

Creating an Effective Peer Group Workshop

Giving - and receiving - critical feedback as writers

Peer group workshops (online or in person) have many benefits - the most obvious being that they offer us the opportunity to improve our writing and step ever closer to producing work worthy of publication.

A peer group can also offer the following:

- *Companionship and support in what can be quite a solitary business
- *Regular deadlines to meet
- *The opportunity to learn from others
- *Encouragement and motivation

Considering the basics

Who can join the group

Ideally members should be operating at more or less the same level of accomplishment, so that people are neither intimidated by those with more experience, nor discouraged by others' lack of commitment to the task or grasp of basics.

Non-fiction and fiction writers can happily share the same space, as can writers of different genres, (eg romance and) and format (eg short story and novel). However Poetry is usually given better consideration in a group dedicated to that art.

How many people can join

A group works best with somewhere between six and 10 members - not so few that meetings falter due to lack of attendance, or so many that there isn't enough time to give everyone's work adequate attention. The time available at the meeting itself needs to be considered, as well as the time required to read everyone's submitted manuscripts in the week ahead.

How often will you meet

Monthly tends to work best, as this guarantees that members will have time to write, submit and read work of a suitable length in advance. It's also easier to save a monthly date - eg the first Wednesday of the month. But if you are a keen and prolific bunch, with time on your hands, then weekly is an option!

Operational considerations

At the first meeting, or in advance, it is useful to decide how the group intends to operate. Points to consider:

- *Who will lead the facilitation, or will you take turns?
- *How (in what format) work will be submitted to the group in advance? A group email works well.
- *At the meeting, can you make time for writer to read a short section of the submitted manuscript (eg the first paragraph or two) before it is critiqued? This is worth including if possible, as it's an effective and enjoyable way or shifting the attention to the next piece/writer.
- *How will notes on the manuscript be presented to the writer after the critique session? This will depend on whether you are meeting in person or online.

FYI My long standing group meets in person and, despite frequent discussion of the environmental concerns, has found that printing and making notes on a paper copy of the writer's manuscript works most effectively. Once the critique has been delivered at the meeting verbally, the annotated manuscripts (marked with the name of the reader) are handed to the writer.

- *How many words can be submitted (measure by words, not pages!)?

- *How soon in advance (eg a week) should everyone submit their work to allow for proper consideration?
- *Confidentiality re the work submitted
- *Rules/expectations re attendance and punctuality

Delivering and receiving feedback

For a peer group to work successfully, all need to be committed to participating fully and doing so in a supportive, positive manner. Everyone must write for each meeting, everyone must read the manuscripts prior to each meeting.

As Ursula Le Guin says in *Steering The Craft*, "That's the basic agreement on which the group stands or falls"!

Being able to deliver and receive feedback graciously and humbly is equally important. And, this includes the interaction with the other 'critiquers'. A peer group is founded on mutual trust and respect - there is no room for the 'domineering ego and the self-abasing sycophant' (Le Guin).

The writer whose work is being discussed/critiqued

- *Should offer no preliminary excuses or explanations
- *Should stay entirely silent while listening to the feedback being provided (this is an - the - essential part of the process)
- *By staying silent, not defending the work, "All you can do is hear. You can hear what people got from your piece, what they think needs some work, what they misunderstood and understood, disliked and liked about it. And that's what you are there for." (Le Guin)
- *Make notes on what is being said, even if comments feel inappropriate/stupid at the time. They may make sense later.
- *Can only be addressed directly if the group critique would benefit from clarity on a matter, and it can be answered with a simple yes or no response. (The group needs to be in agreement about asking the question before it is posed, and it should never be a question that requires a long answer or defence)
- *Once the group have completed their discussion of the work/time is up, thank them for their comments.
- *Briefly ask any pressing question about the story that wasn't addressed, if necessary.
- *Receive the printed notes to consider in more detail at home.

Effective feedback does the following:

- *Criticises the writing, not the writer, and with the sole purpose of trying to improve the manuscript.
- *Considers what the story is about, what it is trying to do, how it is working and how it might achieve its ends better
- *Remembers that the story belongs to the author, and they need to take it in the direction that is right for them.
- *Suggestions on 'fixes' should be delivered respectfully
- *Focuses on substantive issues only
- *Includes reactions from a first reading/first impressions (this is, after all, what an agent/editor will respond to)
- *Includes positive comments ie points to what you like, what you think works well, as well as pointing to areas that you found confusing or you think may need to be given further attention
- *Is offered as a point of view only
- *Is specific and concrete, offering solutions where possible
- *Is succinct and focussed
- *Includes more general/neutral comments about how the draft has progressed.

*Provides written notes on the page also, correcting the first few minor, grammatical errors, leaving the writer to correct the rest.

*Is grounded in the knowledge that the writer will weigh up all the comments and make up their own mind.

Final words from Le Guin:

“There may be periods in a writer’s life when they need the stimulus and feedback of a group, and periods when they do better working alone. Always, on your own or in a group, you are your own judge, and you make your own decisions. The discipline of art is freedom.”