



Greater Lehigh Valley Writers Group

Critique Group Guidelines

The purpose of a critique group is to help each member become a better writer. The success of any critique group depends upon how well its members understand both how to give instructive criticism and how to receive it. Following these guidelines should set the tone for successful critique sessions and serve as a positive example for new members.

GUIDELINES FOR THE WRITER:

1. When submitting a piece of writing for criticism, it is important to make sure the manuscript is as free from errors as possible. Do not use the critique group as an editorial service. This is a waste of resources. It distracts reviewers from focusing on more subtle refinements that can be the difference between good writing and excellent writing.
2. Submissions should follow a standard format. This can be decided by the group, but standard submission guidelines might include the author's name, title and page number in the "slug line" within header. Chapters begin one-third down the page. All margins should be one inch. Double-space your manuscript using a standard, easy-to-read font, and only print on one side.
3. When listening to criticism, the author should be silent and attentive. It is important not to interrupt or launch into a defense of your writing. This can quickly change the tone of the session from a positive learning experience to mere confrontation. Try to show appreciation for the thought and effort your critic has taken on your behalf. Say, "Thank you."
4. Record all comments so you can review them later. This serves two other purposes: first, it shows that you are receptive to criticism, and secondly, it keeps you busy so you will be less likely try to defend your writing. It is natural to want to explain your intentions but remember—you joined the group for improvement, not for approval.
5. The writer needs to keep emotions firmly in check and to focus upon the ideas expressed by the critic. In the emotionally charged moment of being criticized, it is easy to misunderstand a comment or to infer more than what is meant.
6. When the critique session for a piece of writing is completed, the author may then ask questions to clarify points or ask about a specific area of concern. Was the dialogue realistic? Did I capture the correct mood? Etc.
7. Remember, not all comments or observations may be valid. Study the comments you recorded carefully and later, in the privacy of your home, you can ignore the ones you feel were unjustified. As a rule of thumb, if two or more people comment on the same point, it is wise on the part of the author to take notice of the comment and address it.

GUIDELINES FOR THE CRITIC:

1. Start with something positive. Find something good in the piece of writing and praise the writer for it even if it is just a well-turned phrase. Everyone likes praise, and this is a good way to set a positive tone and makes the author more receptive to harsher criticism that may come later.
2. Criticism should always refer to the writing and never to the writer. If fault is found, that fault lies within the manuscript and not its author. "This story is weak" is acceptable; "You write weak plays" is never acceptable.
3. Speak from your own perspective. Let the writer know how you responded as you read the piece. "I had trouble understanding the character's motives," for example, lets the writer know that this is a trouble spot, and may open the door for more discussion.
5. Keep your criticism within the scope of the writing sample. Do not make assumptions about the direction of the piece and criticize the author based upon those assumptions. Criticize what you read.
6. Criticism must be honest. Don't be afraid to discuss a weakness because you don't want to hurt the author's feelings. This defeats the purpose of the critique group and does not help the author at all. Positive and negative statements must be honest and true.
7. Be specific. Instead of just saying, "Your dialogue is weak," suggest ways to strengthen it.
8. Criticism does not rest upon subjectivity alone. "I like it" and "I don't like it" are valid responses to a piece of writing, but the author needs to know why the critic likes it or doesn't like the manuscript or its components.
9. Write down your comments and areas of concern for the writer. It would also be helpful to prioritize them from big problems to little problems or organize them into categories such as characterization, plot, dialogue, etc.
10. Place yourself on the receiving end of your criticism and consider what impact your choice of words or tone will have on the writer. Remember, you are offering helpful advice, and your message should bolster the writer and not belittle him.