

Writers' CRITIQUE GROUP GUIDELINES for face-to-face groups

THE PURPOSE OF A CRITIQUE GROUP is to encourage each member through comments and suggestions to improve the story or article; affirm what has been written; point out areas which need to be cut, lengthened or strengthened. (A critique group is not a mutual admiration society, nor a time to tear others down!) Visiting, market news, and announcements should be limited to a reasonable portion of the total time.

THE JOB OF THE CRITQUER is to encourage the author, to suggest ways to strengthen the story, and to point out where the story needs tightening or clarifying. Use "I" statements, rather than "You" statements—i.e. "I like how you use active verbs" or "I'm confused by . . ."

THE JOB OF THE AUTHOR whose story is being discussed is to introduce manuscript, read it, listen to comments, ask questions for clarification, and later decide which advice to take.

WHEN YOU ARE BEING CRITIQUED . . .

1. Introduce your manuscript by saying:
 - What it is: "the first draft of a picture book," "a short story," "the 2nd chapter of a novel," "an article," etc.
 - Who it is for: "3-5 year olds," "middle graders," "for young adults"
 - Do not make excuses: "This is really rough..."
2. 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 reading aloud.
3. You may explain the intention or goal of the story in response to critiques, but **may not argue** with the comments.
4. You, the writer, always have the option of setting aside any critiques you feel do not apply. THIS IS NOT DONE VERBALLY. (Remember, it is your story, the final judgment is yours.)

WHEN CRITIQUING . . .

1. Take notes during the reading.
 - a) Be sure they are legible and suggestions are clear.
 - b) If writing on a copy of the manuscript itself, one aid is to put a plus (+) by the things you like, a minus (-) by the ones you don't, and a question mark (?) where you got confused or didn't understand.
 - c) If writing on blank paper instead of a copy of the manuscript, include the title or chapter # for the convenience of the writer. Give verbal critiques one at a time.
 - d) It's okay to ask to see the manuscript or have a short section reread.
 - e) Add your name and date and hand your notes or return the manuscript to the writer after verbal critiques are done.
2. Be sensitive to feelings.
 - a) 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..."
 - b) Don't compare writers in your group.
3. Keep verbal critiques brief and clear. If you have trouble being brief, consider giving only the most important suggestions verbally, then let your notes do the rest.

4. Direct comments toward the work, NOT the writer or his/her ability. Not: "You aren't very good at showing us the character." Instead: "I don't see your main character too well." (Exception: "You're very good at dialogue, etc.")
5. Don't push for a change even if you are SURE grammar, tense, or ? is incorrect. You just inform. It is the writer's job to check it out.
6. Remember, all suggestions are just that—suggestions.
7. HOW they are offered is just as important as WHAT is offered. NOT: "You can't have a 9-year-old say that." INSTEAD: "Your hero sounds a little adult to me." The latter is an opinion—and you are entitled to one—but you cannot tell the writer what to do or not do.
8. Do not make a suggestion more than twice, no matter how strongly you feel about it. The writer must take responsibility for changes—especially those they hear from several people.
9. 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.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR . . .

1. TITLE: Effective? Arouse interest? Hint at content?
2. BEGINNING: Grab and hold attention? Does the story begin as written or really begin later/earlier?
3. POINT OF VIEW: Consistent? The right one?
4. AUDIENCE: Age/audience appropriate for the proposed audience?
5. SETTING: Do we know where we are? When we are?
6. THEME: Important to many or few? Fresh or already overdone?
7. MOVEMENT: Smooth? Good transitions? Logical order? Well paced? Flashbacks don't lose the reader?
8. CONTENT: Extraneous material or digressions? Sharp focus? Showing, not telling? Sensory details are woven in? Is there a good balance between narrative description, action, and dialogue? Are there summarized passages that should be written out as scenes?
9. CHARACTERS: Is it clear who the main character is? Does he/she have both weaknesses and strengths? Are characters well-rounded? Believable? Each one's dialogue distinctive and appropriate to place, time and character? Does the hero solve his/her own problems? Is the villain realistic?
10. PLOT: Problem clear? Does the plot develop with credibility? Motivations? Proper preparation for what happens without the reader feeling "set up"? Sufficient conflict?
11. ENDINGS: Do chapter endings make you want to read on? Does the end of the story leave you with a satisfied feeling?
12. VOICE: Fresh, original, compelling? Age appropriate?
13. DIALOGUE: Does it seem natural? Advance the story? Show character? Do characters have unique ways of talking? Are tag lines and attributions used appropriately?
14. WORD CHOICE: Is there clarity, rhythm and power in the language? Active verbs and strong nouns, few adverbs? Doesn't use clichés?
15. SENTENCE FLUENCY: Clear sentences? Variety of sentence structure and length?
16. BCD: Are there places where we're bored? Confused? Don't believe it?

Helpful phrases and suggestions: "You may/might want to think about..." or "try..." or "consider..."
 "I agree/disagree with Ann about..." "I wonder if you could strengthen this scene by..."

Remember, we are here to support each other, bolster each other's confidence after rejection letters, and rejoice in each other's successes.