

Critique Groups Packet

Ozarks Chapter of American Christian Writers

Advantages of a Share/Critique Group

1. It provides a regular writing deadline, to encourage you to schedule time for drafting and polishing your writing.
2. Other writers may offer fresh insights, marketing ideas, and help on a manuscript before an editor sees it. This can help your manuscript be more polished for an editor and better targeted for an appropriate audience.
3. An atmosphere of openly exchanging ideas with other writers can help create better writing and new topic ideas.
4. Venturing the first risk of letting another person read your manuscript, in person, can make it easier to send your “baby” to editor where it risks rejection.

What is the difference between a *Share Group* and a *Critique Group*?

The primary difference is the type of response solicited by the reader. In a share group, the reader merely wants to read a piece of work and receive encouragement to continue writing more works. In a critique group, the reader is wants listeners to offer feedback on the work that will help them either improve it, find the right market for it, or feel ready to submit it to an editor.

To allow our members to join a genre group, we are combining the purposes; which should be clearly communicated to the group’s facilitator before a reading. Then the group knows how best to respond after the reading is completed.

What is the process of conducting a share/critique group?

1. Our groups will confer at the end of a regular monthly meeting to select an eatery at which to gather for lunch and readings. Groups of 4 to 7 members function best.
2. At the beginning of the reading time, each group should select a facilitator. This can be a different person each month, but most groups find it advantageous to elect a facilitator for a specified period of time...because...
3. About 2 weeks before each meeting, group members who desire critiques at the next meeting should send a copy to the facilitator for distribution to the group; so members can give serious consideration to their comments before listening to the work read at the upcoming meeting. All copies should be returned to the owner at the end of the meeting, with or without written comments. Everyone agrees to keep all writing confidential and not reuse another’s work, in part or in whole, for their own writing.
4. Members who are comfortable with sharing their writing but do not, for whatever reason, desire a critique; merely contact their group’s facilitator to get on the group’s reading list for the next meeting.
5. Occasionally, a facilitator will get more reading requests than can be completed in an hour. In such cases, members who need critiques so they will be ready for publication should read first; while others may get to wait until the next meeting.

Is there a *Best Way* to critique a manuscript?

It depends on the author's writing experience and comfort level with a genre. For instance, a natural poet may try writing a magazine article; or a journalist may start writing a novel. Even accomplished writers need gentler handling in a genre that is new to them.

General Guidelines:

1. Use the **SANDWICH** technique: start with something positive, offer a few suggestions for improvement, then end with another specific positive.
2. Remember: it is your opinion. Be specific, and offer a fix with your critique.
3. Avoid giving too many suggestions for changes; not only is it often disheartening to a writer, a large number of changes can lose the author's voice and style.

Guidelines for Critiquing A Manuscript:

1. Is the title effective?
2. Does the opening grab one's attention and hint at the content?
3. Does the material flow in a logical order, or does it need rearranged?
4. Does it contain material unrelated to the main theme, such as side issues or "rabbit chasing"? These extraneous items may be an additional manuscript for the future.
5. Are there clichés, frequently repeated words or phrases, or colloquial jargon in it?
6. Would pertinent anecdotes, statistics, or quotations improve the manuscript?
7. Is the wording clear? Does it have long, run-on sentences or huge paragraphs?
8. Do sentence and paragraph length vary?
9. Have all facts, statistics, and quotations been double-checked?
10. Are there any points left out? Was something ignored that the reader will ask?
11. Does the manuscript end in the right place?
12. Finally, is its grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary appropriate and correct?

Guidelines for Critiquing Poetry:

1. Is the title catchy, appropriate to the mood of the poem?
2. Does the first line and subject grab the reader's attention?
3. Has the poet captured a mood? Shared an experience? Created a mental image?
4. Has the poet conveyed a central message? Is the poem intended to entertain?
5. Does the poem have a clear beginning, middle, and ending? Is it fully developed?
6. Has the poet presented something new and fresh, or from a unique approach?
7. Has the poet used imagery? Picture words? Sensory words? Poetic language?
8. If the poet used rhyme: Is it patterned rhyme? If patterned, is the rhyme consistent? Is the rhyme true rhyme or slant rhyme? Do the word choices sound awkward just for the sake of forcing a rhyme? Did it use internal rhyme or end rhyme?
9. If the poet used meter: Did it follow the chosen metric pattern correctly and consistently? Would another metric pattern have better fit the poem's topic?
10. If the poet used free verse: Did it have sufficient content or is it chopped up prose?
11. Has the poet avoided fogginess, moralizing, venting, and sloppiness?
12. Is the poem complete?

How to Receive a Critique

Editors attend writers' conferences, searching for their next discovery, and often remind writers that "there is no perfect manuscript." As writers, we tend to feel protective of our works; even defensive – that's natural. Yet as Christian writers, we also want to see our best in print, not our "that's good enough."

1. Bring your best work.
If you waited until the night before critique group to dash something off, don't waste other's time with a rough draft you know you can still improve on your own without help – unless you are genuinely in the early stages of exploring an idea and want their input and guidance.
2. You may benefit more by having someone else read your manuscript aloud.
 - Your own ears will catch things when you're listening. This is why editors recommend writers read their work aloud, even if to themselves, before submitting it for consideration.
 - Reading aloud is even more important for poets, because the writer will often emphasize different words than the reader. Did it break the meter in an unexpected way? Does the point come across, or did the message get lost in an awkward reading?
3. Provide copies for everyone in the group.
Some errors are difficult to catch by only listening to a work read. If it is a large work, share a brief synopsis so listeners can focus on the provided small section.
4. Watch other members of the group as your work is read.
If you let someone else read your work, you can focus on watching for visible reactions of interest, excitement, agreement, laughter, boredom, and so forth.
5. Let the speaker finish.
Resist the urge to interrupt to argue, defend, or explain your writing to the critiquer. Others are merely offering their opinions. Let them speak, then weigh their comments in your mind later. Decide which ones have validity to you and which you can dismiss. Often, after reflection, even "wrong" comments can help a writer discover an unclear area that needs revision.

Types of Critiquers

- Katie-Know-It-All: Always has at least one opinion on everything.
- Polly Positive: Everyone's manuscript is great, lacking nothing.
- Nancy Negative: Ignores other's tears, would critique the Bible if it was a manuscript.
- Tommy Theologian: No matter how good the writing, if it doesn't match his ideas....
- Mary Monopolizer: Reads the most, critiques the most, talks at length.
- Randy Rabbit-chaser: Can turn any critique into a chance to get on a soapbox.
- George Grammar: He knows all the rules and allows no exceptions.
- Becky Beginner: Scared as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rockers, but wants to try.