiquing each other's work and by encouraging each other to submit finished works. We also provide networking, contacts with professionals in the field and a chance to meet other local talents with similar interests.*

GUIDELINE #2

Does the group have any interest in the type of writing you want to do?

Some YA or middle grade writers may not be interested in picture books or vice versa. It is important to make sure there is interest in your genre.

GUIDELINE #3

Do the group members arrive and get to work, or does everyone just stand around and talk about writing?

Pretty early in the meeting, everyone should start moving toward the chairs. Manuscript pages should start appearing along with pens and notepads. The group should not spend more than a half hour hanging out and talking. (Most writers' experience is that you start out being very formal with a time-keeper and a fixed rotation on who goes first, etc. then become relaxed as the group begins to gel.)

GUIDELINE #4

Are there rules for individuals being critiqued and the critiquers?

Talk about the work, not the person. You are the reader—what questions do you have for the writer about the story? For example: Critiquing the writing never starts with: “You are”... or “You should” instead: “The writing is ...” or “The story could . . .” It is not helpful to say: “This is how I would write it ...” How **you** would write it isn’t the point.

Remember the subject matter is personal. You don’t have to like the story to give it a fair critique.

Gauge your own feelings. If you leave the group meeting feeling more energized and challenged, then the group may be a good fit. If you leave feeling devastated and wanting to quit writing or do not feel like you received helpful feedback, perhaps it may be helpful to try other groups.

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(Kind thanks to Holly Lisle: Writer "The Good, The Bad and the Ugly, or How to choose a Writers Group".)

Etiquette for a Critique Group

Set Expectations Up Front

This can make a big difference in the critique exchange and relationship in your group. Be professional. Set time and exchange expectations up front.

For instance, are you going to provide your critique at the live meeting (or if you can't attend that meeting, within the following week?) If for some reason you can't provide the critique at the given time, let the other person know.

And what specifically does the author/visual artist want you to critique for? Big picture comments? Your take on characterization development, or plot, or arc, or dialogue, or anything that strikes you? Illustration/art work matching the manuscript? Try to be specific. What would be most helpful to you when someone critiques your work?

Receiving Critiques Takes a Thick Skin (But Worth It!)

When we receive a critique, sometimes even the tiniest comments can seem harsh. But remember you are here to get feedback to take your work to great levels and hopefully to be picked up by an agent and publisher! So, take advantage of being in a relatively safe environment with others who also love children's books and are willing to take the time to read your work and give you their honest impressions.

Try to take notes and give it a few days and then re-examine the feedback with an open mind. Try to look for trends (i.e., more than one person said the same thing at the same point about your story or art work).

The bottom line is that it is *your* work and your vision, and you don't have to change it because someone else thinks you should. You will get the hang of who in your group has strong personal preferences (and we all do!) and which comments are the most useful for you.

Yes, it can be hard to "take" a critique. Understand there must be a level of trust. It is important to trust your critique partners who understand your strengths and respect your abilities, so that when they have a criticism, what you hear is "We know you and KNOW you can do better. And, by the way, we feel your work is worth the effort and can't wait to see more."

The best manuscripts and art work are revised many, many times before they are ready to go out into the world. And critique is one of the best ways to help you see your work from a fresh point of view.

Giving Critiques Isn't Easy Either, But You Will Get the Hang of It

If you are new to giving critiques, understand that it is important to share what you think about someone's work in an honest but polite way so that your feedback might be find useful.

Remember what it's like to be on the receiving side. When we receive a critique, sometimes even the tiniest comments can seem harsh. So, if you feel there are lot of areas of improvement in someone's work (which there *should* be—unless the manuscript or art work is at the perfectly polished stage!). Pick the comments you have that strike you as the most important feedback coming from you.

Listen to what the other members say and don't repeat with long detailed examples, but you can say briefly "that also caught my attention" so that the author/illustrator can start to see that if there is a pattern related to an area of improvement (i.e., more than one person got stuck on a word).

Bottom line: Don't overwhelm the author/artist with *all* of your thoughts all at once.

Keep in mind that providing critique to others will also help you develop skills that will make your own work better. Often, you get more out of reading another's work critically than you do from a critique of your own work. And also hearing other readers' opinions about someone else's work may improve your own work, too.

Other Thoughts

Finding long-term critique partners can be challenging. Keep going until you find the right match. It's like dating (sometimes more like a marriage), but with the specific purpose of making the work in question the best it can be. It is important to treat each other with the utmost respect before, during, and after a critique exchange.

(Excerpt taken from SCBWI's message board – thank you Verla Kay. Additional edits by CenCal.)

General Critiquing Etiquette

When Giving Feedback, Remember...

It's not your story. Don't rewrite or tell your peer what her story should or shouldn't say. Instead, pose your thoughts as a question: "What if . . ." or "Have you tried?" Always be polite.

How to Give Feedback

Feedback can be given in a formal way via typewritten comments, or you may handwrite comments on a separate page or on the manuscript itself.

Groups may use a printed critique form which is filled in for every critique. The form can help the group focus on the essentials and helps guarantee that nothing is overlooked.

Mark with pencil on the areas you wish to point out throughout the manuscript, including additional notes in the margins.

Start your critique by explaining what you thought the story was about and highlight all the strengths. Don't just say that you liked something, say why. This is the "sandwich rule." Start with positive comments, give feedback on what you think are problem areas, then end on a positive note or encouragement.

List the major parts that didn't work for you and tell your peer WHY.

Did a section seem awkward? Was the paragraph jarring? Was a plot detail confusing? Or perhaps you couldn't connect with the main character; explain what you meant by that.

Don't waste time pointing out minor typos or punctuation, just mark them on the manuscript.

(Kind thanks to SCBWI New Jersey for this information.)

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SCBWI Critique Gold Form with Talking Points

The following questions are part of the Critique Gold Form used at SCBWI Conferences when we ask industry professionals—editors, agents, and PAL writers—to provide written critiques.

1) What are the positive aspects of this work?

2) Synopsis

- Plot arc / story line clear?
- Character arc: goals, motivations, and conflicts clearly revealed and resolved?
- Satisfying ending, all conflicts satisfactorily resolved or explained?
- Free of unimportant details and unanswered questions?
- Correct common format: present tense, third person?

3) Opening Scenes

- Does author give a sense of setting, time, and place, setting the tone of the story without intrusive detail?
- Story begins with an interesting hook?
- Story begins in the correct place?
- Good introduction of the protagonist and his/her goals, motivations & conflict?

4) Plot (within Manuscript) and Pacing

- Plausible, unique, avoid clichés/common story lines?
- Compelling events, enough conflict (internal and external) to sustain the story?
- Forward movement of main plot?
- Use of hooks?
- No overuse of backstory?
- Sequencing: presented in easy-to-follow order, appropriate to story and age of reader?
- Show vs. Tell?

5) Viewpoint

- Clear POV at all times – Appropriate POV for scene/story?

6) Characterization

- Effective character development
- Distinguishable characters
- Believable, multidimensional, appropriate, not cliché/interesting flaws and strengths
- Sympathetic, interesting? Would you root for them? Know what motivates them?
- Understandable motivations?
- Secondary characters developed, well defined, necessary, and non-intrusive?

7) Dialogue

- Character-specific?
- Necessary to story/scene, effective balance between narrative and dialogue
 - Believable, read naturally, for the time, and reveal the voices of the characters
- Mimicking a child/teenager's POV & dialogue?
- Proper use of tags
- Reveal characterization, move the story and/or relationships forward

8) Setting

- Effective use of these components, enough/too much sensory details

9) Mechanics

- Sentence structure, punctuation, grammar, typos?

10) Audience

- Children, Middle Grade, YA Elements?
- Written at level of intended audience (language, sentence structure and length)
- Story, content and plot, age-appropriate? Would a child/teen really care

about the conflict?

- Does the protagonist succeed or fail as a result of his/her own efforts, without the interference or safety net of an adult?
- Are the main characters children/teens with adult characters relegated to the background?

(Kind thanks to SCBWI Carolinas for giving us permission to share this with CenCal members.)

Critique Guidelines for Writers

Overall Roles

Of the Writer Whose Work is Being Discussed

- 1. Introduce the manuscript.**
- 2. Read or share it to the group** (or have someone else read it). Unless your work was emailed ahead of time and members are coming in with their comments already prepared.
- 3. Absorb the feedback.**
- 4. Ask questions if you need more information to understand the feedback.**
- 5. Later on, after you have time to absorb the feedback, decide which advice to take** (you don't have to agree to make changes in your meeting).

Of the Critiquer

- 1. Suggest ways to strengthen the story.**
- 2. Point out where the story may need tightening or clarifying.**
- 3. Use "I" statements rather than "You" statements.** For ex: "I like how you use active verbs," or "I am confused by..."
- 4. Keep in mind that your comments are your thoughts and can easily be subjective, so try to review work from the perspective of the general population** (children age X) or a specific population (i.e., librarian, teacher, social worker, etc.). Remember the Writer has his/her own vision for his/her story. You are there to help enhance it, not re-do it for them, nor to ask that s/he re-create it the way you would *prefer* to see it according to your own personal vision.

Process Suggestions

When You are Being Critiqued

1. **Introduce your manuscript.**
2. **Identify the genre and details of the work being reviewed today:** “the first draft of a picture book” or “the second chapter of a middle grade novel” etc.
3. **Identify the intended audience:** “3 – 5-year-olds” or “middle graders” etc.
4. **Do not make excuses or explain:** “This is a really rough draft...” As Linda Sue Park, Newberry Winner and SCBWI Board member, states on her website: “...the work must stand or fall on its own. When the piece eventually gets submitted and is read by the editor, the Writer won’t be there to say things like, ‘Well what I meant there is...’ or ‘That’s supposed to refer back to...’”
5. **Read (or ask someone else to read) the manuscript straight through, with no digressions or side remarks.** You may find yourself circling or underlining problem areas you hear when it is being read aloud, but do that quickly and quietly.
6. You may explain the intention or goal of the story in response to critiques, but **do not argue with the comments.** If you don’t agree with it, do so silently and let it go.
7. **Some groups prefer guidelines that encourage the writer to just listen** as the group discusses the work.
8. You, the Writer, always has the option of setting aside any critiques you feel do not apply. Remember not do that out loud. **Ultimately, it is your story, and the final judgement is yours.**

When You are the One Providing the Critique

1. Take notes during when you are reading through the manuscript. Be sure your notes are legible and the suggestions are clear so you can **provide feedback effectively when it is your turn.**
2. **If you are adding notes directly onto a copy of the manuscript,** one idea is to put a (+) by the things you like, a minus (-) by the ones you don't, and a question mark (?) where you get confused or didn't understand something. (If you think something was funny add a LOL! or smiley face.)
3. If you notice **minor spelling or punctuation errors,** note them directly on the copy and don't mention them in your verbal analysis. That just takes up precious time.
4. **It's okay to disagree with another member's analyses.** Someone else may find fault with the writer's vocabulary choices; if you disagree, say so and explain why...good naturedly. Writers need to have a range of choices and opinions when it's time to revise.
5. Above all else, **be constructive.** Your comments aren't designed to showcase your brilliant analytical powers (or your crappy day), but to help another writer create better work.
6. If you are writing on a blank paper instead of a copy of the manuscript, include the title or chapter # or other **references for the convenience of the writer.**
7. **It's okay to ask the reader to re-read a short section** (if the work is being read aloud and comments not prepared ahead of time.)
8. Add your name and date and hand your notes or **return the manuscript with your comments to the Writer after verbal critiques** are done so s/he can review it again at home.
9. **Be sensitive to feelings:**
 - **Start each critique with a positive statement,** even if it's only, "This has a lot of promise," or "This is better" or "Nice title...good humor...great phrase...etc."

- **Make sure your verbal critiques are brief and clear.** If you have trouble being brief, consider giving only the most important suggestions verbally, then let your notes do the rest.
- **Don't compare the Writer to others** in your group.
- **Direct the comments about the actual work you are reviewing—not the Writer's abilities.** For example: "You aren't very good at showing us character" (not helpful). Instead use: "I don't see your main character clearly" (helpful).
- **Don't push for change,** even if you are sure the grammar, tense or anything else is incorrect.
- **How your comments are offered is just as important as what is offered.** Not helpful: "There's no way a 9-year-old would say that." And: "Your hero is way too adult." Instead offer suggestions like, "I'm not sure I've heard a 9-year-old use words like that." Or "Are you writing for MG? When I read your manuscript, I thought I was reading YA because the hero sounded more mature than what I'm used to reading in MG books."
- **Do not make a suggestion more than twice, no matter how strongly you feel about it.** The Writer owns the responsibility for any changes to her/his story.
- **No need to say more than, "I agree with (another Critiquer) about _____" when someone else has already pointed out a problem or a job well done.** Don't go into detail. Instead, move on to your next piece of feedback.

(Kind thanks to SCBWI New Jersey for this information. Additional edits by CenCal.)

The Nuts & Bolts of Critiquing a Writer

When you read a whole manuscript or a number of pages for critique, here's a checklist of things to look for.

PLOT

- ✓ Is there a clear, believable main plot?
- ✓ Did the story start too soon and give you too much background information or did it throw you into the middle of the conflict where you're scrambling to catch up?
- ✓ Did the main character resolve the problem in the end or merely resolve to live with it?
- ✓ Do the subplots advance the story or are they simply window dressing to stall on ending the piece?

PACING

- ✓ Did the plot move fast enough to maintain the reader's attention?
- ✓ Did the plot move so fast you're still trying to catch your breath?
- ✓ Does the pacing match the style and genre of the story? i.e. A melodrama should not be moving at the same pace as an action/adventure story.

SETTING

- ✓ Did the description of the setting transport you to "that time and place" or are you still sitting in your chair bored to tears?
- ✓ Do the descriptions run on for pages or are they interspersed throughout the story?
- ✓ Do the characters, their actions and the time period agree/conflict? For example: current slang will not work for an 1800 western.

- ✓ Does the order of events remain consistent throughout the story? For example: did the action hero cut his arm to the bone only to be using it the next day without any pain or loss of motion?

CHARACTERIZATION

- ✓ Are the characters “real”?
- ✓ Do they feel like stereotypes of all the books you’ve read?
- ✓ Are they complex enough to hold your interest or are you yawning by page two?
- ✓ Were the characters consistent?
- ✓ A character that has a disability cannot “lose” that disability halfway through the story or perform feats of strength/intelligence that are beyond the character’s innate abilities. Small details matter as well. Having a character’s eye/hair color change halfway through the story can be very distracting.
- ✓ Does the protagonist undergo some sort of change in the story? If not, what is the purpose of the story? The change does not have to be a good one. If the story is dark, it is acceptable for the character to undergo a negative change.
- ✓ Is the character’s background given in one lump or a small manageable piece?
- ✓ Was there too much information?

DIALOGUE

- ✓ Did the dialogue match the time frame?
- ✓ Did the dialogue include unnecessary profanity, too many sentence fragments, clichés, or too heavy of a dialect?
- ✓ Does each character have their own manner of speaking, like real people do?
- ✓ The dialogue should match the conflict that is happening between the characters, where it is sexual, social, physical, or political?

POINT OF VIEW

- ✓ The story should stay in one POV (point of view). If it starts in first person (I), or third person (he/she) it should stay that way throughout.
- ✓ POV shifts should identify the character leading the scene quickly and easily.
- ✓ In the third person POV the story should stay either omniscient point of view (all knowing) or limited POV (no head jumping, all clues to other character's motives are through their actions and dialogue).
- ✓ If the writer does change, the switch should be seamless and natural. If it's jarring, that is something that should be noted.

2001 Tina Morgan Fiction Factor

Checklist: Preparing Your Manuscript for Critique

Whether you are submitting a manuscript to an editor, agent, or to your critique group here are some guidelines to follow:

MECHANICS

- ✓ Did you use the proper format?
- ✓ Are you showing, not telling?
- ✓ Is it as tight as it can be? remove adverbs and unnecessary adjective.
- ✓ Is the manuscript an appropriate word length?
- ✓ Did you use correct grammar (tense, spelling etc.?)
- ✓ Did you use correct punctuation, especially for dialogue?
- ✓ Did you proofread carefully to catch typos?
- ✓ Is there variety in the sentence structure?
- ✓ Is there variety in the paragraph length?

LANGUAGE

- ✓ Is your language appropriate for the age of the audience?
- ✓ Beware of alliteration: i.e., "Little Larry leapt" or "She cursed and cried and called."
- ✓ Beware of overuse of "And" or "But" at the beginning of sentences.
- ✓ Watch out for clichés.
- ✓ Weed out Weasel Words: really, finally, just, very, so, then, next, seems, seemed, began...
- ✓ Are you overusing: as, looked, that, turned?
- ✓ Search for pet words and phrases that you've overused.
- ✓ Are you using active verbs?
- ✓ Check for sentences that begin with "there" and reword them.
- ✓ Are you using specific nouns?
- ✓ Did you use at least 3 of the 5 senses?
- ✓ Did you resist the urge to explain? Make what you say clear and important the first time and you won't have to retell the reader.
- ✓ Does the story flow when read aloud?

STORY

- ✓ Does the story stay in the main character's viewpoint?
- ✓ Does the main character solve the problem?
- ✓ Is the story conflict identified early on?
- ✓ Is the story idea age appropriate?

- ✓ Is the story believable?
- ✓ Does the story have action?
- ✓ First sentence – is it compelling? Does it hook the reader?
- ✓ Does the story come full circle? Tie back to the beginning?
- ✓ Have you avoided coincidences and convenient plot solutions?
- ✓ Beware of being didactic or preachy.
- ✓ Is your setting clear?
- ✓ Does the story fit the genre?
- ✓ Is it clear who your audience is?
- ✓ Does the story have a universal theme?
- ✓ Does your story take a predictable/same old story idea and give it a new twist?

CHARACTER

- ✓ Do we know the age of the main character?
- ✓ Is the character appropriate for the age of the audience?
- ✓ Will the reader be able to quickly identify the main character of your story?
- ✓ Does your main character grow and change?
- ✓ Is your main character unique and three dimensional?
- ✓ Is your main character sympathetic or easy to identify with?
- ✓ Is the character's voice unique?

DIALOGUE

- ✓ Is it clear who is speaking?

- ✓ Do your characters have distinctive voices?
- ✓ Avoid most speaker attributions meant to replace "said" (exclaimed, retorted, responded, inquired, etc.)
- ✓ Do you use action tag lines as well as simple attributions (said, asked)?
- ✓ Is the dialogue natural sounding?
- ✓ Does the dialogue move the story forward?
- ✓ Remove dialogue that is there to convey information to the reader.
- ✓ Watch out for characters "speechifying."

FOR PICTURE BOOKS

- ✓ Does it have good rhythm and meter? (This doesn't mean it was written in verse).
- ✓ Is there plenty of action for an illustrator to illustrate?
- ✓ Is the story sacrificed to make it fit into verse?
- ✓ Would this be more appropriate for a magazine piece?

(Kind thanks to Sue Ford www.susanuhlig.com for this information.)

Critique Guidelines for Illustrators/Visual Artists

The purpose of an Illustration/Visual Art critique group is to encourage each participant through comments and suggestions to enhance the illustrations and other types of art work intended to “illustrate” a children’s book, as well as to affirm what has been created, pointing out areas that need to be strengthened, removed, or clarified. Illustrators/Visual Artists’ groups can be much more informal and subjective than writers’ groups, more like art school critiques.

Overall Roles

Of the Illustrator/Visual Artist Whose Work is Being Discussed

1-Introduce the artwork.

2-Share it with the group. Unless your work was emailed ahead of time and members are coming in with their comments already prepared.

3-Absorb the feedback.

4-Ask questions if you need more information to understand the feedback.

5-Later on, after you have time to absorb the feedback, decide which advice to take (you don’t have to agree to make changes in your meeting).

Of the Critiquer

- 1. Start with the positive aspects of the work.**
- 2. First, point out those things the Illustrator/Visual Artist is doing well,** such as overall presentation, continuity, consistency, subject matter, perspectives, composition, and marketability.
- 3. Point out where the artwork may need tightening or clarifying but speak from your own perspective.** Use “I” statements rather than “You” statements. For example: “I like how you used motion in your illustration,” or “I am confused because I can’t clearly see the hero in your illustration...”

4. **Be specific.** Instead of saying, “You need to work on composition,” try to offer a specific way the Illustrator /Visual Artist might improve the composition.
 5. **Keep in mind that your comments are your thoughts and can easily be subjective, so try to review the work from the perspective of the general population** (children age X) or a specific population (i.e., librarian, teacher, social worker, etc.). Remember the Illustrator/Visual Artist has his/her own vision for the story’s artwork. You are there to help enhance it, not re-do it for them, nor to ask that s/he re-create it the way you would *prefer* to see it according to your own personal vision.
 6. **Bring something new into the discussion.** Instead of repeating what’s already been said, try to find something new to add. It’s okay to say, “I agree with what’s been said,” and then pass to the next person.
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Process Suggestions

When You are Being Critiqued

1. **Introduce your artwork. Identify the genre and details of the work being reviewed** today: “the thumbnail sketches for a picture book about a boy who gets his first pet” or “my finished double-page spread where the boy’s mom gives him a dog for his birthday” etc. Note: often the artwork will show the story’s text so the reviewers should have a good feel for what the artist is trying to do to further enhance the story. If you have any specific feedback that you are looking for in particular, don’t hesitate to make that clear. You may want help to make a scene more dynamic, or with an appropriate color scheme. If you communicate specific questions, then more of your feedback will be framed with your current goals in mind!
2. **Show your artwork straight through, with no digressions or side remarks.** During the review, you may find yourself identifying new problem areas you want to revise later, but jot down those notes quickly and quietly for your own use later.
3. **As you show your work, do not excuse or explain.** “This is a really rough draft, or I worked on this late last night...” As Linda Sue Park, Newberry Winner and SCBWI Board member, states on her website: “...the work must stand or fall on its own. When the piece eventually gets submitted and is read by the editor,

the Illustrator /Visual Artist won't be there to say things like, 'Well what I meant there is...' or 'That's supposed to refer back to...'

4. **Give the group the chance to fully evaluate your work.** Everyone's training and art style is different! What is confusing to one may be perfectly clear to another. So answer any questions that someone asks of you to help clarify it for that person so they can provide you with good feedback.
5. **Try not to be defensive.** Remember your goal: a stronger portfolio and/or book dummy, etc. The group is offering ideas to help your work become stronger. So, try to relax and remember that other people's suggestions are just that--suggestions! You may explain the intention or goal of the art piece in response to critiques, but do not argue with the comments. If you don't agree with it, do so silently and let it go.
6. **Listen for patterns in the feedback.** If several reviewers agree on one aspect of your work, that may signal that you need to separate yourself from your art and listen to the suggestions being offered.
7. **Some groups have guidelines that encourage the Illustrator/Visual Artist to just listen** as the group discusses the work.
8. You, the Illustrator/Visual Artist, always has the option of setting aside any critiques you feel do not apply. Remember not do that out loud. **Ultimately, it is your work, and the final judgement is yours.**

When You are the One Providing the Critique

Take notes during the presentation of the artwork. Be sure your notes are legible, and the suggestions are clear, so you can **provide effective feedback when it is your turn.**

If you are adding notes directly onto a printed copy of the artwork, one idea is to put a (+) by the things you like, a minus (-) by the ones you don't, and a question mark (?) where you get confused or didn't understand something. (If you think something was funny add a LOL! or smiley face.)

If you are making notes on a blank paper instead of a copy of the artwork, **include reference details for the convenience of the Illustrator/Visual Artist.**

It's okay to ask the Illustrator/Visual Artist for a quick re-review of part of the art piece (if the work is being reviewed out loud and your comments are not expected to be prepared ahead of time.)

Add your name and date and hand your notes or **return the art printout to the Illustrator/Visual Artist after verbal critiques are done so s/he can review it again** at home.

Be sensitive to feelings:

- ✓ **Start each critique with a positive statement**, even if it's only, "This has a lot of promise," or "This is better" or "Nice title...good humor...great colors...etc."
- ✓ **Make sure your verbal critiques are brief and clear.** If you have trouble being brief, consider giving only the most important suggestions verbally, then let your notes do the rest.
- ✓ **Don't compare the Illustrator/Visual Artist to others** in the group.
- ✓ **Direct the comments about the actual work you are reviewing—not the Illustrator/Visual Artist's abilities.** For example: "You aren't very good at making the character show up" (not helpful). Instead use: "I don't see your character clearly" (helpful).
- ✓ **Don't push for change**, even if you are sure something isn't working about the art piece.
- ✓ **How your comments are offered is just as important as what is offered.** Not helpful: "There's no way a 9-year-old would look like that." Or "Your hero is way too adult." Instead, offer suggestions like, "I'm not sure I've seen a 9-year-old wears clothes like that." Or "Are you illustrating for the 2-to-6year-old age group or the 6-to 8-year-olds? I can't quite tell."
- ✓ **Do not make a suggestion more than twice**, no matter how strongly you feel about it. The Illustrator/Visual Artist owns the responsibility for any changes to her/his story.
- ✓ **No need to say more than, "I agree with (another Critiquer) about _____" when someone else has already pointed out a problem or a job well done.** Don't go into detail. Instead, move on to your next piece of feedback.

(Kind thanks to SCBWI Los Angeles and New Jersey for this information. Additional edits by CenCal.)

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Please note that while we are happy to help assist you in pursuing your interest in joining (or forming) a critique group, by your utilizing SCBWI or SCBWI-CenCal information you are acknowledging that you are solely responsible for all related outcomes including but not limited to such activities related to forming and/or participating in/and or managing critique groups. Neither SCBWI nor SCBWI-CenCal creates/monitors/controls critique groups. That is up to you as individuals.