Inclusive Approaches for Building and Maintaining a Constructive Environment in Your Critique Group

Critique Groups are one of many membership benefits of SCBWI and are free and open to all who are interested. The high level of ongoing participation in Critique Groups suggests that, by and large, members find them to be a valuable part of their writing and/or illustrating journey. Therefore, Eastern PA SCBWI wants to do its utmost to make all members feel welcome to participate, and to ensure participants find an environment in their Critique Group that serves their personal goals.

Authors and illustrators of children's literature participate in Critique Groups with various objectives in mind. Some come to experience encouragement through the creative process; others come for in-depth, critical feedback. Many authors and illustrators benefit in both ways. Ideally, a Critique Group is an empowering environment that fosters creativity – a key component of children's writing and illustration.

Critique Group Leaders play a key role in helping Eastern PA SCBWI achieve its goal of providing equal access to Critique Groups to all SCBWI members.

The degree to which participants can reap the rewards of Critique Group participation is affected by the nature of the interactions between members; group learning settings such as Critique Groups function best when members speak with kindness and respect for one another. Critique Group Leaders should model kind, respectful communication and urge all members to interact in the same manner. For more general critiquing guidelines, see our Critique Group Resources page.

Supportive Communication

A Critique Group is a somewhat unique environment. It may be useful to emphasize, to new and existing members, good communication techniques – no interrupting or talking over others – as well as insights in social power dynamics in order to help ensure that all who come to the Critique Group have a meaningful, constructive experience that serves the ultimate purpose of furthering their writing and illustrating goals. It's worth remembering that the sharing process can make the creator feel vulnerable; it is the responsibility of the Critique Group Leader to ensure that the group is a safe space for sharing. Often, even experienced writers and illustrators have had very little instruction on how to offer critique. Providing insight into another's work is a challenging task.

Consider the feedback structure of your Critique Group. Below are two approaches for giving and receiving feedback. You might structure your Critique Group so that individuals can choose the approach that works best for them when their own work is being discussed.

a) One approach involves participants providing feedback while the writer or illustrator listens without interrupting. Some creators feel that they benefit from this approach, or, because this has historically been the approach in many academic venues, are accustomed to receiving feedback given in this style.

b) Another approach is a dialogue led by the writer or illustrator. Some creators find that this approach better serves their goals. It can be useful for

      1) ensuring that within the limited timeframe of the critique, those areas the creator is most interested in receiving feedback on are the focus;

2) helping the discussion move beyond conventional ideas about "good" writing or illustrating, which might, in fact, stand in the way of achieving the creator's purpose (see Felicia Rose Chavez's cake example below under "Resources for Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback);

3) helping writers and illustrators see for themselves what changes might help achieve their creative purpose, rather than looking to others to "fix" the piece; and

4) empowering writers and illustrators to decline to receive feedback that is not in line with their current needs (see examples of how to do this below).

Resources for Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback:

Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process advocates that participants aim to ask neutral questions of a creator during a critique, rather than asking questions with embedded opinions. To understand the difference between a neutral question versus a question with an embedded opinion, we can turn to Felicia Rose Chavez's cake example. "Why is this cake so dry?" contains an embedded opinion, whereas the neutral question "What texture were you aiming for when you made this cake?" opens a door to reveal something about the creator's purpose, such as, "My great aunt Marjorie just died, and I was trying to recreate the cake she used to make." The rules around grammar, word choice, story structure, and illustration composition, for example, can all be broken to serve the creator's purpose, to meet the intended audience where they are, or to impact the audience in other ways.

When an author or illustrator is using the creator-led approach (see letter b above), one of the benefits is that the critique will be focused on the areas that the creator chooses. The creator can decline feedback if a group member approaches the creator with feedback outside of the preferred focus. For example, when a creator is specifically seeking feedback on a character, a Critique Group member may say, "I have an opinion about the setting of your story. Would you like to hear it?" The creator can respond with "Yes, please," or "Maybe later, if there's time," or "No, but thank you" if the topic is not relevant to their goals or to the stage of their creative process or for any other reason.

Some Critique Groups communicate via written feedback (e.g., documents with written comments) in addition to or instead of verbal critique. Written critique may require even more intentionality than verbal critique because the person giving the critique isn't there to clarify their thoughts and feedback while the receiver is reading it. When giving written critiques, it is important to keep in mind that feedback should be given as suggestions rather than instructions. Instead of phrasing your comment as a command, such as "Delete this phrase" or "Move this section to page 2," word your feedback as a suggestion and include detailed explanations so that the creator can understand the intent of the suggestion. For example, "Consider removing this phrase because this information was given in the previous paragraph," or "Perhaps this section would work well on page 2 to build suspense for the reader." Avoid using "you" in written feedback. You are critiquing the work, not the creator. Some examples of phrases to use that will help give the author or illustrator a positive, respectful experience with written feedback are, "You may/might want to think about..." or "Try..." or "Consider..." Always include positive feedback on what is working well, rather than focusing exclusively on improvements.

Problems

Some areas in which Critique Groups might experience challenges include

a) ensuring that members communicate in ways that are supportive and further the interest of the creator while they are giving manuscript or illustration feedback (see examples above), and

b) addressing incidents where the content of manuscripts or artwork involves sensitivity issues.

In the event of problematic verbal communication within the Critique Group, there are strategies you might try for improving the nature of the discussion or the climate of the Group. Encourage members of the Group to ask themselves questions such as: Do I, as a reader or viewer, understand the creator's purpose in creating this work? Am I actively tuned in to the pitfall of making quality judgements about another person's story or art according to how it reinforces my own worldview rather than focusing on the message of the creator? Our own biases affect the kind of feedback we give to others. Remind participants that Critique Groups should be nurturing, inclusive, respectful places and that participation is a benefit open to all SCBWI members. As a Critique Group Leader, ask members of your Critique Group to let you know if they feel a lack of tolerance, respect, or compassion. Encourage members to respond in the moment – or to follow up later if there was not a timely response – when they feel that words said in the Critique Group are coming from a place of bias. As a Critique Group Leader, respond in the moment to offensive language, should you encounter it, and recognize and challenge biases that might be affecting the type of feedback participants might be giving. It is a responsibility of everyone to confront racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, or other behavior or words that might be embedded in critique language. You can refer members to SCBWI's anti-harassment policy, which, among other things, prohibits abusive verbal comments.

Just as biased or offensive language should be addressed in the moment, so should racist, sexist, or other offensive representations in manuscripts and artwork. It may be an educational moment for a creator to hear that portraying a father as bumbling and incompetent as an attempt at humor is unflattering, biased, and stereotypical. Likewise, portraying older individuals as senile, people of color or women as intellectual inferiors, and a plentitude of other stereotypes can offend readers and perpetuate these stereotypes for our young audiences who are learning about the world through our work. Not only that, but work that includes biases such as these are unlikely to attract an agent or publisher. Once again, you can refer members whose work may be problematic to SCBWI's anti-harassment policy, which also includes the prohibition of harmful or prejudicial written comments or images.

Writing and illustrating is often a solitary process; coming together in a Critique Group is an opportunity for community and all the richness that supportive communities bring to our lives. The members of your Critique Group will come with many different perspectives, just as the children who are your intended audience will, opening our eyes to different ways of viewing the world around us, and even different ways of viewing our very own words and illustrations.

The content of this document draws on the following sources, which are excellent resources for learning more about giving and receiving feedback in an inclusive, respectful environment:

Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*

Liz Lerman's *Critical Response Process: A Method for Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, From Dance to Dessert*

Additional Resources:

Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping by Matthew Salesses