

How to Make Your Critique Group Genuinely Helpful

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Daniel Schwabauer

This is the **first in a short series** I'm going to do on making a critique group take off. But before I start in on how to *make* critiques...

Why Join—or Start—a Critique Group?

Most writers understand how important good feedback is to improving a manuscript. We need beta readers to point out problems—and even strengths—in our work. But **critiquing is not just about making a story better. It's about making ourselves better.** Critiquing is critical to the development of any writer.

Yes, receiving feedback will help you to see your work-in-progress more clearly.

But **giving feedback might be even more important.** Developing good critique skills teaches your mind to analyze story elements. It teaches you to sift the beautiful from the mundane. And that training—sharpened in the process of helping someone else—will carry over into your own writing.

The problem, for many writers, is not unwillingness to critique, but **lack of opportunity.**

Good critique groups can be hard to find. So how are you supposed to do all this critiquing without a group?

One Year Adventure Novel (OYAN) students may of course use the OYAN [Student Forum](#). But critiques through the OYAN critique boards, though helpful, can never be as rigorous as those given in a **face-to-face meeting**. The most benefit you can get would be from joining a live group that meets **at least once every month**.

If you can't find a group, my advice is to **start one**. Even if your group starts out with just two people, you will still find it helpful (though three or more people will make for a better critique dynamic.)

Nuts and Bolts

- **Meet often.** Once a week is ideal. Once a month is still very helpful.
- **Allow 2–3 hours for each session.** Good critiquing takes time.
- **Socialize first.** Plan on spending 15–20 minutes at the beginning of each meeting chatting and catching up on life. This is going to happen anyway, since it is part of human nature. More importantly, it will help you **see each other in a larger context**. The better you know each member, the better your feedback will be.
- **Bring food!** Eating is an important part of letting people into your life and will create a bond. You don't have to make meals. A bowl of microwave popcorn is sufficient. Home-baked brownies are even better. The group I'm part of sometimes has little more than a bag of skittles, though members routinely bring delicious baked goods. Nothing says "I respect you as a writer" like warm chocolate chip cookies.
- **Begin on time.** Start the actual critiquing no later than 20 minutes after the meeting begins.

- **Invite writers**, or at least people who are interested in *writing*. I don't mean that everyone in the group has to be constantly churning out pages of prose. But including someone because they are an avid reader does not necessarily mean they will be a great fit for your group.

- **Create boundaries.** Time and page count limitations will make everyone more **comfortable**. You don't have to be rigid about these, but it's a good idea to **agree on some guidelines upfront**. Maybe 10 pages is fine, but 20 is too much. Maybe you need to use an egg timer to make sure you don't spend the whole two hours on one person's excerpt. Maybe you need to always end at 9:30. Whatever the boundaries are, make sure everyone is comfortable with them.

- **Be consistent.** Scheduling conflicts are inevitable, but critique groups work best when they happen in the same place at the same time with few interruptions or missed sessions.

Here There be Dragons (Things to be Wary of)

MR. JERK-FACE

This person delights in pointing out how stupid everyone else's work is. He comes with a sharpened pen and a belligerent attitude, **but never with anything of his own for critique**. (The group is of course too amateurish to offer him anything of value.) He is condescending and hostile. He tears down because it makes him feel better about himself, and he will destroy your group if you don't **ask him to leave**.

That said, not every blunt or harsh critic is a Mr. Jerk-Face. Some people just have very direct, and even insensitive, personalities. **Often these people make great additions to a writing group; they may be the only ones willing to say what you really need to hear.**

LACK OF HONESTY

Some groups are **artificial**. Members try so hard to encourage each other that they **fail to point out genuine flaws**. This helps no one. In fact, it's worse than not being in a group at all, because it facilitates a feeling of unfairness. Members eventually get the idea that their work is not the reason they aren't getting published. **They start believing that it's not the fault of their prose or their story lines or their submission process. Instead, the problem lies with biased publishers, an unfair industry, or with the sad decline of a favored genre.**

PRETENSE

Writers who pretend to know everything are dangerous. No one has all the answers to every manuscript flaw. I've watched inexperienced writers give solutions based on misunderstood principles and conjecture. This really hurts those receiving the feedback if they try to fix something based on **bad advice**.

Which is not to say that youth or inexperience disqualifies you as a critic. Just **speak from what you know** (such as how a story affects you), rather than from what you don't know ("All science fiction editors are prudes!"). **It is much better to say, "I don't know how to fix this, but I was bored from pages 7 to 9" than it is to give a diagnosis from ignorance.**

DISCOURAGEMENT

The great-granddaddy of writing monsters, discouragement, is the ultimate dream-killer. It's what makes Mr. Jerk-Face such a threat. But discouragement usually **wins through attrition, not outright assault**. Dreams are postponed, goals delayed, books left

unwritten not just because “life happens,” but because we suspect our work is inferior and will never be good enough. **Discouragement whispers to us that we can’t be rejected if we don’t submit.** Better to polish that short story a 17th time than send it to an online journal. Better to hide from the world than be crushed by it.

The antidote to this is a supportive community. Every writer in your group should also be a cheerleader for every other member. Small successes—such as hearing that one or two other writers truly value your work—can make all the difference in whether a writer keeps writing.

Beyond this, groups should prod each other into submitting their articles and short stories and novels. Remind your group that **rejections are training bruises. Bad reviews are battle-scars.**

Offer **community rewards** for individual successes. When I sold the Legends of Tira-Nor series, the group I was in threw a party. Their happiness was **a mark of their investment in my work.**

You can do something similar. For instance, offer to buy dinner (or ice cream) for the first person to publish a short story, with the tab paid by the other members. The reward doesn’t have to be huge; it just needs to communicate your investment in each other’s work.

Success is often contagious. But **your dedication to each other will be more effective than anything else at keeping discouragement at bay.**

Next week I’ll offer suggestions about how to give and receive feedback in a live setting.

Have you ever been in a live critique group? To what do you credit its success or failure?

How to Make Your Critique Group Genuinely Helpful, Part 2

- October 14, 2015

Giving Feedback

If you’ve ever started a critique group, I’m guessing the first meeting went something like this:

After everyone arrived you broke out the popcorn or brownies and talked for a few minutes before asking if anyone had brought anything. Ashley raised her hand (a little sheepishly, perhaps) and passed out her first chapter. She read it aloud while everyone else followed along on her printed copies, jotting down notes where appropriate. A long, uncomfortable silence followed and eventually someone said, **“It was good. I liked it.”**

This, sadly, is how most critiques sessions tend to go at first. If your group is made up of young or inexperienced writers, you will have to address what to do when Ashley finishes reading.

Sure, everyone will have an opinion on her story. But without some guidance, most of these opinions will not be very helpful. They will probably be both **too nice and too vague.** Not

that your comments should draw blood (or even tears), but “I liked it. It was good,” is not helpful. And it’s not really a critique.

You must commit to being both honest and specific. Everyone in the group should understand this up front. **You will be kind, but you will also tell the truth.** A critique session is no place for white lies, however small.

This means that you will praise particular things, not ambiguous things. It means when you find flaws, you will name them specifically. It doesn’t mean you need to know why you liked or disliked something. It does mean **you need to be clear about what you liked and disliked.** You can admire the dialogue on page 6 and hate the way the story ends without understanding why the dialogue works and the ending doesn’t. But you can’t summarize the entire story with an adjective. You can’t just call it terrible, or even good. Be specific. To make things easier, I’ve created a blueprint for giving feedback on fiction. This is not a comprehensive list. I make no claim that my method is superior to other methods. I do claim its superiority over no method at all.

For simplicity, let’s call it the “Zoom” method. Zoom isn’t an acronym, but implies that you should **start with the big picture and zoom in.** Help the writer to fix her story before you tear into her sentence structure and verb-tense problems.

Why Zoom?

There’s nothing magical about starting big and working inward to the small stuff, but I suggest it for two reasons.

First, **if you find several major story issues, you shouldn’t address more nit-picky things.** New writers don’t need their prose torn to shreds. They need someone to tell them what’s wrong with their story. They need help clarifying plot and characters and theme. Sure, they might be able to stand a little guidance about showing instead of telling, or avoiding passive sentences. But they don’t need to focus on these things. **Story first, polish later.**

Second, even experienced writers sometimes find that a big-picture solution offered in critique makes later sections of a story redundant or even unusable. Why spend time polishing prose that’s destined for deletion?*

So we’re going to work from big to small, moving inward along each major point. Emotion takes precedence over Change, which takes precedence over Characters and Dialogue.

1. Emotion

Does the text create emotion?

What do you feel? This is key to any story, but writers often don’t know which emotions they are creating. One of the most helpful things you can do for any manuscript is point out where it is being funny, tense, heart-breaking, etc. If you are bored by a page, say so.

What does the writer intend?

We can’t always know the answer to this question, but often the intention is clear even if the

effort is unsuccessful. You can tell when a five-year-old is trying to be funny even if his joke falls flat. If you can see that a writer means to make you cry but the prose is so sappy that you instead feel like giggling, point this out.

What changes might help create the intended emotion?

Is there an obvious way to make the tension bigger or the joke funnier? Sometimes emotion is hindered by having too much of something. Other times the writer is cheating by telling us what to feel rather than showing us a situation with emotive consequences.

Conflict is often the core of an emotional exchange. Is it too weak?

Look for ways to heighten the core conflict. Once you've explored how the conflict can be made bigger or sharper or more consequential, look for ways to add other sorts of conflict to the text. For instance, in an argument that leads to a woman's husband storming out of the house, can there be another conflict pulsing in the background? Perhaps a literal storm that he is rushing off into, or an internal conflict such as her feelings of guilt over spending their savings without telling him.

Tension / Suspense

Does the writer raise important questions and then force you to wait for the answer? This is how story tension is created. Good storytellers dole out answers sparingly in early sections of a novel. Answers to major story questions are a signal the story is coming to an end. Point out areas in early chapters where the writer is answering questions too frequently or not raising them often enough.

Unexpected Elements. (Surprise is powerful.)

Is the action expected? If so, is it because the writer told you too much in an earlier section, or is it because the story itself is clichéd? Look for ways the manuscript can be taken in unexpected directions. Often these ideas already exist in the story, but the writer has shied away from them without knowing it.

2. Change

Does it resolve (for a short story or novel) or Does it have a change of values (for a novel chapter)?

Resolution is what makes a story fulfilling. A story that seems to go nowhere will always produce dissatisfaction in the reader. Similarly, a chapter that ends with nothing important having happened will feel like a waste of the reader's time. Every chapter should produce a change of values. Someone learns something or does something important to the story.

Does the change of values relate to the theme in some way?

Is the theme reinforced or demonstrated? Theme can be hard to examine in a critique group, but try anyway. Often it takes the input of other writers to show an author what she is really writing about in a story.

Believability

Is the excerpt fundamentally unbelievable? If as a reader you cannot suspend your disbelief, the writer needs to know.

Fulfilling Story Promises

If the change of values or resolution doesn't work, then either the beginning or the ending needs to be reworked.

3. Character/Dialogue

Arcs

Do characters and situations change over time? Just as Scrooge becomes a different person by the end of *A Christmas Carol*, story characters should change over the course of a novel or short story. The change doesn't have to be as large as Scrooge's, but it must be evident in, and result from, the story. Point out any change that is essentially invisible or feels tacked on.

Motivation

Every character should be driven primarily by a significant desire. Do we know what the main characters want? Is it evident on every page, if only by implication? Unmotivated characters will kill a story. The reader loses interest because the characters themselves have lost interest.

Personality

Characters feel flat when we cannot identify what makes them a person, (i.e., their personality.) Personality is not the same thing as mood or emotion. An angry look is an expression of personality, not a defining trait. Look for ways in which story characters are not acting true to themselves. If a character's personality seems consistently bland to you, point this out. The writer may be focusing too much on plot and not paying attention to his story people.

Consistency

Are the story characters consistent from chapter to chapter? Do their personalities or motivations change for no reason?

State of Mind

Is the character's state of mind clear? If the hero is terrified, is this terror demonstrated not just through his actions and words, but through the narration? Do we feel the terror too? And does it affect the flow of the story even as it is affected by that same story flow?

Dialogue

Does it match the character?

Does it enhance the emotion/theme?

Are any lines ambiguous? Can they serve more than one purpose?

Don't try to address every one of these core issues. Instead, look for places where an excerpt works really well or doesn't work at all. Chances are the cause can be found here.

And keep in mind that **positive feedback on big-picture elements is important too**. If the conflict has grabbed you by the throat, if the characters are fascinating, if the dialogue is compelling and witty, say so!

Once you've addressed emotion, change and characters/dialogue, zoom in to the nuts and bolts of the prose. Again, start with setting/description and move down the list.

4. Setting/Description

Does it enhance/reinforce the theme/emotion/mood?

Beautiful descriptions may not belong in the middle of an intense action scene.

How does it influence the characters?

A setting that appears at convenient places but never inconveniences the characters in a story will not feel real.

Any “white sheet” backgrounds?

Many first drafts seem to take place in a blank fog or against a white sheet because the author has failed to establish a concrete sense of place. This is often a failure of the writer’s imagination, but sometimes it’s simply a matter of not communicating what she sees. She knows the action is taking place in a castle but hasn’t revealed this to the reader.

Any purple prose?

Are there any places where the writer seems to be showing off? If you noticed it, then it pulled you out of the story and needs to be weeded out.

5. Tightening

Tense changes

Point-Of-View (POV) shifts

Unnecessary phrases or words

Pacing

Is the writer matching sentence length to the action of the story?

6. Action Words

Passive voice

Excessive was-ing sentences.

Weak verbs

In particular, any conjugation of “is” and “have,” but other verbs can be considered weak where a stronger verb lends itself to the sentence and story flow. “He went” is sometimes weaker than “He ran.”

Adverbs

You can’t get rid of all of them, but they frequently indicate a weak verb.

That’s it. That’s the Zoom blue-print. Yes, I have left off some things. No, I don’t rigidly follow this when I give feedback. **But I do work from big-picture to small.** I do try to zoom inward from Story to Polish. And each of these points is something you should be familiar with as a potential flaw or strength.

Next week I will look at an even more terrifying subject: how to *receive* feedback.

** Yes, it can help you improve as a writer to practice fixing prose you aren’t going to keep. But such exercises are best reserved for private writing times rather than group effort.*

How to Make Your Critique Group Genuinely Helpful, Part 3

- October 22, 2015
Daniel Schwabauer

Receiving Feedback

Finding (or starting) a good critique group may be the single most helpful thing you can do to polish your skills as a writer. And growing as a writer is really the point. Yes, a good group will be helpful in revising a novel or a series of short stories. But **personal improvement is more important than polishing a single manuscript**. Learning to give and receive feedback will help you over a lifetime.

Last week I outlined what I call the Zoom method, a critique approach that moves from big picture to small. That list of potential manuscript flaws is lengthy, but worth taking the time to understand. **When you can spot listed problems in someone else's work, you are more likely to anticipate and avoid them in your own.**

The really hard work of a critique group is always done by those giving feedback, not the one getting it. To be helpful, the readers in your critique group must spot inconsistencies between what a writer intends and what his text achieves. Good readers try to observe **not just a written story, but their own reactions** to that story. They have to simultaneously imagine your ten-page pirate battle and notice their own emotional reactions to it. This requires a considerable amount of both story technique and personal awareness.

But readers are not the only ones responsible for a great critique session. While it is certainly easier to be on the receiving end, the writer has a part to play as well. Here are four rules to observe when your manuscript goes under the microscope.

Rule #1 – Don't explain.

Writers tend to give too much information before (and after!) a reading. If someone has missed a critique session and needs to be filled in to understand what you are about to read, go ahead and tell them what they missed. But don't explain the backstory you left out of your book. **Don't give your group any information not directly available in the text.** Doing so provides story context that won't be shared by other readers. This damages the value of a live critique.

Similarly, **guard the secrecy of what will unfold in later chapters** the same way you would in a novel. (Would you ever type, "Dear Reader: I know things look bleak for Esmerelda right now, but in the next chapter a rescue helicopter pulls her to safety"? I hope not.)

In short, don't give your live group any information that isn't available to other readers.

Rule #2 – Value feedback.

Feedback that reveals flaws is precious. Cultivate a genuine desire to have the flaws in your work exposed. Critiques are not about you personally. They are not about your abilities as a writer. They are about **words on a page**: these particular words on these particular pages, and how these particular people were affected.

Even if someone shares an opinion about your excerpt that you don't agree with, be grateful for it. **You cannot spot every flaw in your own work.** You need the help of your peers. Don't ignore legitimate criticism on the basis that "they just don't understand." Yes,

you know more about your story than anyone else in the room. That's what makes your perspective flawed. **You actually know too much.** Not knowing your story is what makes a critique group valuable. Your readers don't remember the pages you deleted or the character background work you did before writing. They don't have any context except what's in your draft. This is why they can respond to it as typical readers.

So smile at every red mark. Giggle when your awkward sentences and tired clichés are uncovered. Pump your fists when your prose weaknesses and story inconsistencies are exposed. Rejoice when readers speak all manner of evil against your story. Rejoice and be glad!

Rule #3 – Ask questions.

After you have listened to every critique, it can be helpful to ask questions for the sake of clarity. But don't ask questions that aren't related to your readers' perceptions. Never ask something like, "What if I told you that Bob is really the villain? Then would you like his dialogue?"

Do ask questions that help you to **understand the story experience your readers are having**, such as:

"Does this plot twist work?"

"What do you expect after chapter six?"

"Who do you think is behind the assassination attempt?"

"Why did you say you hate Bob's decision to go home on page 92?"

"Does the situation with Jennifer and Cole seem predictable?"

Rule #4 – Say "thank you."

Don't be defensive. Don't justify your story or defend your writing decisions. Even if their feedback wasn't helpful, your group just gave you 30 or 40 minutes of their time and focused concentration. **Be grateful.**

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Which of these rules do you struggle with most?