

# ***Critique Groups: What's Right for You?***

*By Robin L. Perini © 2002*

How many times have you heard an author, at an awards ceremonies or in their book's acknowledgements, thank their critique group? Have you wondered if you're missing something by not being in a critique group? Do you want to join or start a critique group? What should you look for, what's important? Read on, and we'll navigate those stormy waters together and answer the question, "Is a critique group right for you?"

## **Do You Buy Into the Critique Group Credo?**

*It's a rare person who wants to hear what he doesn't want to hear.*

*—Dick Cavett*

Mr. Cavett's quote epitomizes a valuable critique group member, and if you want to be a member of a critique group, then you need to understand and accept that you ARE one of the rare. Don't get me wrong. None of us wants to hear criticism concerning our writing. We've sweated blood over each and every word, and now we must listen to someone else telling us our writing can use improvement?

The answer is not just yes, it's absolutely—and bring it on! Writing is a continually developing craft. To improve, we must not only dream, we must work and study, and we must be willing to accept criticism without becoming defensive. Which is much tougher than it sounds. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you believe in yourself and your dream?
- Do you want to learn and grow as a writer?
- Do you believe a critique group can help you achieve your goals?

By the end of this article you'll know if you can answer yes to all three of these questions. If you do—then you belong in a critique group.

## **Do You Believe in Yourself and Your Dreams?**

I have no doubt that you answered "yes" to this first question. Something inside has already convinced you that you want to be a writer or you wouldn't be reading this article. But have you thought about what being a writer means?

You are the creator of your own world, and you are the protector of your dreams. A book or an article, a short story or a screenplay, is your vision put to paper to share with others. Your beliefs, your ideas are the creation that you offer to your reader.

And you must walk this path alone, in the musings of your mind.

By its very nature, writing is a solitary business. It is also an elusive art form, which merges the infinite possibilities of human imagination with a foundation of the craft of

storytelling and the technique of grammar and composition.

A critique group may be your choice as the means by which you fine-tune your writing—if you can be strong enough in your own story's vision to take advantage of their suggestions without compromising your voice and the heart of your book. If you are confident your anchor is substantial enough, a critique group may be right for you. You've been given the dream, now it's time to determine if a critique group can mold the craft and technique so that your words impart your imagination to the world.

## Do You Want to Learn and Grow as a Writer?

*We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.*

—Ernest Hemingway

Learning is an active process, and the best way to learn to write is to write. The best way to make your writing better is to learn to critique your work. However, it is often difficult to see our work in the harsh sunlight when the words are wrapped in the gauze of our dreams.

This dilemma of human nature is the cornerstone of why the critique group exists. As writers, we can analyze others' works through unvarnished eyes, and in doing so, we can learn to recognize the merits and flaws in our own writing as well. We become expert at *constructive criticism*.

*Constructive criticism is the art of evaluating and analyzing works of literature by considering the merits and demerits in a manner which will promote improvement or development.*

Whether this criticism is done in a critique group or not, being able to honestly evaluate your own writing is critical in your successful development as a writer.

## Do You Believe a Critique Group Can Help You Achieve Your Goals?

A critique group's core purpose is to promote the improvement and development of writers. How the members expand that definition is what makes each group special and functional for its membership.

If this is the case, then how can the answer to the third question be anything but "Yes."

Well, the ideal critique group is nothing but good, but as in life, nothing is ever ideal. There are pros and cons that must be considered before joining a critique group.

The positive aspects of joining a critique group fall into three main categories:

- Critique group members can offer a knowledgeable basis for opinions on your writing and its merits and flaws.
- No one understands the success and trials of writing like other writers.
- Critique group members can offer the significant advantage of brainstorming with those who understand the craft and can help analyze the story from other angles because they are on the outside of the process.

There is negative potential in joining a critique group, however

- If you are unsure of yourself and easily swayed by outside opinion, critique groups can influence your work so that you lose your unique voice and story.
- Criticism can deflate your enthusiasm if it is taken too much to heart.
- Critiquing takes time, energy and commitment that some don't have.

## **The Ideal Critique Group**

- **Support.**
  - Can and should be a support group. Writing is a lonely business, and sometimes we forget there are others out there going through the same frustrations and difficulties that we do.
  - Should celebrate our successes, be they minor or major—who else but a writer would understand the meaning of a “good rejection?”
  - Can commiserate over the unenlightened editor who rejected your fabulous novel.
- **Honesty.**
  - Should be a place to get honest feedback concerning your writing and be the fresh eyes you can't be for yourself.
- **Incentive.**
  - Should be a place to discuss career goals (both short- and long-term), and aspirations.
  - Gives you incentive and encouragement to finish your work.
  - Gives you workable short-term goals because you meet at regularly scheduled times.
- **Feedback.**
  - Will bring together members with different and compatible strengths and weaknesses to offer a well-rounded critique of your work.
- **Education.**
  - Will help you find and hone your own strengths.
  - Brings members' experiences and expertise together which will broaden your work and understanding.
- **Brainstorming.**
  - Should function as a sounding-board for ideas and help find solutions to problems by brainstorming. This is one of the most valuable aspects of a good critique group.
- **Flexibility.**
- **Whatever You Need.**

- Can help you polish your manuscript so you don't waste opportunities.
- **Equality**

## Types of Critique Groups

- **Critique**
- **Brainstorming**
- **Mail**
  - **Round Robin**
- **Electronic**
- **1-Time**

## How To Start A Critique Group

**SET YOUR GOALS.** The first challenge in putting together a critique group is to decide what *you* want out of your critique group. Do you want to be published? Do you want to be a great writer? While these are not mutually exclusive goals, they are not identical either. Many a writer has composed the ever-popular “Great American Novel” only to find they cannot get a publisher to buy their Nobel-prize contender.

*If you want to be published*, you must consider the current publishing industry trends, look ahead to future trends, and analyze the market. For example, how many publishers are buying the type of writing you write? Do they take on new writers? If you want to be published, it is best for those in your critique group to aspire to similar goals. Great sentence structure and perfect grammar will not get it done. A good critique group will look at the big picture.

**ADVERTISE FOR MEMBERS.** Once you've decided on your goal, the second challenge is to decide how many members you want in your group and find other writers with your goals who are interested in asking for and receiving criticism of their work. Not an easy task. Writing is difficult, and putting your work out in front of others, *asking* other writers to tell you what's wrong with it can be agony. Your local writing group is a great place to start. Their newsletter may be willing to advertise. I recommend between four and five members. Any more than this becomes too time-consuming for both the critic and critiquee.

Unfortunately, not every Joan, Sarah or Harry who expresses interest will be right for your group. A questionnaire, like the one found at the end of this article, is a good way to weed through applicants. You should develop a questionnaire that fits your group. Notice that the group's expectations are clearly defined. This group requests one chapter of a prospective member's work. This way, you can evaluate the skill level of the prospective member. Other questions can include:

- Reading history—a good critic is an experienced reader.
- Favorite authors—to get an idea of reading tastes.
- Type of writing—Fiction, nonfiction, short story, genre, etc.

- Status of manuscript—completed? How many manuscripts written, and information about the project. Depending on the level of ability in your group, this could be important.
- Target market—line/publisher? A good measure of their knowledge.
- Organizations—a good measure of their seriousness.
- Books on writing or magazines on writing they've read—another good measure of seriousness.
- Published.

A questionnaire is for the sole purpose of making intelligent choices to avoid future problems, but it is not necessary. However, experience has taught me, it is a good idea.

**FIRST MEETING.** The next step is to set up a meeting. I suggest allowing at least 2-3 hours for the first meeting. At this time, the group needs to

- Set up a regular meeting time,
- Set up a regular meeting place
- Decide on the rules of the group.

The time needs to be convenient for all members and needs to allow enough time for each member to critique and be critiqued. The meeting location is important because if the group decides to meet at a member's house, be aware that this decision puts that member in a position of power. This may or may not be a problem. It depends on your group—as do most of the comments throughout the article.

A set of sample rules is located at the end of this article and should address topics such as members who do not bring material regularly, expectations of the group, limitations on the amount of material, and reminders of the purpose of the critique group. The necessary topics of the first meeting will be more clear as you read the rest of the article.

As in all groups, frank and detailed discussions of this nature can prevent misunderstandings from occurring. The most important understanding to reach is that of the goals of the members of your group and the willingness of each member to commit to the group.

**DECIDE ON A CRITIQUING METHOD.** There are two main methods of critiquing. One is to bring material to read aloud, the other is to take material home. I find the latter far superior.

When material is read aloud, the reader tends to bring inflection and attitude into the writing that would not have been present in a straight, silent read. Even if the author doesn't read, the possibility remains. From a time management standpoint, reading aloud wastes valuable time. In the time it takes to read ten pages aloud, most readers can read two to three times that much. Also, the critic can read the material as a reader, and can go back and reread portions they are concerned about. The one positive to reading aloud is immediate feedback, which most writers crave.

Taking the manuscript home offers several advantages. You can mark up the manuscripts more thoroughly. Grammar and syntax problems can be considered more carefully. Also, I suggest giving the material a quick read for the first impression, to see

the big picture, and then reading for the more detailed problems such as word choice, grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. I believe the quality of the critiques received after a home reading far outweigh any disadvantage of waiting for your material.

In either case, the best way to critique is to start with a member and move in order around the table, each member in turn critiquing the work. The member whose work is being critiqued should wait until the critic is finished before asking for clarification. The member being critiqued should never become defensive. They should listen and learn. All criticism is valid and valuable. Remember, the manuscript is your work, and you make the final decisions. Make notes on what each member suggested.

I recommend taking a clean copy and transferring each critic's comments onto one copy, with a different color ink for each critic. This way, it is easy to compare the comments. If you discover a page or a scene that several members have difficulty with, this scene obviously needs a hard look.

## **Standard Operating Procedure**

A critique group is a big commitment. Each member needs to commit to attending every meeting on time and commit to reading all the material submitted at each session. Critiquing a writer's work is a serious business. Falling behind can create tensions within the group and can be frustrating for both the writer and the critic.

### **A Few Simple Rules**

1. Set a time limit or a limit on the amount of work each member can bring.
2. Make certain you have enough time for each member to have a chance to read their work.
3. Try to talk about only subjects pertaining to writing. You should also spend the first ten minutes talking about personal, catch up on news or talk to get it out of the way.
4. Avoid personal pet peeves that keep you from critiquing with an open mind.
5. Establish a working relationship at the start, and agree to adhere to the goals and rules of the group.
6. If one group doesn't work for you, try another one. Remember, we are all friends, even if we find we can't be in a critique group together.

**BE ON TIME.** One way to encourage arriving on time is to meet for a meal beforehand. This way, members have a chance to socialize. At the time set for the meeting, all socializing ceases and the group gets down to business. This is much like putting on the editor's cap after you've been writing. You must shift focus. Try this, but if you find it too difficult to switch focus without getting personal, you will have to put the socializing aside. Remember the goal of your group.

**START WITH A SYNOPSIS.** Another recommendation I promote strongly is that no manuscript should be read without seeing a detailed synopsis beforehand. This can save both the writer and reader a huge amount of time. Your critique group may be able to ferret out plot or characterization problems from a well-written synopsis that will save

you from rewrites. Don't misunderstand me, this takes practice. The critique group members must become as skilled as editors in reading a synopsis and seeing the potential problems. But when the group becomes adept at this skill, the time and frustration saved is worth the learning curve.

**BE A READER.** I have found that the best critics are readers of the genre they are critiquing. Especially in romance, where the "hidden romantic coding" is such an integral part of the genre, if a critic doesn't read or understand the genre, the critique will be superficial. The critic may give accurate criticism concerning grammar and sentence structure, but the "big picture" of what makes a salable romance novel will be lost.

**BE POSITIVE.** Start and end on a positive note. Emphasize the strong, positive points of the manuscript. Every writer works hard on their manuscript, and every manuscript has something good about it.

**ANALYZE MORE THAN GRAMMAR.** Look at the manuscript as a reader would. Some points to examine are:

- Are the characters interesting?
- Is the story too slow?
- Do the scenes move the story forward or illustrate important aspects of the character? If not, is the scene necessary?
- Is there an external conflict and an internal (romantic) conflict? Is there enough conflict? Are the conflicts resolved too soon?
- Is too much of the story given away too soon?
- Does the story begin at the beginning, or is the beginning two chapters later?
- Do the hero and heroine meet in the first chapter? If not, does it work?
- Are we in the main character's point of view most of the time? If not, does it work?
- Do the characters feel real?
- Is the dialogue in the characters' voices and not the author's voice?
- Are the characters reacting consistently within character? Are their goals and motivations clearly defined?
- Does the character change by the end of the book? Does he/she have an epiphany or realization?
- Does the romance work? Is the romantic conflict based on a misunderstanding that is easily resolved if they discussed it?
- Is the manuscript too wordy and full of unnecessary adjectives and adverbs?
- Are there a lot of clichés or repetitive words?
- Does the manuscript fit the target market?

Many contests have good checklists. There is probably one member of your critique group who has entered one or more. Put together your own check list to meet your group's needs.

**BE A LISTENER AND KEEP AN OPEN MIND.** Often writers are too close to their work. A critic can help the writer stand back and examine the manuscript. However,

every writer must realize that they know their book best. The critic may discover a problem, but does not identify the correct problem. It is worthwhile to examine a section in which the critic has a problem to see what threw them out of the story. They may think a reaction is too strong, for example, but the real problem is that the writer hasn't set up the situation properly.

If the critique is too painful and you are angry, put the comments away for a few days until the editor in you can read and analyze it. It is not appropriate to attack the critic, this is just an opinion and much as it hurts, it can help you.

I use a rule by Susan Macias to help me. I assume all the criticism is correct and then try to prove it wrong. The process of analyzing the critique then becomes a positive one instead of a negative one. If I can prove the critic wrong, I ignore that particular point. If I can't, I fix the problem. Again, the remedy to the problem may not be the suggestion in the critique. This is where each writer must listen to their gut and make a decision.

And remember, nothing is written in stone. A writer can choose to accept the comments or reject them. Sometimes you might tell the critic, "I did this because I'm trying to show a certain point." If the critic doesn't get the point, then you have left something out. Wait until the critic is finished with the critique. Discussion and questioning the points the critic made can help you discover something you don't understand.

It doesn't matter if the writer perfectly illustrated a point on page 37. If the reader didn't get the point, the writer needs to emphasize the point in another way, or another place.

**BUILD TRUST.** This is a tough one and will only develop over time. You must trust the members of the group to give you honest, sincere feedback. If after six months, you don't feel that way about your group, find another one.

### **How To Add a New Member**

Adding a new member is a serious step, especially for an established critique group with a good rapport. The group should have decided on the mechanism for adding new members ahead of time. Look at your group and ask the members why they want to add another member. Then make a list of what you would like to have in an ideal member by answering the following questions:

- What strengths are missing from your group?
- Does the group need a logical thinker? A grammarian? Someone with a knack for characterization?
- Is the group willing to put the time and effort into a new writer or do they want a more experienced writer?
- Is the group willing to risk a well run group to add a new member?

The answers to these questions have much to do with how well your group is running. Once you decide to take the plunge, advertise as you did to form and use a New Member Questionnaire.

Some groups invite prospective members to visit and observe during one meeting. These visitors need to understand what the group requires and offers to make an informed decision. I highly recommend that you read a sample chapter of a prospective member's

writing. This way, if the group decides the new member's writing is not appropriate or not at a level the group wants to deal with, the decision to turn down a prospective member is easier to make. I also recommend a trial period for a new member—three sessions at the most. But be aware that even with these precautions, telling a member of your group that the relationship is not working is very difficult. Discuss this possibility beforehand and appoint a member in charge of making “the call” or writing “the letter.”

### **How to Ask a Member to Leave**

A critique group is like a marriage—open and honest communication lines are essential. Members will come and go, and people may change their goals and attitudes. Sometimes the group deteriorates and the goals are disrupted. If a member develops problems accepting the critique, or can't adhere to the rules, this disrupts the flow. The group should honestly discuss the problem with that person so the working relationship is restored. But be sure to make it clear how serious the situation is. You must state clearly the consequences of continued disruptive behavior.

If the member continues to have a disrupting influence on the group, the members should ask the person to leave. I will not sugarcoat this action. It is difficult and may result in hard feelings. Be prepared. The best way to deal with this problem is to prevent it and deal with it before it becomes too big of a problem and before strong feelings and relationships develop. Remember, negative behavior spreads like weeds in your garden, and soon stifles the positive flow of your critiques.

I have seen groups continue with a member who is disruptive or working on something inappropriate for years. They don't want to hurt the member's feelings, so they continue to carry this poorly functioning member. Unfortunately, this affects the morale of the group.

If a member shows they are not serious about writing and learning and cannot take suggestions (if they don't show growth, and are not cooperating with the overall goals of the group) it may not be appropriate for them to stay in the group.

Remember, while your group may become close, it is also a business alliance. I can't stress enough to keep the business of critiquing separate from social interactions. If you aren't capable of separating the two, a critique group may not be in your best interest.

### **When is it Time to Leave?**

This is a very difficult decision for anyone to make. Your goals may change. The group may lose its way. You must be honest about your feelings and talk about it. Many times this is no one's fault, but it is a difference in commitment and goals. This talk may get the group back on track, or you may come to realize that the group is no longer meeting your needs.

Remember, your writing career belongs to you. **YOU MUST DO WHAT IS BEST FOR YOU AND YOUR WRITING.**

## **In a Nutshell**

*Do's*

1. Do grow a thick skin! Criticism is hard to take, but if it means growth in your writing, learning the craft, and sales, it's worth it!
2. Do give the group a chance. Don't expect it to work immediately. Try it for six months or more, so members can learn to critique and develop a working relationship.
3. Do remember that critique groups do not work for everyone. Many successful writers write without a critique group. Many continue to use a critique group. Some can't take criticism. Everyone who wants to be in a critique group should ask themselves, "Can I listen with an open mind, and later look at this objectively?"
4. Do use standard copy-editing marks. They're included at the end of this article.
4. Do give *positive, supportive* reinforcement.
5. Do assume the criticism is true, then prove it wrong.
6. Do give *lots* of warm fuzzies.

## *Don'ts*

1. Don't argue with the critic or the recipient of the critique.
2. Don't interrupt the critic, or she might lose her train of thought and forget to mention an important point.
3. Don't be defensive, this isn't personal.
4. Don't throw out the comments before considering them. Write down the comments and page numbers and wait a few days before analyzing them.
5. Don't argue with one another.
6. Don't monopolize the conversation or lead the discussion off into personal, non-writing related topics. Critique time is too valuable.
7. Don't bring more work than your group agreed on. All our time is valuable and taking advantage of the other members will foster resentment.
8. Don't attempt to rewrite someone's book.
9. Don't ever let the critique become a personal attack or vendetta because another author said something you didn't like.
10. Don't come to your group and dictate what you want criticism on. Example: "I only want you to check this for spelling and grammar." You are establishing control and inequality in the group. A group should have equality among the members.
11. Some personalities are stronger than others. Beware of intimidation. This can block the flow of beneficial criticism from shy members who fear retaliation.
12. Don't forget the warm fuzzies.

## *Conclusion*

Critique groups are like any other group, they take commitment and hard work. And like anything else, you get out of the group what you put into it. I find a critique group invaluable for me and my writing and I hope you will as well, but if you don't, remember

that many authors don't have critique groups or critique partners. Writing is a funny business. There are no rules. There are as many styles as there are authors. Do what works for you and you can't go wrong.

## *New Member Information Questionnaire*

The Romance Critique Group is a group who is *serious about being published*. We work hard and are committed to our writing, and we want someone else who is as well. We critique up to 80 pages per week, but this varies. We meet biweekly, but occasionally meet weekly, depending on the needs of group members. If you're interested in being part of a group on the move, please complete the following questionnaire and provide us with one chapter of your work.

1. Name  
Address  
Phone No.
2. What types of books have you read in the last six months? Genre? Mainstream? Nonfiction?
3. Who are a few of your favorite authors?
4. What kind of writing do you do? Fiction/nonfiction/short story/genre?
5. Have you completed a manuscript/rough draft? If not, how much have you written? Tell us a little about it. What is the projected word count?
6. What or who is your target line/publisher?
7. Are you a member of RWA, or another writers' group?
8. Do you read any writers magazines or have you read any books on writing? Name a few, if possible.
9. Are you published?

## *Critique Group Rules*

1. **A critique group is a big commitment. Commit to attending every meeting. Commit to reading all material given at each time. DO NOT FALL BEHIND.**
2. If possible, let the positive comments come close to equaling the constructive criticism.
3. Start and end each critique on a positive note.
4. **Be honest.** The reason we are in critique group is to get published. If we can't count on honesty from the group, from whom can we count on it?
5. The maximum number of pages to bring to be read is 20-30 per person unless it is close to a deadline and the material has been through the group once.
6. Commit to writing. If you're not going to write on a regular basis, don't critique on a regular basis.
7. Be on time.
8. Don't take the critique as a personal insult. It's not. The critique is of the work, not the person.
9. Once the meeting begins, it's all business. We can socialize before or after or another time.
10. Critique verbally the big concepts or things that need explaining. If it's a small comment—write it in—clearly and legibly in colored ink. No pencil.
11. Don't **argue with the critic.** Don't be defensive. Listen and learn. If you want to explain yourself, wait until everyone has finished their critique.
12. If you're having difficulty with a small section, we will be glad to read it aloud at the meeting and try to help. If you're having difficulty with any aspect of the book, we are very willing to brainstorm.
13. Critique the material yourself before giving it to the group. It should be as good as you can make it before we get it.
14. A detailed synopsis is required of all members before we begin critiquing the manuscript.
15. New members—mutual trial period of three meetings.

## COMMON PROOFREADER'S MARKS

Edit	Proofreader's mark	In the text
Delete		Check your <del>your</del> work.
Spell out completely	sp or	You will be here for
Transpose		You'll red <del>ive</del>
New paragraph		Writing isn't easy.  For example...
Don't end paragraph here: run in	no	Writing isn't easy. Hemingway once said...
Change text to lower case		J <del>J</del> ayne Ann Krentz writes exciting books.
Close up space		Printing takes  too much ti me.
Insert something		"I don't want to be here  Jake."
Insert dash	or  or /m/	The blue dress  and it was blue—disappeared.
Insert hyphen	- or  or  or  or  or	Classic myths traveled word  of  mouth.
Insert period		I enjoy reading romance  It's more...
Insert quotation marks	or	"What do you want to do?  she asked.
Insert space		Critique  groups are helpful.
Move left to this point		Publishing a novel takes persistence.
Ignore marked changes		Her favorite author is <del>Nora Roberts. Ann Maxwell</del>
Change text to italics*		Jake knew  intentions were honorable.
Change italic* text to roman		I don't want  dog.

\* Most editors and publishers will tell you not to use italics even though most writers are capable of producing them with today's equipment. Underline the text that will be italicized for the publisher's convenience.