

Get Your Writing Moving—Join a Critique Group

By W. Terry Whalin

Discouraged about your writing? Wonder if you are ever going to get anything published? How do you learn to write? Admittedly, any kind of writing requires work and effort, but joining a critique group can move you in the right direction. A critique group is a small group of writers who encourage each other and provide regular help to each other. Joining a group is not something to be taken lightly. It means a commitment to write something each month, polish the writing and then share it with the group. Also it's a commitment to carefully critique the other members' manuscripts and come prepared to help others.

"Sounds wonderful," you think. "Where do I find one?"

First, see if your local writers group has critique groups. For example, the Society of Children's Book Writers has critique groups scattered across the country. If you write children's material, this is one possibility to locate an existing group. You should determine your area of specialization such as fiction, children's writing, articles, scripts, poetry, etc.? If there is not a group in your specialty or area, why not begin one?

"Oh, no," you wail, "I'm a beginning writer. I need someone to teach me."

Each of us begins somewhere and you can be an instrument for God's use if you are willing and available. You can learn lots through the critique group. You simply set the time and place then announce it in your local newspaper or some other public manner. Be creative in your networking and be available to begin a group and minister to others who want to write. You need to determine where will you meet and what time? Decide on the maximum number of participants and how often the group will meet. The larger the group, the more time will be needed for each person and his manuscript. So a small number like four persons in a group is better.

Once you've located the people, how do you begin? One essential requirement is that people be committed to writing as well as willing to critique other writer's materials. If people do not write and bring materials, the group degenerates into a chatting session rather than a work session. Regarding the actual critique, there are two basic options. Some groups bring the manuscripts to the meeting, read them aloud and then critique them. Other groups send the manuscripts out ahead of time and do not read the manuscripts during the meeting. Instead, they talk about the content. I prefer the latter method since I find it difficult to catch the content from reading aloud. In my opinion, the manuscript receives a better critique when read in advance.

During the meeting, agree on the amount of time for each manuscript so that no one person or manuscript dominates the critique session. For example, a group of four may meet for one hour each month and spend 15 minutes on each manuscript. Now you have someone else's work. What do you do with it? First, begin with praise. Find something that you like about the manuscript, possibly the format or the main character or the general theme or plot. In this way, we build up one another and give encouragement. Critiques vary according to the type of material. Here are some basic questions to consider:

Nonfiction:

1. Examine the overall structure. Is it logical? What kind of article is it and does it fulfill the proper requirements? Can you restate the premise in a single sentence? Does the article clearly point out the problem, then offer a sensible conclusion? Is there adequate

information for the reader to draw his own conclusions and learn what he needs to learn? Is it easy to read? Entertaining? Does the writing show rather than tell ideas? Are there illustrations and anecdotes and are they effective?

2. Detailed examination. Are the facts accurate? References correct? Transitions smooth? Point out any awkward phrases, incorrect grammar, misspellings, and trite phrases. Is the title eye-catching and appropriate? Do you want to keep reading after the first paragraph?

Fiction:

1. Overall examination. Did you like the story? Why or why not? Did it work as a whole? Who was the main character? Did the beginning set up an immediate, important (to the character) problem? Was the fictional dream maintained? Were there rough spots? Was the main character's behavior consistent? The other characters consistent? Did the story have a beginning, middle and an end? If in a particular genre, did it work? Is it appropriate for the chosen audience? Were the plot and the character's motive in sync? Was the tone appropriate? The pacing? What was the theme? Did it work? Can you restate it in a single sentence?
2. Detailed examination. Did the author tell rather than show the story? Point out any awkward phrases, incorrect grammar, misspellings, trite phrases and poor transitions. Was there any metaphors or analogies? Did they work? Was the dialogue realistic? Did it forward the plot? Did the first paragraph grab your attention? How about the title? Was there a balance of narrative and action? Was the sentence pattern varied?

These questions, whether non-fiction or fiction, reveal the critiquer's commitment. It's a lot of work to carefully examine another person's work. Finally let's examine some of the advantages for being in a critique group. First, it provides you a writing deadline. Each month the group needs to keep writing and that means constantly producing new material. This deadline will push you to schedule time for writing and polishing your work.

Examination of a manuscript by other writers gives you an edge over other freelancers. Other writers can give you fresh insight, marketing ideas and help on the manuscript before an editor sees it. This extra polish makes your manuscript stand out from the others on the editor's desk. The critique group provides an excellent atmosphere to exchange ideas with other writers. You get the benefit of receiving their input, experience and encouragement. Showing your manuscript to another person involves risk. What if they don't like it? Better to hear that from a fellow writer and polish it some more, than send the article all over the country, receive rejections slips, and never know why. Take the plunge and either begin a group or get in one. The process works for me and has helped give my writing an edge over others who don't take advantage of help from other writers. It will help you avoid all those form rejections and get some publishing credits.

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