

IRB Writer's Group Guidelines

GOAL:

The goal of the group is to improve everyone's writing. Through practice, feedback, exploration, and the strength of the group, we seek to help each member move closer to their writing goals.

We are hoping for 8-10 people per meeting, although optional, it helps if you bring at least 5 copies of one project, such as a chapter, poem, essay, short story, script, or etc. It is best when you format the project in 12-point font and double space the lines so that writers may make comments directly on the paper. We won't have time for all verbal comments in the time after you read, so these copies are an important tool for you to check when you are ready to make changes.

Format:

After a brief introduction of each attendee, we will take turns reading our work to the group. The time to read will be based on the number of people in the meeting that are prepared to read. The goal is for everyone to read with sufficient time for critique.

Moderator:

IRB resident Tom Cosentino will be the moderator of the group. Tom has been participating in Writer's Groups since 2016 and has moderated several different groups. Tom's first novel was published in July of 2021. He has also published several short stories in various publications.

Readers:

- **You may choose one short project to read.** Even with poetry, please allow one piece at a time.
- **Introduce yourself, but please refrain from your project's backstory.** You may give a few sentences of description if you need to, or let the group know what you'd like as far as feedback (I especially need help with pacing/dialogue/character development/setting), but simply stating your name and your piece's genre is best.
- **Read as clearly as possible, in a pace that allows the group time to edit.**
- **Please just listen to the feedback offered.** Do not argue or try to explain. You are not required to agree with everyone, but do your best to listen to what they suggest.

Editors:

- **Write your name at the top of the paper.** As you listen, write your comments/suggestions.
- **Begin with at least two positives about what you've just heard.** Help the writer see what works, even if it's his/her first attempt at writing.
- **Comment to elevate the author's knowledge.** We are all here to learn, and we are all teachers.
- Although suggestions are OK, **do not rewrite the story.**
- **If you see individual punctuation /spelling errors, please mark them down.** We don't need to discuss those at length unless you notice common mistakes throughout a piece.

- **Refrain from arguing about content.** We don't all agree, so please keep your religious/political/other beliefs to yourself when critiquing such a piece.

Giving Critiques

Critiquing the work of others requires balance. Being too nice will not help your fellow writers develop their work; being too harsh can crush a writer's ego (particularly new writers, who tend to be shy about sharing their work). How can you achieve the right balance? Here are some tips:

Take care to point out both what works, and what doesn't. If you're new to critiquing, a good hint would be to point out one thing you like (a phrase, a description, an idea) for each thing that bothered you.

Whenever possible, be specific when pointing out things that you didn't like (don't just say "I didn't like this part" or "I'd cut that," say "I didn't like this part because..." or "I'd cut that because...").

Try to offer suggestions when you think a change is needed. Suggestions, even to the point of an offered rewording, can be very helpful; even if the suggestion isn't exactly right for the author to use, he or she may get a good idea from it, or at least a better understanding of the point you are trying to make.

Be honest and direct, but in a polite way. Holding back your feelings about a piece because you're afraid to share your thoughts isn't going to help anyone. Just be mindful of how you share your opinions! Use "I" statements: It's better to say "I found this part boring" not "This part was boring."

Be specific: If you "found this part boring," explain why you found it boring. Don't just say you found it boring.

Offer suggestions: If you "found this part boring," offer ways to make it not boring.

Use polite phrasing: If you "found this part boring," it might be nicer to say "I found this part a bit slow," or "this part pulled me out of the story..." and then explain why.

Never criticize the writer: Discuss the manuscript, not the writer. If you "found this part boring," never tell the writer "you write boring manuscripts."

Receiving Critiques

How you handle critiques you receive is just as important as how you give them to others. It's perfectly natural to want to defend your work, but it isn't a healthy thing to do in a writers' group. When receiving a critique, here are a few things to bear in mind:

Don't argue with someone's critique of your work. If you don't like the changes he or she has suggested, just say "Thank you," and move on. After all, a critique is an opinion, and we're all entitled to our own opinions.

Feel free to ask questions. Sometimes, asking a person to clarify what he or she has said in a critique will help you to see why that suggestion was made.

You're the author, and you have the final say. So, remember, as you receive critiques, it is your prerogative to accept or reject any suggestions made. This is a useful tip to keep in mind when the group is pretty evenly divided on a particular point (which will likely be most of the time). Don't feel like you have to change something just because someone in the group didn't like it; but also don't make any overly hasty judgments about critiques you receive (sometimes they make more sense when you go back and look at them later).

If everyone in the group has the same comment, chances are they're right. You may not agree, and it's still your right to reject their opinion, but generally speaking, if everyone has the same reaction, there's probably something to it.

Rather than pointing out each typo, the group can simply discuss larger issues, and the author can take the handouts back to check for line edits later. You can also make it your practice to avoid repetitious comments (if a member has already said what you were thinking, simply say "I agree with _____" and continue to the next point.