

The Critiquing Process

For new writers, the critiquing process may be intimidating. Readers are exposing themselves to the critical comments of others by inviting them to make a careful judgment on their hard work and artistic efforts. We can make this process easier on one another if we follow the critiquing suggestions that follow.

Suggestions for Critiquing:

Our focus is reader critique. We do not do line or style editing in the critiquing circle. Remember, you are not critiquing the writer, only the writing. Criticism of an individual is a private issue, and is not appropriate.

1. Give an overview critique first, beginning with a positive statement such as “I enjoyed listening to your story”, followed by specific things you liked. Follow with suggestions for fixing things you think are not working in the story.

EXAMPLE: “Your descriptions are well done, but I wanted to know more about the people/setting etc. Next, mention the picky stuff (for which you will have made notes during the reading of the story or on the copy of the writing). EXAMPLE: I noticed two or three clichés, example “My heart beat like a drum” was one. You also used the word “road” three times in two sentences. I’d also like to know more background history of that castle you visited.”

2. Because most members are working on early drafts, we do mainly reader’s critiques. That is: voice, content, plot, character and setting descriptions and details, tension, word usage (if applicable), and the other aspects of a good, coherent story.

3. We are not expected to do Stylized editing (e.g. sentence structure, spell-check etc) Nor do we do copy editing (dotting”I’s”, putting in colons, and other punctuation. These are the responsibilities of writers as they prepare their manuscripts for submission.

4. Proof reading is what writer’s do when an editor has accepted their work and sent the proofs back for the writer to check over before publishing. If you start critiquing every comma and colon it takes up too much time in the critiquing process and this is not necessary for first draft writing.

5. When critiquing, ask yourself questions like these: Does the story work? Does it move quickly or drag? Can you, as a reader “See” and “experience” the setting? Has the writer set a ‘mood’ and transported us to this setting? Is there enough attention to detail? (or perhaps too much detail?) Are there excessive adverbs? Are there clichés? Are there strong, active verbs that describe the action? Or are there too many passive verbs. Is there a problem with word choice? Is there enough dialogue? In novel writing, has the writer ‘balanced the modes’ (e.g., exposition, setting, action, dialogue). Is there enough describe or too much? (Can you smell that fresh bread in the bakery and touch the grain of wood on the walls in the old barn? Can you hear the sound of the geese flying overhead? Can you see the print on the colorful costumes of the folk dancers? Has the

writer used all five senses? Is there enough action? Does the story move quickly or stand still? Does the story have an interesting narrative “hook” and a good ending? Has the story got enough texture (historical or technical data); is there enough human interest? Good character development? Does the writer switch point of view in a way that it is confusing to the reader?

Remember, when you are critiquing, follow your gut feelings, but keep it positive. Don’t slice people and their work to pieces. Be kind and objective. Be specific and helpful.

Suggestions for the reader being critiqued:

(We try to keep to a maximum length of nine pages, double spaced.)

1. Listen. Keep your mind open as you do. Do not interrupt the critiquer unless you are asked specific questions or if it’s necessary to clarify something.
2. Don’t argue or defend your work. If you get applause, that’s great! But you will only be helped by complete honesty. So be objective and accept the critique that is offered. Accept what you want, ignore what you want also. However, remember if three people say the same thing it’s time to pay attention and be prepared to revise and rework.
3. Write down the specific suggestions you get and take what advice you want, reserve judgment on the rest.
4. Look at criticism in a constructive way, rather than in a defensive way. Ask:”If this person objects to a certain thing, what can I do to make it better?”
5. Be professional in your responses. If you get a negative response to your work, ask questions (at the end of the critique). You may learn how to fix the problem this way.

Participation:

People have different learning styles. Visual learners understand better if they have the printed text in front of them. Auditory learners understand better if they are permitted to listen without the distraction of a printed text.

1. Each week some members will read a selection of their writing. Printed copies are not mandatory, but are welcomed. It is not required for readers to provide copies for others. It is up to the reader to choose the form in which their selection will be presented.
2. Remember, the critiquing process is all part of learning to be a better writer. So the more you critique, the better you get at it and the easier it will be for you to learn how to edit your own work.
3. It is helpful for both the critiquer and the reader to make notes especially if the critiquer has no copy.