



Guide for Critique Group Leaders

As a critique group leader, your tasks are to:

- Send meeting reminders
- Facilitate meetings
- Submit your creative work and offer feedback like other members
- Remind members to renew their annual Winston-Salem Writers' membership
- Mediate challenges and conflicts that might arise

It helps if you implement these character traits:

- Friendliness/approachability
- Patience
- Compassion
- Flexibility
- Professionalism
- Punctuality
- Hospitality (if meetings are held at your home)

How many people should be in a group?

We recommend no more than five members per group due to time constraints. As you get to know one another, you will inevitably want time to socialize in addition to critiquing. If all five members submit work and each member has 15 minutes to get feedback from the group, that's 75 minutes plus 15 minutes or so for socializing, plus some wiggle room if more feedback is given to any member — that's about two hours.

Where should we meet?

Critique groups decide on their own where they would like to meet. Some groups meet online, such as via Zoom or other conferencing platform. Other groups meet at someone's home or in a public place, such as a coffee shop or restaurant like Panera Bread. Keep in mind that most public locations do not offer reserved seating, and many can be noisy.

When should we meet, and how often?

We recommend that groups meet once per month on any day of the week and time of day that the members agree to. If some members work day shifts, then you may want to meet after 6 p.m. on a weekday or in the morning or afternoon on a Saturday or Sunday. Meeting

once per month usually gives members a chance to prepare new pieces and implement feedback between meetings.

How should we submit our work? How much material should we submit?

It benefits members to have the option of reading each other's pieces in advance of the meeting. It's a good idea to have members submit their pieces at least two days prior, along with any questions they have for their readers (e.g. Does the title make sense? Have I effectively characterized Charlotte?) Each group should determine how much material they will be able to read and give feedback on, depending on how many members are in the group. Typically, this is one or two poems, one chapter for fiction or nonfiction, and one scene for scripts. You could also set page limits or word count limits, such as 10 pages or 5000 words.

What should be our meeting format?

Members can present their pieces in the order in which they submitted, or one member can volunteer to go first and then others go in clockwise order. Determine how much time will be spent giving feedback. Can each critiquer give feedback for five minutes, ten minutes? Does someone need to keep track of the time or set a timer? Again, this depends on how many people are in the group and even how many people show up to a meeting. You can be flexible with this if you wish. However, a meeting that lasts longer than two hours might mean members leave feeling exhausted and, possibly, less inclined to participate in the future.

How should we give feedback?

Although it's called a "critique" group, members offer constructive feedback to one another. We are all writers, and we are all individuals with unique perspectives; we all have something to learn from one another. Humility and curiosity are essential in this setting. Offering constructive feedback often means coming to a creative piece with a reader's mind. As a reader:

- How does the piece affect you?
- What do you like about the piece?
- What confused you?
- What specific suggestions do you have for improvement? For instance, if a word doesn't sound right, what might that person use instead? If the piece doesn't read well, what ideas do you have for reorganizing?

We are giving feedback on the piece, not the person. Consider the difference between these two statements:

"It's obvious the writer does not understand where to place the climax."

"I was interested in the plot, but I wanted the climax to come sooner."

The first statement is arrogant and degrading, a tone and attitude which should be avoided.

The second statement is constructive; the critiquer is responding as a reader. They can go one step further and suggest exactly where they want the climax to appear.

How should we respond to feedback?

It's a good idea for each member to remain silent while they receive feedback, asking questions when needed. Defensiveness helps no one, especially the writer. They may want to explain what they meant, but ultimately, it's important to listen to everyone's feedback. Ultimately, it's up to the writer to decide what feedback to implement and why, but even if the writer disagrees with someone's feedback, they should take into consideration other perspectives. Other readers, including future readers, may feel the same way! It can also be helpful to sit on it — even if a writer disagrees with someone's feedback at first, they may revisit it and learn from it at some point in the future.

What should I do if conflict arises?

This is where your professional skills will come in handy. Assume, if you can, that everyone has good intentions. Remind members of the agreed-upon rules and/or the objective of the group: We are here to give constructive feedback, to help one another as writers, not to put one another down or gossip or . . . (fill in the blank). If one particular person seems disagreeable or otherwise does not follow the rules/guidelines/spirit of the group, have a one-on-one conversation with them. They may be having a bad day, and no one likes to be called out in front of others. (Brené Brown has a lot to say about this: Shame is not an effective tool for changing behavior.) If two or more members are in conflict, try mediating a conversation in which each person uses I-statements and talks about their feelings; often, it's *feelings* that need breathing room, not necessarily opinions or perspectives. Have each member paraphrase what the other has said to show they have listened. Offer a reasonable compromise, if needed, or ask them to devise one. There can be conflicting personalities and perspectives within any group, but that doesn't mean we can't find some common ground and respect one another.

Who do I contact for questions, concerns, and support?

Reach out to the Critique Group Coordinator anytime. Email groups@wswriters.org.