

There's no crying in critique groups!

How to form or join a group, and take and receive criticism

Why form or join a critique group?

- Avoid writing in a vacuum
- Knowledge sharing
- Encouragement
- Challenge
- Tribe support
- Hone your craft
- It's good practice for public criticism after you're published
- Learn to tame your overblown ego/cowering inner child

Find an existing group

Online:

- InkedVoices.com, CritiqueCircle.com, etc.

In real life:

- PPW's Open Critique Program
- RMFW.org/members/critique
- Lighthouse Writers

Points to ponder when forming new groups

- Genre-specific or cross-genre?
- Expectations
- Social vs. strictly business
- Written guidelines both for critiquing and for how meetings will be conducted
- Plan for conflict resolution
- Culture

Questions to ask potential members

- What is your writing experience?
- What are your writing goals? (Hobbyist, craft development, publication, self-publication)
- Are you willing to take criticism, or are you looking for encouragement only?
- What steps have you taken toward your goals?

Things to consider: your group's general guidelines

- Objective
- Purpose
- Location
- Schedule: days, times, frequency
- Prospective member auditions
- Group leader, facilitator, or neither?
- Individual responsibilities
- Family members allowed to audition?

Conflict resolution: ways to head off problems

- Don't split into factions
- Don't badmouth anyone behind his/her back (do it to their face)
- Follow your guidelines—make expectations clear
- Don't gossip
- Be supportive
- Encourage members to speak face to face if there's an issue
- Be courteous, kind, polite

My critique group: business

- Yahoo groups for uploading files and member emails
- Private Facebook page
- Promote each other's work
- Broadcast opportunities
- Written guidelines, group and critique, review regularly
- 80 pages per meeting
- Deadline for submission: midnight one week before the meeting
- Auditions are read separately and voted on via email or in person

My critique group: culture

- We are pretty hard on each other
- Lots of humor (much of it sarcastic)
- Supportive
- Encouraging but we don't BS each other
- Meet socially on a regular basis
- Non-competitive ("High tide floats all boats")
- A tradition of celebration

Levels of criticism – what's appropriate for your group?

- High-level criticism (what works about the story? Is the arc clear? Does the language fit the genre/time period/culture?)
- Copyediting (word choices, sentence structure, style consistency, fact accuracy)
- Line editing (formatting, punctuation, spelling)

My critique group's guidelines

- High-level issues: narrative flow, logic, choreography, pacing, etc.
- “Critiquees” aren’t allowed to speak during critiques
- Don’t belabor a point another member has already made
- Other members are discouraged from interrupting each other’s critiques
- Point out the good as well as the not-so-good

When giving criticism

Don't

- give vague feedback
- attack the writer's values, character, personality
- be dismissive of the writer's choice of genre
- assume that if you don't understand a cultural reference, no one will
- critique based on your personal preferences (i.e., personal hot-button words vs. generally offensive language)
- ask for clarification. Give your critique and move on. The critiquee can answer those questions if there's time at the end.

Criticism dos

Do

- Allow yourself plenty of time to read multiple times
- Use the sandwich method (compliment-criticism-compliment)
- Give specific feedback
- Distinguish between personal preference and helpful criticism
- Educate yourself on genre-specific tropes, language, etc.

Unhelpful criticism

If you can't articulate why and how to fix it, keep your mouth shut. Don't say

- “This just didn't work for me.”
- “I didn't like it. I don't know why, I just didn't.”
- “I would never read anything like this.”

When receiving criticism

Don't

- glare at the critic
- try to explain or change the critic's mind (if you have to explain, it doesn't work)
- take it personally
- interrupt
- ask questions (save them for later—time is limited!)

Incorporating received criticism

- Inverted pyramid: begin with the high-level and work your way down to the specific
- Don't try to please everyone
- If two or more people have an issue, it's an issue – if only one, you're allowed to disregard
- At the end of the day, it's your novel