

## CRITIQUE GROUP CONSIDERATIONS

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Critique groups can greatly enhance SWW's mission of helping writers "improve their crafts and further their careers." In my many years in them (in Albuquerque, Denver, and Houston), I've found them to be essential to my writing. I work on a piece until I think it's perfect, but it never is (sigh). Submitting it to an audience of discerning readers for *supportive professional feedback* reveals its imperfections that I *must* fix before submitting it for publication or to a contest. I may need to revise a piece multiple times for group critique before it's ready to submit.

A significant degree of insecurity goes with being a writer, too. The blank page can be formidable and the support of others is critical in moving from there to the finished piece, ready to send out for publication or to a contest. Even if a writer says they're uninterested in publication, just submitting their work to *anyone* for critique can be intimidating, and a supportive, caring critique group can help them get over that hurdle. For me, the writing process is incomplete until a piece finds its audience and a critique group can help us find it. It can also encourage that shy writer to seek publication of their prose or poetry or to enter it into a contest.

A critique group teaches us that it's our *WORK* that's being criticized or rejected *NOT US*. The encouraging criticism of even our best work can help us achieve the emotional distance from it that's necessary for us to keep improving it and sending it out. Just as salespersons are taught to "celebrate the Nos," critique groups can help us celebrate the *rejections!* A brave way to deal with a painful rejection letter is to *read it aloud* in the critique group and get supportive feedback from the members whose pieces have been rejected, too! Some writers even *frame* them.

A critique group can also help with marketing a piece by having members suggest a market for it, based on it's particulars. Knowledge of the potential markets for a piece is also an essential part of the writing process and it helps to have the experience of others to shorten the research effort. Marketing can be intimidating for the writer, too - it has been for this writer! - and the support of a critique group can help us endure the rejection we get until the piece finally finds its audience

Can a critique group work for a book-length project like a novel, memoir, or a work of non-fiction? In my past experiences, in writing workshops, it was rare to get good feedback on a chapter out of a book. The reviewers tended to point out missing elements that are in other chapters, without pointing out things that need to be improved in the chapter they're reviewing.

But it's different for an *ongoing* critique group, where the members have been together for *years*. The members have *institutional memory* from having reviewed previous chapters when they're reviewing the current one submitted by the writer. The writer also can provide a manuscript of their work on the book to date, to help the reviewers refresh their memories. Therefore, a critique group can work for book-length projects, as long as the group stays together long-term

Should a critique group be single-genre or can it support a variety of kinds of writing? The Corrales Writing Group in the Albuquerque area critiques the latter, but they're a veteran writing group with their own website with published anthologies of member writings. If a critique group's role is to help its members in their writing careers, an argument could be made that a critique group devoted to all kinds of fiction, non-fiction, or poetry could work. It would challenge the members to *look past the genre-specific language* for the *principles of good writing* the writer is trying to use. For a new critique group, though, it might be simplest if it started out single-genre and expanded as the group matures. Many writers are "multi-discipline," though.

Occasionally a critique group may develop interpersonal conflicts, which compromise the safety and trust in the group, where members may share their innermost feelings in their submittals and the group members may have a variety of skill levels. For new critique group startups in 2021, with the historic health, political, and financial crises afflicting the world simultaneously, all would be well-advised to keep the emotional fragility of some members uppermost in mind.

Healthy, effective, enduring writer critique groups can be a great asset to SWW members and non-members alike. The written guidance and personal coaching the community can offer, through its members with a depth of experience in critique groups, can be an invaluable contribution to their own writing - and writing lives - and thus strengthen their group. The SWW members in the group can gradually enlighten the non-members in it on the breadth of SWW activities and writer support, which could encourage some of them to join SWW.

Finally, in the internet + virtual meetings era, critique groups have been freed from the constraints of geography altogether. Their members can even live in different parts of the world. And so can SWW members!