

How to Form and Run a Critique Group

By Eric Wiesenthal

“Critiquing is not just about making a story better. It’s about making ourselves better. Critiquing is critical to the development of any writer,” according to Daniel Schwabauer, who holds an M.A. in Fine Arts from University of Kansas and is an award-winning author. He also has a popular website that directs high school students in fiction writing.

Schwabauer has a firm belief that giving feedback allows writers to see their own works in-progress more clearly, and the critique group process sharpens their writing skills when they provide insights to fellow writers. “... this, will carry over into your own writing,” he adds.

If you are trying to form a critique group, there is general agreement about how to proceed:

- Be consistent with date, time, and place.
- Allow 15 – 20 minutes of socializing before you start working or as a break in the middle of the meeting with light refreshments and drinks.
- Meet either twice a week or, at minimum, once a month.
- In this era of ZOOM meetings, the group probably should only meet for two hours at most.
- Who will be allowed to attend? (new writers, ones with rough manuscripts/short stories, experienced writers).
- Will the group be eclectic in the manuscripts it reviews or focus on a specific genre (fiction, non-fiction, memoir, sci-fi, thriller, etc.)?

- Think about what you can offer the group – amount of time, critiquing expertise, how-to write queries and editor contacts, or just encouragement and support.
- Groups of 5 – 8 writers generally work best.
- Create boundaries:
 - Some groups read only two manuscripts per meeting, allowing 45 minutes for reading and critiquing, while others provide 15 minutes per writer, allowing for reading and quick critiquing of all the manuscripts.
 - Writers scheduled to be critiqued are responsible for getting copies of their manuscripts to each member of the group a week before the next meeting.
- As readings proceed, writers should be aware of visible reactions to their writing: Interest, boredom, excitement, incredulity, or emotional involvement.

If you're a critiquer:

- Review the manuscripts to be critiqued in advance and bring your notes to the meeting.
- Refer to the writer in the third person (i.e., the author, the writer, the narrator)
- Always begin with a positive comment. Be sensitive.
- Avoid making eye contact with the writer. In many cases, this will ease the difficulty of accepting criticism for the writer.
- Offer all criticism tentatively, as your opinion

- Always be honest. Straightforward observations and questions from members of the group are important for everyone, but it is especially important in supporting and encouraging less experienced writers.
 - Providing an alternative word or expression can help the author. Also consider what you got from the piece and how it impacted you.
- Remember that the author has the last word. They have to believe in the suggested change.

NOTES TO GROUP LEADERS:

- Maintaining confidentiality about the group's discussions, etc., is extremely important!
- The leader also should not allow any meeting to focus on mechanical or technical details (punctuation, etc.).

Kit Kirkpatrick has been leading critique groups for memoir writers for several years. She advises those who become group leaders to “approach the role as a teaching moment to point out something powerful about each piece or reiterate it if someone else has already made the point.”

She also emphasizes working toward developing her critique group so that writers feel comfortable expressing very personal or sensitive perspectives. “I think it is love that makes these critiquing groups a safe place to share true stories, to heal and to bond, beyond receiving the literary benefits of thoughtful and kind critique.”

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