

London Writers' Society
CRITIQUING GUIDELINES

A poorly conducted critique group can send an inexperienced writer reeling home in a state of shock—disillusioned and despondent. When this happens everyone is diminished and the group will, likely, disband.

So the governing principles during critiquing sessions must always be good manners and common sense. Writers and writing teachers have developed some suggestions to help you. (Note also that the way you phrase your comments will depend upon whether you take the 'discussion about' or the 'dialogue with' approach to critiquing.)

Q: So what are the ground rules?

A: Have a preset format.

- For example, after each writer reads, have each person around the room (or table) take a turn at offering comments while the writer listens.
- You may want to agree that the writer is not to apologize for, defend or explain the work.
- Larger groups may need a chairperson to enforce time limits (within reason), call on particular people for critiques, and keep comments within the bonds of civility.
- **Create a questionnaire.** List topics such as plot, character, grammar, and pacing to be sure the criticism covers all important points.
- If possible, at the end of each meeting, distribute copies of work to be critiqued next time.

Q: How do I critique a piece of writing that an author has just read?

A: Begin on a positive note.

- **Find something you liked!** Begin by telling the author what delighted you about the piece and what seemed to work.
- Mention images or actions that were concrete, realistic, detailed or vivid. Did the author make you see, smell, touch, and hear the scene? Be specific!
- **What moved you to laugh or cry?** What hooked your interest or curiosity? Be specific!
- Look for varied sentence structure. Did the author use short sentences for tension and excitement and longer sentences for more reflective parts?
- **In there dialogue and is it realistic?** Refer to the exact words that seemed in character.

Q: What else should I mention?

A: Report on anything that distracted you, or caused your mind to wander from the story.

- Are any words or actions out of character? Are there confusing or conflicting images? Are there breaks in rhythm that disrupt the fictional dream?
- **Did the author explain things you'd have preferred to figure out for yourself? If so, exactly where? Be specific!**
- Are there words which, if deleted, would make the piece stronger? Watch out for these: and, the, a, that, some, little, very, all, so, lovely, beautiful, sweet, up, down, just, even, and all forms of the verb "to be."
- **Note places in which a weak verb is modified by an adverb and suggest, instead, a stronger, more descriptive verb.**
- Did you find it easy to tell the characters apart? Were they different in age, outlook, gender etc.? Would their names lead to confusion (i.e. Molly and Milly?)

- **If there is more than one strong image, did you find that confusing? Would it have been better, for example, to have used centipedes throughout, rather than centipedes, bears, and supernovas?**
- Does the piece start where it should and hit the ground running? Should it start later? Earlier?
- **Did you like the ending? Should the piece end sooner? Was some of the imagery or information too near the end?**
- Is point of view consistent? If not, did you find the shifts in point of view to be distracting? Be specific!
- **Where any of the characters' names repeated too often? Should some of the names have been replaced by pronouns?**
- Are there any clichés ("thick as a post", or "like a dog") that could have been fresher?
- **Are there any grammatical, punctuation or spelling errors?**
- Don't attempt to rewrite the piece! Flag particular parts, offer specific criticism and move on.
- **Does the piece read well and did the writer read it well?**
- Does the overall structure and format work? If not, why not? Be specific!

Q: What about the writer's feelings?

A: Always be considerate of the feelings of others.

- Personal feelings are bound to affect our reaction to criticism. We all wonder, when someone doesn't like our characters or doesn't understand our story: "Does she hate me?" or "Am I hopeless?"
- **Don't treat deliberately on self-esteem!**
- Try to offer your criticism in such a way that it will not be taken personally. You are critiquing a person's work NOT his or her person, talent, character or morals.
- **Recommend works which would show the writer how others handle the kind of thing he or she is writing.**

Q: How can I, as the writer who has just read my piece, get the most benefit from my critique group?

A: Maintain an open mind. Realize that those present are giving you something precious, *their time*, and trying help.

- **Let the others know what kind of feedback you need.** Are you worried about your dialogue? Description? Plot? Character? Pacing? End?
- **Listen quietly and respectfully.** Resist the temptation to apologize, to explain, or to defend. Think about the criticism overnight. Often, what seemed to be dead wrong at the first hearing will begin to make sense upon reflection, so *take notes*.
- **Avoid the temptation of 'critiquing the critique'.** Those giving candid opinions may be afraid to give you the feedback you need next time if you put them on the defensive now, or argue with them about how they "don't understand" your piece.
- **Let the other members know which comments you find particularly helpful.** Be sure to thank both the group and specific individuals for pointing out the things you missed that, when you change them, will improve your story.
- **Sometimes you will find there is one member of the group** who particularly understands your work and can give you in-depth help. Keeping in mind the feelings of the other members, you may be able to call or meet separately with this person when either of you has a writing problem.
- **It's your story.** After you have listened carefully and tried to get a feeling for what works and what doesn't, make the final decision yourself. Another's opinion is simply a point of view – a different world view – something you can consider and then accept or reject.