

Tri-Valley Writers Critique Groups Best Practices

- 1) Provide a critique that is constructive to the author, i.e. point out what works with the piece, what might be confusing, etc. See Patrick Coyle's notes below.
- 2) Receive each critique graciously. There is no need to explain, persuade, or defend your writing. This is an opportunity to find out if readers would have a problem understanding what you, as the writer, are trying to convey.
- 3) Do not re-write another writer's story. Allow the writer to keep their story intact. Only offer suggestions for improvement.
- 4) Remember, Tri-Valley Writers has a lending library that is available via Patrick Coyle at Stem Group, or Patricia Boyle (VP).
- 5) Stem Group is a great place to learn about the critiquing process. For more information, contact Patrick Coyle at: critique@trivalleywriters.org.

Patrick Coyle's notes from Sands Hall's book, *Tools of the Writer's Craft*, the section "Preparing a Manuscript for Discussion in Workshop".

Things to base your critique around:

Characters:

- Do you care about them?
- Are they fleshed out adequately?
- Does the author succeed in making them unique? Or are they walking clichés?
- Do their motivations make sense and drive them through the story?
- Are they consistent in their actions and their dialogue? If not, do these inconsistencies tell you something about them or about the plot?

Plot:

- What happens?
- Does someone change?
- Is the story or chapter intriguing; did the writer succeed in creating a sense of tension?
- Does the story or chapter start before it needs to? End too long after the scene's climax?
- Are scenes included that are not necessary?

Point of view:

- Is the piece written in first person? Third person? Changing or Rotating? Omniscient?
- Is the point of view consistent? Are there changes in perspective that are jarring?
- Does the point of view chosen to tell the story seem to be the most effective one possible?
- Are vocabulary, grammar, even punctuation consistent with the character of the chosen point of view?

Voice (related to both point of view and language):

- Is the voice consistent or does it waver?
- Did you find it intrusive, or is it right for the story being told?

Language:

- Is the author's language elegant? Realistic? Vivid, boring, cerebral? (Clearly, this contributes to the quality of the voice.)

- Is the language true to the narrator, the point of view telling the story? Or is it the language of the author? (This may be a matter of “style”; not necessarily more or less effective, but it's good to note: either way, is it purposeful?)
- Is the writer’s use of language clichéd, or do interesting turns of phrase strike you with your unique “take” on the world?
- Does the author use strong verbs?
- Are figures of speech used unusually and well?

Detail:

- Does the author use detail well?
- Are the details intrinsic to the characters and story, or does their inclusion seem merely “writerly?”
- Does a given detail advance character? And/or plot? And/or theme?
- You might examine the writer’s use of metaphor: do objects and incidents in the manuscript represent more than their “surface” meaning? Are these consistent with the thematic concerns of the story?

Dialogue:

- Is it believable?
- Is it appropriate to the characters and to the style of the story?
- Does it help to round out the characters?
- Is there a dependence on adverbs in the attributions (he said, calmly; she commented, angrily or - - my favorite -- she asked, interrogatively) to communicate tone? That is, does the author tell, or show how the characters are behaving?
- Is it too little dialogue?
- Is there too much: does the author depend on characters to literally tell the story?
- Is dialogue-as-exposition handled deftly? Awkwardly?

Content:

- Is this a story you've read before?
- Or does it give you a fresh look at the world, asking you to think about something in a new way?
- Would you like to read more about this world, or by this author?
- If the manuscript is a chapter in the novel would you want to read on?

Theme:

- Note: some authors maintain that they are not interested in theme, or if there is one, it is not “purposeful”: this is disingenuous. Any worthwhile discussion of the manuscript includes the ideas it provokes, and it behooves the writer to sooner or later become aware of what those are.
- What is the story -- or the chapter -- about?
- Does the writer seem to begin with one idea and then veer into something unconnected?
- Do the elements listed above contribute to your understanding of the theme, or does the writer's choice of details, style, characters, and other elements confuse you?

Title:

- Does the title of the story or novel contribute to your understanding of the pages you’ve read?
- Does it offer a key as to theme, or how the author might intend you to read the manuscript?

After you've pondered these elements, heft your pencil or pen and get to work. Reread the manuscript, marking places and phrases that worked for you and ones that didn't and – this is a great help to the author – write commentary in the margins as to why.

Some readers like to create a key: a check mark or some squiggle lines for something that is particularly effective; a question mark beside something that doesn't make sense; parentheses around a phrase or section that seems redundant and can be deleted.

Write a paragraph or two with your overall response.