

Critique Reminders

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Ask yourself:

- What kind of input are you looking for? Ex: Structure vs. line editing. Most writers need to get the structure down first, rather than focusing on edits. All the edits in the world won't help if the structure is not right. Input on structure does not mean changing the author's voice, which should remain intact.
- What does the critique group leader offer? Does he/she make you feel comfortable and run the meetings efficiently? The leader should set a tone of a safe environment for authors to share their writing. Critique groups without a good leader generally don't do well.
- How is reader input given around the table? It should be insightful, not damaging to the ego, though the author has to be tough. Listen to input you are given. Avoid getting defensive or feel the need to explain.
- Bring something beyond typos to offer fellow critique group members. Read each piece three times. Should be okay to write thoughts for improvement right on the piece. Input should be expressed as your opinion only. Be sure to include positive things about the piece.
- Have faith that practice in reading work will make you a better reviewer of other people's work as well as your own. It does take practice. .

Selected Examples of Review Elements

Plot: what does the narrator or character want and what gets in the way of accomplishing these desires?

Scenes: how are scenes knitted together to form a story by putting the reader there? Read about scene-building.

How is character developed through scene by showing rather than telling? Read about character development and how to "show, not tell."

What is the resolution that gives satisfaction to the reader?

One model for a writer to use to develop a story: scene, summary, reflection.

(There are books on this topic.)

Scene: action in real time. Close-up lens like a camera zooming in through the window, i.e., two figures at the table as the reader hears them speak. Draws the reader into a particular moment,

adding a sense of immediacy. Scene slows down the story. Starts with phrases such as “At 9 p.m.,” or “As the sun was rising over ...” Draws on techniques such as dialogue, description, detail. Uses sounds, smells, temperature, expressions, movement, environment. Study the elements contained in a scene.

Summary: ongoing actions that take place over time. Pulls back the camera to a distance, embracing the house, the street, the neighborhoods, than a wider shot from above, the city and mountains. Summary can deal with something recurring, going to camp every year, passing a corner store daily.

Scene vs. summary: re-enacting the time his teeth were removed *versus* “Usually when I would get a tooth removed...”

Reflection: looking back with today’s wisdom and perspective. Makes the story though-provoking. *I now know...*

Dialogue Reminders

Dialogue - how we get to know characters. How we watch them fall in love or tell someone off. You should be able to hear what the woman argues about with her coach or the lobbyist who sidles up to the congressperson. Shows character’s attitude and background. Relationship to others. Someone wants something. Slows the action, puts the reader in the moment, and helps the reader to take a rest: see the person in real time.

Types of dialogue: direct, indirect (he told me to get out), habitual (he was always saying)..., internal, (I wondered when he...), hidden in sub-texts – silence, gestures, what’s not said, environment.

People don’t always say what they mean. Let reader get to know a person/character through how and what she speaks. Distinguish the character based on age, class, education level, dialect, etc.

Use “he said,” not “he mused.” Eliminate tag lines after several lines. No need to repeat. The reader can follow who is speaking after the author has established a pattern.

Avoid adverbs – not: he said sadly; rather, *show* it...he looked down at the floor, shoulders slumped. I don’t want to do this anymore.” “He clenched his hands and flew into the other room. *Damn it! Why doesn’t anyone believe me?*” Embed how she said it in the words that she speaks.

Avoid long chunks of info coming out of someone’s mouth.

From author Adam Hochschild: The bookstore was just around the corner from the British Empire's central post office. I found a journalist's description of the scene as the afternoon mail was dispatched. Dozens of delivery coaches raced out of the post office courtyard, carrying the mail to all parts of the kingdom. The meeting minutes say that it began at five in the afternoon, so I know there must have been sounds of galloping horses and postmen blowing their horns. What other details of sight, sound, and smell could I find?

Setting Exercises

Time and location; helps to anchor the reader and establish place and mood.

- Write a short summary from the years you were in high school. Now go back and figure out what this story is about and write a scene from those years – in your room, in a classroom, in the cafeteria, in a parking lot, at a dance, etc.
- Write a memory about mealtime – how your family all ate at home. Who cooked, how meals were served, conversations, etc. Think of what might have been unique or interesting – something that carries the “stamp” of your family. Use scene, summary, and musing.
- Choose an object, photo, or other artifact that intrigues you. Might be related to your history or something in your contemporary life. As you write, go beyond mere description of the object. Describe sensory details the item suggests other than visual. If a photo, go beyond to negative space – what we can't see, what's outside the borders or the shot? Who took the photo? What or who is missing? What happened right before the photo was snapped or right after? Be aware of the time period, theme, and universal question. How did the item come into your hands? Why did you select it? Do whatever it takes to bring it to a deeper level of experience.

Write a scene in which the narrator or a character is in conflict with the setting. An example could be a female teen at a birthday party who has just found out something personal and is ashamed to talk about it. She has to pretend she's having a good time