

Guidelines for Running Critique Groups

“If you’re serious about writing—critiquing is the best way to receive reactions similar to those you can expect from the marketplace.”

Nancy Kress, “Writer’s Digest”

“Let’s talk about the writing.”

Pearl Silvernale’s “mantra,”
San Carlos Writer’s Workshop,
San Diego

THE GUIDELINES

KEEP READINGS TO THE AGREED NUMBER OF MINUTES. Minimize extraneous and/or introductory material, providing only essential scene-setting and background. Discussion of artistic process may be interesting, but it’s rarely essential to a reading.

BRING SOMETHING YOU’VE WRITTEN TO READ. Hard to believe, but some people actually attend writers’ groups just to hang out. Of course, if you’re in a freeze—drop in, do the exercises, warm up, thaw out, and get going again.

READ YOUR OWN STUFF. If your work product is editorial, read the edit-in-progress rather than the raw material. Reserve entertainment (“puff”) pieces, news clips, and similar items for the early, informal “sharing” period of the group.

PSYCHOTHERAPY NOT PRACTICED HERE. You may find writing to be therapeutic; but the focus in critique groups is the writing. When necessary to bring the group back to earth, use Silvernale’s “mantra” (inscription above).

DO THE EXERCISES. This may be the best chance a new writer gets to learn the craft—with the least at stake.

KEEP WRITING, AND READING, AS YOU ATTEND THE GROUP. For instance, as your style develops and matures you can begin to rid your

writing of Latinisms. Ipse dixit! And, of course, be reading in your genre(s) of interest.

EXERCISE YOUR FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS—AND COURTESY, TOO. You can't please everybody; please don't try. On any workshop day you may be facing unrepentant yuppies, unreconstructed hippies, generation X'ers, country boys, city women, righties, lefties, millennials, and/or Holy Joes. Expect to offend someone, someday. If your reading contains material which may be especially offensive to some, consider scheduling it late in the session and let people know what's coming—so they can choose to make an early departure.

PLEDGE YOURSELF TO HONESTY. “The last thing a writer needs is insincere flattery” (Tom Cook). Beware of “Groupthink,” the phenomenon described by Irving Janis in which members of a small group think so highly of each other that no one dissents or offers critical thinking—only hopelessly optimistic estimates of literary merit or marketability.

FOCUS ON THE WRITING. To use a nonfiction example: don't attack the premise of an article or essay, but rather the patterns of argument used, or apparent abuses of logic.

BE POSITIVE. You can constructively support fellow writers by pointing out “strengths and opportunities” as well as “problems and weaknesses.”

DON'T DEFEND YOUR WRITING. The tough one. But arguing is, of course, pointless and the worst use of precious time. Accept that you will sometimes get bad advice, learn to recognize it, thank the giver—and ignore it. It's your writing, after all. You needn't change a thing.

IT'S OK—USE THE AUDIENCE. Try to record, or to have recorded, listener reactions to your work. Ask for clarification of critiques that are vague or ambiguous. Ask for feelings about what listeners have heard, as well as criterion-based criticisms (—Peter Elbow). When it's your turn, return the favour by listening actively. And while it may sometimes be necessary to leave a meeting early, avoid the “read 'n' run” habit.

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Workshop _____

Date

TITLE _____

STRENGTHS

WEAKNESSES

OPPORTUNITIES

PROBLEMS