

The Benefits of Critiquing

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"For the first time in my life I was around people like me -- devoted to the twin acts of reading and writing . . . For many years I had taken writing very seriously, but now I took myself seriously as a writer." -- Chris Offutt

Benefits of critiquing:

1. Receiving a critique
 - a. Comprehension
 - b. Consistency
 - c. Characterization, setting, story arc problems
 - d. Brainstorming ideas
 - e. Factually correct
 - f. Technical issues - POV and tense consistencies, grammatical errors, redundant word usage, etc.
 - g. Sets Deadlines
 - h. Encouragement
2. Critiquing others - time commitment
 - a. Makes us more critical of our own work
 - b. Makes us invested in the work of others
3. Networking and resources

How to receive a critique:

1. Feedback - be specific, line-by-line/developmental, be honest
2. Defenses - letting go
3. Listen
4. They're your words

How to write an effective critique:

1. Critiquing is a skill
2. Be clear
3. Set aside your preferences
4. Understanding genre
5. Writing Levels and Temperaments
6. Read the submission completely before writing any comments
7. Overall opinion
8. Praise
9. Issues
10. Ask questions
11. Don't tell them how or what to write
12. Know your limitations
13. Follow up with words of encouragement

What to look for in a critique group:

1. Type
2. Level
3. Varieties of critique groups
4. Logistics
5. Commitment
6. Flexibility
7. Critiquing styles

Where to find a critique group or critique partner:

1. Writers' organizations
2. Writers' conferences
3. Meetup
4. Libraries
5. Bookstores

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Resources

Book: *Writing Alone, Writing Together - A Guide for Writers and Writing Groups*, Judy Reeves

Magazines:

1. *The Writer*, Advice and inspiration for today's writer, WriterMag.com
2. *Writer's Digest*, writersdigest.com
3. *Poets & Writers*, pw.org

Websites:

1. National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo): nanowrimo.org
2. Wattpad: wattpad.com/writers
3. Jane Friedman: janefriedman.com, specifically:
 - a. "How to Find the Right Critique Group for You" - janefriedman.com/find-the-right-critique-group - detailed info about online critique sites, too.
 - b. "The 4 Hidden Dangers of Writing Groups" - janefriedman.com/dangers-of-writing-groups
 - c. "Writing Communities" - janefriedman.com/writing-communities

Online Critique Groups: before posting your work determine whether posting it will be the same thing as publishing it. Many journals and contests want only work that is not previously published.

1. Tim Storm's online critique groups: stormwritingschool.com/p/critique
2. Meetup - type in your area and writing
3. Scribophile: scribophile.com
4. Article by Cathy Yardley: "41 Places to Find a Critique Partner Who Will Help You Improve Your Writing": thewritelife.com/find-a-critique-partner

Prompts:

1. Poets & Writers writing prompts
2. writersdigest.com/prompts

Retreats & Residencies:

1. Ragdale, Lake Forest, IL - ragdale.org
2. "Twenty-two of the Most Inspiring Writers Retreats in the County" - www.pw.org/content/twentytwo_of_the_most_inspiring_writers_retreats_in_the_country
3. Poets & Writers Conferences and Residencies Database

Organizations:

1. Chicago Writers Association - chicagowrites.org
2. The Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators - scbwi.org
3. American Christian Fiction Writers - acfw.com
4. Romance Writers of America - rwa.org

Kristin's bi-monthly newsletter on all things writing: kristinoakley.net

Critiquing Tips

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Whether you're new to critiquing or an old hand at it, the following tips will help ensure that your critique will have the desired effect: to help improve the writing of others.

Critiquing tips:

1. Read the submission completely before writing any comments. A question you have may be clarified later in the piece.
2. Once you've read the piece, write down your overall impression.
3. Start your critique with specific praise. "You have terrific imagery that puts me into the setting" rather than "I liked the first paragraph." Point out what's working.
4. Make note of when the writing pops you out of the story. These are issues the writer should work on.
5. Rather than criticize, ask questions. Criticism tends to put writers on the defensive but asking questions makes them think deeper about their work. For instance, instead of "This is confusing" ask "Why does the protagonist do that?"
6. Avoid telling the writer what to write or rewriting sections for them.
7. List what you consider the writer's top two priorities as they revise. Be sure to mention the good stuff that they should leave alone.
8. Follow up with words of encouragement. We want to motivate each other to write more!

Elements of story - some things to consider as you read:

1. Hook - did the first line intrigue you? Make you want you to read more? If not, is there another line later on in the piece that could be used as the hook?
2. Has the writer put you into the scene through setting and characterization? Does the writer make good use of description using several of the five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) on each page? Is there too much description that slows the story's pace?
3. Is it clear who the protagonist is?
4. Does the protagonist have a defined goal? Do you know what's at stake? Ideally this should be on the first page, even the first line. Story in a nutshell: a protagonist has a goal and someone or something (the antagonist) is trying to stop them from achieving that goal. Has the writer made this clear in the first few pages of their story?
5. What is the inciting incident that forces the protagonist to act?
6. Is there action? Is there tension?
7. Conflict - Is there an antagonist (someone or something) who is putting obstacles in the protagonist's way? Is the conflict external, internal, or both?
8. What is the purpose of the scene? How does it move the story forward?
9. Is the dialogue realistic? Does it serve a purpose?
10. How would you describe the writer's voice? For instance: humorous, confident, timid, pretentious, clever, inconsistent, colorful, trustworthy, memorable, natural, forced, etc. Does their voice work well for the genre they're writing?
11. Does the scene end with tension (a disaster, cliffhanger, unanswered question, surprise revealed, etc.) that makes you want to read more? If not, is there a better place to end the scene?