



AUSTIN SCBWI

CRITIQUE GROUP GUIDELINES

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What is a critique? A critique is an evaluation or analysis of a work of literature, framed with constructive criticisms and helpful suggestions.

General critique etiquette

The ultimate goal of any critique group is to help each other hone the skills necessary to produce publishable manuscripts. As a critique group member, you will at times be a partner, a therapist, a sounding board, an impartial reader, an editor, and a cheerleader. An active group can provide invaluable support. Not only will critique of your work offer fresh perspectives to help improve your own work, but by analyzing the works of others you begin to read like an editor.

There is potential for improvement in every manuscript, so be prepared to give and receive critical feedback. Writers pour heart and soul into their writing, so it is crucial that each member be honest, constructive, and encouraging. That being said, feedback is purely subjective. Keep an open mind and consider comments carefully. If you find the suggestions helpful, implement them. If you disagree, disregard them. It is, after all, your story.

How can you become a great critiquer and writer? Read. Read. Read. Seek quality published works in the genre you will be critiquing and writing.

Establishing your group's parameters

Who is the group representative or contact person?
Create a list of email addresses and phone numbers for group members.
How many members will your group allow? (Five or six is the average)
How frequently will you meet? (Weekly, monthly, etc.) How long will each meeting be?
Will there be refreshments?
How much time will be dedicated to each individual's critique during the meeting?
Where will you meet? (individual home, coffee shop, library, Skype, etc?)
Will you critique after a cold reading, or submit in advance to allow more time for thorough feedback? How will you submit? Email or snail mail?
How many pages or words should be submitted ahead of time? How far in advance?
During your critique session, is the writer required to remain silent until all feedback is presented or is open exchange welcome? (It is often more time-efficient to hold input from the writer until after his/her critiques have been shared.)



←Begin with positive overall comments about the manuscript

←Offer "meaty" criticisms that are constructive, helpful, and respectful

←End your critique with positive comments and encouragement.

Plan before you critique someone else's work

- 1.) Decide how your critique will be presented.
 - a.) handwritten comments on the manuscript pages?
 - b.) typed notes on a separate document?
 - c.) **Track changes and comments on the emailed manuscript?**^[HAC1]
- 2.) Become familiar with standard manuscript formatting. (refer to:
http://www.scbwi.org/Resources/Documents/04_FromKeyboardtoPrinted09.pdf)
- 3.) Read each submitted piece multiple times. The first should be a straight-through reading for effectiveness and style. Comment on your initial impression then dig in to more critical analysis and comments on the second and subsequent read-throughs.
- 4.) Be specific with your comments.
- 5.) Familiarize yourself with Strunk & White's style book, ELEMENTS OF STYLE

General Critique Tips: What to look for

(Note that picture books, poetry, and nonfiction will have unique story structure so some tips will not apply.)

1. Feel free to suggest alternative wording in problem areas, but consider offering questions for the writer to help them come up with their own solutions as well. See examples:

<i>"Have you tried..."</i>	<i>"What do you think about..."</i>
<i>"What would happen if..."</i>	<i>"I wonder if the character might...."</i>
<i>"Is this staying true to the character's personality?"</i>	<i>"Perhaps..."</i>
<i>"Is there a better way to say this?"</i>	<i>"Maybe..."</i>
	<i>"Word choice?"</i>
2. If you are critiquing a portion of a longer work, consider how it fits into the work as a whole.
3. Clear beginning, middle, and ending?
4. Does the story start at the right place? End at the right place?
5. Is there a strong opening hook? Dramatic page turns?
6. Does the story have a well developed protagonist and antagonist?
7. Is there a consistent point of view?
8. Is there a consistent tense?
9. Is the piece well researched?
10. Are characters memorable? Does the reader care about them?
11. Is there a clear story problem?
12. Does the main character grow and change throughout the story?
13. Is dialog believable and authentic?
14. Is there a good balance of dialog vs. exposition?
15. Is the plot compelling and age appropriate?
16. Does each scene move the story forward?
17. Are there plot twists/reversals?
18. Is there too much back story? Not enough back story?
19. Internal and external conflict(s)?
20. Does the middle drag or lack movement?
21. Does the writer use "showing" language, rather than "telling"?

22. Does the writer use active verbs
23. Are there too many adverbs and adjectives?
24. Are there repetitive words or phrases? Overused cliches?
25. Is the writing vivid, emotional, fluid?
26. Do sentences begin with a variety of openings?
27. Is the story well-paced? Does it flow seamlessly?
28. Does the reader stumble over a scene, paragraph, or sentence?
29. Is there a story arc with necessary tension to propel the story through dramatic ups and downs?
30. Is the length appropriate for the genre and intended age?
31. Does the ending offer a satisfactory resolution to the story problem?

What NOT TO DO while critiquing

Do not make harsh comments.

Do not dwell on spelling or punctuation issues. (It's enough to point them out.)

Do not make suggestions based on your personal tastes

Do not be falsely flattering- Insincerity is unhelpful

Do not rewrite or restructure another writer's story (This is not your work.)

Do not line-edit unless requested to do so

Do not be nit-picky. This is a work in progress.

Do not forget to point out the positives. What works well? What impresses you?

What will kids love about the piece?

Planning for your Critique

- Be prepared with a synopsis, if possible.
- Be prepared to summarize your story in a sentence or two, including the overall theme.
This will help you find the real focus of your story.
- ***Keep an open mind.
- Be ready to ask for suggestions or opinions if you're "stuck"
- Do not be defensive. Your partners are critiquing your manuscript, not you.
- Be gracious.
- Take lots of notes.
- If a comment or suggestion is unclear, ask the critiquer for clarification.
- If unsure about a suggestion, open a new document and experiment with revision.
You can always press delete if they don't work for you.
- After your critique, tackle any changes right away, while fresh on your mind.
- Most importantly, never give up.

A few helpful Resources:

www.underdown.org

www.write4kids.com

www.cbicclubhouse.com

Austin SCBWI mentor program

www.verlakay.com

www.insitutechildrenslit.com

www.scbwi.com (publications)

Watch the Austin SCBWI website for continuing updates. www.austinscbwi.com

Contact Donna Bowman Bratton, critique coordinator at dbratton3@austin.rr.com