

## **Critique Format**

The format for each critique group is determined by that specific group's moderator and may vary from group to group. The following guidelines are general guidelines provided as a sample and are not specifically representative of any group.

Most manuscripts presented for critique will be novel-length, commercial fiction as this is the general focus of RMFW. However, some groups may consider other works such as short stories, screen plays, or true crime. If your work is not commercial, novel length fiction, contact the group moderator and inquire as to whether your work will be a fit for the group.

Submission presented for critique are most often in the standard format accepted by agents and editors.

- double spaced
- 24-25 lines per page (about 250 words)
- A 12 point, typewriter style font (like this Times New Roman font).
- A header and page number are quite helpful as is a date so it can be referred to when making revisions.

Most groups have a page limit for critiques. In the absence of an exact number, assume a count of 10 pages or 2500 words. If you have a longer scene and feel your scene must be read as a whole, contact the moderator of the group you wish to attend and inquire as to any specific arrangements.

Most groups read from hard copy pages. The author is responsible to bring sufficient copies for each attendee. Normally this should not exceed more than 10 paper-clipped copies. Again, contacting the group moderator can save you from making too many copies, or from not making enough. It is possible on occasion for two people to share a copy but you may not get as thorough a critique from the two sharing.

Each manuscript is handed out so all may follow along and also so that the attendees can make written comments.

Three or four manuscripts will be read at each session and sessions can last for several hours, so be prepared to stay at the meeting until all have read. Arriving late or leaving early is not only discouraged, it's rude and not in the spirit of mutual advancement adopted by RMFW.

It is not necessary to read at each session. The author is encouraged to read aloud. We understand that reading aloud from your own work can be an intimidating or even frightening prospect, but our methods are not without purpose. Often, reading aloud, in a group, brings out trouble spots that the author reading alone could not find. Besides, once you are published you'll need to do live reads so you might as well get some practice.

Just as it is not necessary to read at every session, it is also not necessary to read your entire manuscript to the group. Such an undertaking would require years and is therefore impractical.

Instead, readers are encouraged to bring sections with which they are having difficulty. The one exception to this is the first time read. For your first read of a new work, it is good to bring the first 10 pages. For future readings, bring trouble sections but prepare a short overview, not only for the benefit of the attendees who may be reading your story for the first time, but also to fill in the story line for those scenes you are skipping.

### **Submitting Your Work**

As you may have gathered from the above guidelines, it's a good idea to attend a critique group a few times before you bring your own work. This will give you a sense of how the group works and the feedback exchanged before you put your own work out there.

When you are ready to submit, follow the guidelines provided by your group leader.

Remember, guidelines vary from group to group, and are driven by the size of the group, the genre, and the number of people who want to read. Some groups assign reading spots in advance, others accept all work and adjust the group dynamics and time spent critiquing according to the number of pieces to be reviewed. Some groups send reading out ahead and the time in group is spent only on critique.

When you submit your work, tell the readers where you are in the story, (such as a page number or a reference like "halfway through")

Your short overview should provide sufficient background needed to understand the scene you are reading. (Writing the overview is a good way to practice your synopsis writing!) But keep the overview short, half a page is recommended.

If you have a specific question or want the group to focus on a certain area (such as dialogue, characters, choreography) make this apparent before you begin to read. It is not necessary to be able to articulate any specific need.

Be sensitive to the possibility that the content or language of your creative work may offend some readers. If you think your work may be considered offensive, issue a warning so that readers may excuse themselves if they wish. If you find someone else's work offensive, you may decline to read and critique it. However, literature is vast and dynamic in its composition. We ask that you understand that each segment of each session is about the author who is reading at that specific time. The focus is on them and not on you. So extend to them the same respect you would want for your own work.

### **Offering Critique**

Each participant has an opportunity to comment briefly on the work that has been read. We ask that you be a 'wise reader'.

A wise reader is able to be honest without being brutal. If you are new to critique, the simplest and most honest approach is to notice how the author's work makes you feel. Heart racing, sad, wistful, humored, or even angry or repulsed, the latter may well be exactly what the author was hoping for.

If you are unsure of what to say, simply pass, or say, "I have nothing new to add, or all of my points have been covered." This will be possible as you will not likely be asked to comment first.

Watch the more experienced people to see how they comment.

You should see the experienced critique containing some of the following:

- Begin with positive comments. The world of literature is full of more styles and voices than anyone could count. The purpose of fiction is to tell a story, period. So with this in mind, appreciate the work as it is by reflecting back on what you liked, what resonated with you, what you remember (word choices, images, action, dialogue etc). Every presentation has some good in it, find it, or as Thumper's mother would say, "don't say anything at all."
- The experienced critique will begin to note viewpoint, structure, characters, and word choice, and be able to offer specific commentary about the effect these things had on him or her as a reader. If you are not at this level yet, don't worry, with a bit of time, you will be. This live feedback is the lifeblood of critique and why, I believe, authors involved in a critique group experience the most growth in their craft.
- Note any confusion or problems you encountered when reading. However, realize that some confusion will result in that you are only reading ten pages. There are potentially hundreds of other pages you haven't read and some confusion would be expected.
- Tell the writer how the piece made you curious—what questions you have, what interests you, what you want to know going forward. But note: At critique, these questions are not an invitation for the author to *explain* the work, so you won't actually expect any questions to be answered. If you want to further discuss the work with the author, do so outside of the group.
- Be sure to separate the character or narrator in the work from the author. Never refer to the character as "you" or assume that the story is about the author.
- Comment on the work itself, not on what you think it means, or should mean, or how you feel about the work or its subject. It is fine to say, "I don't usually read this kind of book" and refrain from comment if you have nothing helpful to offer.
- If you have a suggestion for reading that would help the writer (another novel, a book on craft) mention it in a note on the manuscript. Be sensitive about mentioning such suggestions aloud. If you have found a particularly helpful craft book, bring it along and show it to the whole group and be ready to admit how the book has helped your own craft.

- Write your comments on grammar, spelling, and word choice on the manuscript. Don't take time to point them out verbally. Also, when it comes to grammar, strive for accuracy. If you aren't sure, say so. You might write, "I don't believe you need a comma here." Don't just strike the comma if you aren't positive you are correct.
- Try not to repeat points that others have made since this takes valuable time. If you agree or disagree with a comment, note it on the MS so the writer will know. Try not to shoot down a fellow member's critique by disagreeing with it aloud. An exception to this might be if you are seeing an author breaking down as a result of too many negative comments or if another member might have been less than tactful in offering critique. Then it is encouraged to build up the author and restore group dynamic. This is generally the duty of the group moderator but all should be sensitive to how a critique is being received.
- End with something affirming and positive. We need to acknowledge the fact that the writer was brave enough to put his/her work on the line.

### **Receiving Critique**

When you are the person receiving critique:

- Just listen or take notes. Don't argue, explain or defend. Having a reader react immediately and say what worked and what didn't is quite valuable. If you explain too much, you dilute the reaction. That reaction is, after all, one of the main reasons you are coming to critique.)
- Don't be intimidated by the writing ability of your fellow group members. And try not to judge based on whether or not the writer is published or not published. Good writing conveys a story; it entertains and does so without grammatical errors and typos. That's it.

Writers at all levels in their career must meet these same criteria. And even the best, most accomplished, award winning writers have room to grow. If nothing else, keep in mind that if they are bringing their work to critique, it is because they are looking for comments.

Give each member your honest feedback and accept theirs in return. It may be difficult to hear that your work needs improvements, but hearing these comments, taking them in, pondering them, and finally doing something with them is the best and quickest way to improve your work.

In the same way, if you are a seasoned writer, don't go to a group looking for applause. Praise will come from the fans of your published work, not from your critique group. This is not to say that we shouldn't offer compliments, but critique is a waste of time if it is solely a mutual admiration gathering.

- Finally, at the end of your session (when the last person has commented on your work) thank everyone for their feedback, and be genuine even if you didn't agree with a word anyone said, even if everyone seemed to 'hate' your work and you want to go home and break your computer.

These are all normal responses to receiving critique. Calm down, think about what was said. Don't only focus on the positive comments; look even more carefully at the negative ones. Certainly don't take everyone's critique as gospel. You are the one who decides what works for you and your writing. Keep a firm hold on your style and voice and remember that every comment doesn't necessarily improve your work but

every comment, if it was offered honestly, has some value. You came to critique to be critiqued, so take it! And have fun.

- That said, not all groups are perfect and neither is every person in attendance. If someone is being unfair in written comments notify your group leader, and if it is the group leader who is being unfair, notify the RMFW Critique Chair.
- Realize that it's possible you won't "click" with a critique group-- personalities, stories, writing styles, etc affect the ability for people to interact well and learn from one another. This is normal. If this happens, try a different group, or pair off with one or two members in your group and form a new group. Sometimes, you may have to visit more than one group before you find a home.

If you do break off and form a new group, let the group leader know what led to the split. It is discouraged to attend a group in order to take over or to attract members away to populate your own group. If you do break off, it is commendable to hold your meeting on a different night. That way, members can still attend both groups. A split is a split and it can be ugly and damaging if it's not handled well.

Often times a splinter group is formed of more advanced writers who meet as a happy consequence of being a part of a larger group. These beta groups might share larger sections of their work and give more in-depth feedback of each reading. Such groups are an exception to the above paragraph. Although, I believe, it is still good to meet on a different night and to also not abandon the larger group.

As the RMFW Critique Chair, I have long believed that experienced writers attending groups with less experienced writers is mutually valuable and is one of the premier advantages to being a member of RMFW. Consider your continued attendance in the larger groups as payback for all the help, encouragement and expertise you received while you were growing and developing as a writer. And be humble. You can still learn!

### **A few points that bear repeating**

- Follow the format rules given by the group leader.
- Remember that receiving criticism is never easy.
- What is said is a comment on your work, not on you personally.
- Give layered critique, what worked along with what didn't work.
- End on a positive note.
- While receiving critique, don't interrupt, don't defend your work.
- Don't interrupt another member's critique. This is critique, not a debate.
- Be polite and remember to say thank you.
- Don't hog all of the reading time.
- Don't hog all of the critique time.
- Be fair and value each member's opinion (even if you think they write like a kindergartner).
- Some of the most valuable commentary you can give a writer is to tell them how their work made you feel.
- The next best commentary you can give a writer is what information you gathered about their story.
- Respect everyone. Demean no one.

If you are checking us out, you can attend 3 meetings before becoming a member. However, you will not be able to read your work in a critique group until you become an RMFW member. It is the responsibility of group leaders to make sure attendees are members.

An RMFW official group is listed in our newsletter and on our website and follows our guidelines.

A word on audition groups: In certain groups, you may be asked to submit work before being allowed to join the group. If an audition group is of interest to you, don't let this aspect intimidate you. Oftentimes it is simply a way to predetermine if a member will be a good fit. Contact the group leader and you will most often find them to be quite receptive and inviting. Don't automatically assume that an audition only group is an elite group of award winning authors who would look down their noses at your work. Such a group would not fit with the above guidelines and would not be listed in our publications and website.

If a member exhibits disruptive, rude, or dangerous behavior, the critique leader has the authority to ask that member to leave the critique group, either for a specified cooling off time, or permanently. If this happens, the group leader should notify the critique chair so that other critique leaders and RMFW board members can be made aware of the situation.

In light of current events, take dangerous behavior seriously and don't hesitate to call the police if you feel you or anyone in your group might be in a threatening situation.