

Critique Groups

Pendelton C. Wallace

www.pennwallace.com

- I. A critique group is the most important writing tool in your tool box
 - a. Try to find people who are better/more experienced than you
 - b. It's like playing tennis, you only get better by playing with better players
 - c. Have thick skin
- II. Why do you want to be in a critique group?
 - a. Mutual support
 - b. Learn and grow as a writer
 - c. Social
 - d. Help other writers
- III. What can a critique group do for you?
 - a. Provide deadline to keep you working
 - i. Forces you to make time to write
 - ii. Robert Ferigno story
 - b. Motivation and Inspiration
 - c. You get quick and easy feedback
 - i. Get first hand reactions from people reading your work
 - ii. You have the accumulated knowledge of the group
 - d. Critiquing other's writing helps you understand what works and what doesn't
 - i. Learn from critique of other's writing
 - e. Meet and make friends with local writers
- IV. What a critique group can't do for you
 - a. Provide validation
 - i. Don't expect to be told you're a great writer
 - ii. Don't expect to be told how to become a great writer
 - b. Line editing
 - i. Group should focus on theme, clarity, character development, flow, etc
 - c. Proof you have talent
 - i. Talent is over rated
 - ii. John Steinbeck and *A Cup of Gold*
 - d. A place to vent frustrations
- V. How our group works
 - a. 2500 words every two weeks (I'd prefer weekly)
 - b. Sent your submission by Sunday for Wednesday meeting
 - c. Edit and critique work on paper before you come to meeting
 - d. Read your selection (or have it read) out loud
 - e. Listen to others critiques
 - i. Don't be defensive

- ii. It's up to you whether or not you take the advice
 - f. Thank participants for their input
 - g. Special stuff
 - i. Quarterly retreats
 - ii. Group presentations
 - iii. Social events
- VI. How to critique
 - a. The purpose of critique is to provide useful information and feedback without deflating the writer's ego
 - b. Be helpful and inspiring
 - c. Use sandwich technique
 - i. Start with praise – "I really liked . . ."
 - ii. Add criticism
 - iii. End with praise – "You did a really good job of . . ."
 - d. Tell what works and what doesn't
 - e. Keep an open mind
 - i. Final decision is up to you
 - ii. Listen to what others say
 - iii. Sometimes when everyone disagrees with you, you have to listen
 - f. Be honest
 - i. It doesn't do anyone any good to spare feelings
 - ii. You are there to hear what others think of your work, be ready to accept it
 - g. Take notes of comments
 - h. Tell how you reacted to piece, how it made you feel
 - i. Make notes on other's manuscripts
 - i. Spelling
 - ii. Typos
 - iii. Punctuation
 - iv. Don't waste group time with trivia
- VII. How do you find a group?
 - a. You may have to try several to find the one that's right for you
 - b. Craig's List
 - c. Meet up groups
 - d. Writers conferences
 - e. Create an eye-catching flyer
 - i. Include your contact information
 - ii. Distribute it everywhere you can
 - 1. Libraries and bookstores
 - 2. local Community College English Department might have a board where you could post
 - 3. consider a small flyer or business card that you can take with you to writing events

- f. Post notices and run ads
 - i. Your small community newspaper might be a great place to connect with writers in your area
 - ii. Many will post community service notices for free
 - iii. Any local online communities too.
 - g. Network
 - i. Alumni Association
 - ii. Church groups
 - iii. Fraternal groups
 - iv. Many people you wouldn't even think about may be writers in hiding
 - v. Attend writing conferences
 - h. Join classes
 - i. Many groups form as a result of students in a class who want to continue to work together
 - i. Read writing publications and post notices there
 - i. Post notices in writing related newsletters and websites.
 - j. Contact places that offer writing classes
 - i. Community Colleges
 - ii. Parks & Recreation Departments
 - iii. Ask writing teachers to inform their students about your group.
- VIII. Choosing a group
- a. How often do they meet?
 - b. How long are meetings?
 - c. How is critique handled?
 - d. Do you read your work in the group meeting?
 - e. Do you submit ahead of time or do critique in the meeting?
 - f. How many people in group?
 - g. Level of experience writing?
 - h. Where does the group meet?
 - i. Make up of Group
 - i. Number of members can vary but think of the time element
 - ii. Mixing genres is always a good idea—expand your feedback
 - iii. Mixing gender of members provides well rounded feedback
 - j. Logistics-decisions to make
 - i. Where to meet(homes vs. public place like a library)
 - ii. When to meet (day of the week, time of day)
 - iii. How often to meet (once a week, every two weeks, once a month)
 - iv. For how long at each meeting (how much time does each member get)
 - k. Running a group
 - i. Will there be a leader or facilitator?
 - ii. If no facilitator, who will be responsible for reminding members or confirmation the location of each meeting?

- iii. Who will be timekeeper?
 - iv. Will you invite guest speakers from time to time?
 - v. How will you handle members entering & exiting once the group is up and running?
 - l. What you'll do when you meet
 - i. Writing together or just critiquing?
 - m. Handling Manuscripts-Decisions To Make
 - i. Number of pages
 - ii. How much time each member
 - iii. Read aloud or silently
 - iv. Read in advance
 - v. Timekeeper
- IX. Roll your own
 - a. Ask for writing samples
 - b. Meet and talk in informal atmosphere before asking to do critiques
 - c. Agree to rules up front – put them in writing
 - d. Start small and add a person or two at a time
 - e. Audition new members – they come as “guests writers”
- X. How do you deal with personality conflicts?
 - a. Don't let one person destroy your group
 - b. Is this just your problem or is everyone else in group bothered?
 - c. Take person aside and give them feedback
 - d. When all else fails, ask them to leave the group
- XI. Tips for Success
 - a. Be a Considerate Member
 - i. Show up when the group is scheduled
 - ii. let someone know if you can't attend
 - iii. Come ready and prepared to each meeting
 - b. Read Aloud
 - i. Each person in the group should read their piece aloud (or get someone else to read)
 - ii. Reading aloud can change the way you 'see' your work
 - iii. is a great way to catch small typos, repetitions
 - iv. get a general feel for the rhythm of the piece.
 - c. Bring copies
 - i. Each member should provide enough copies for everyone
 - ii. You can send out the piece in advance if agreed on
 - iii. have hard copies for each attendee.
 - d. Set a time Limit and a time keeper if needed
 - i. Each person should be limited in not only the amount of work shared but also in the amount of time spent on his/her manuscript
 - ii. Be fair, don't infringe on one another's time.

- e. Keep the group small
 - i. Usually three to five members is perfect for a group depending on how much time you've agreed on
 - ii. Otherwise, each member might not get a chance for review at each meeting.
 - f. Ask what the author wants from the critique
 - i. Do they want a simple reaction to the content?
 - ii. More detailed in grammar, spelling, etc.
 - iii. Do they need to know if it's funny, sad, surprising?
 - g. Require a commitment
 - i. Each member should be willing to bring something to every meeting
 - ii. Once in awhile things come up or life gets crazy and a member might get a pass for a meeting
 - iii. In general, everyone should always participate
 - h. Keep an open mind
 - i. be open to feedback.
 - ii. Your attitude about the process is the best road to success.
 - i. Do not take criticism personally
 - i. they're critiquing your words, not you as a person
 - j. Don't be defensive
 - i. sit and listen
 - k. It's up to the writer to decide what advice he/she will take
 - l. Sometimes, when several people have the same reaction, you need to listen
- XII. Stick With It
- a. When you don't feel like going—go anyway! You never know when your muse will appear.
 - b. If you don't have anything to present—go anyway! Sometimes you get as much or more from critiquing others.
 - c. When you shouldn't go-- If you have had such a rough week/month that you know you will only feel like venting your frustrations on others, stay home.