



CRITIQUE GROUP GUIDE

A working model for devoted writers who value honest feedback and mutual respect.

By Diana Mathur

With thanks to Katherine Friedman,
whose leadership helped codify many of our practices.

I've been meeting with the same critique group in one form or another for fourteen years. They are kind, insightful, and reliable writers who keep me moving forward. They're as vital to my writing as my laptop.

Our group has no qualifying entrance requirements, no dues or fees. Members range from aspiring to accomplished writers and work in many genres, including fiction, nonfiction, and memoir. If you love to read, read, read, your feedback will be valuable.

I hope the practices we picked up over the years are helpful to you.

—Diana

MEETINGS

- Monthly on a fixed day.
 - Our is the first Sunday, 1–4.
 - We now meet on Zoom.
 - Regular participation is expected. Each member may submit work each month, and members critique every submission.
 - Of course, life happens and attendance isn't always possible. When you must miss a meeting, please still send your written critiques to the other authors.
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SUBMISSIONS

- **Submissions are due by midnight** on the Sunday one week before the meeting.
- **Late submissions may occasionally be accepted, but members are not obliged to critique them by the upcoming meeting date.**
- **Format: Microsoft Word document**
Times New Roman or other standard type
- **Layout: 12-point font**
Double-spaced
1-inch margins
- **At the top of your document include:**
“Email critiques to [your email address].”
- **Length: Up to 12,000 words while the group remains small enough to manage it. If members increase, the limit may be 6,000 words (up to 6,300 words to complete a scene.)**
- **Synopsis: You may include a brief summary of prior events at the beginning of your document or in a separate file. The synopsis is not included in the word count and is provided only to orient readers.**

- You are welcome to include specific questions for the group about your manuscript.
- **Proofread** your work before sending it out. None of us expects perfection, but a reasonably clean manuscript allows readers to focus on deeper issues such as structure, voice, pacing, and meaning.
- Email your submission to the entire group (remember Reply All, not Reply).
- Larger critique groups often rotate submissions among members rather than discuss every piece at each meeting, but our group has not needed to do that.
- **Participation When You Don't Submit**
If you are unable to submit pages for a cycle, you are still expected to read and critique the work of others. All of us will miss a submission now and then. In fact, having to read and discuss others' manuscripts while your own work remains unfinished can be surprisingly motivating. Among writers who consistently put in the effort, it all evens out over time.

CRITIQUE PRINCIPLES

- Use Word Review → Track Changes and Insert → Comments, or include notes at the beginning or end of the document.
- **Constructive Approach**
Our group doesn't follow a rigid checklist. Instead, we respond as engaged readers, commenting on what we love, what confuses us, and what might strengthen the piece.
- Start and end by pointing out strengths. There's always something to admire.
- These questions may help you get rolling:
 - What pulled you in?
 - What is unclear or took you 'out' of the story?
 - Where does energy lag?
 - What lingered afterward?

- Be specific. But if you can't put your finger on what is or isn't working for you, that's helpful to know, too.
 - You're not expected to "fix" anything, but feel free to offer any solution that comes to mind.
 - This group is not a substitute for a professional copy editor, though many of us naturally catch occasional grammar errors or typos.
 - You get what you give. Writers who read carefully and comment thoughtfully tend to receive the same in return.
 - Some writers broaden horizons by trading a few pages with another member, and rewriting each other's scenes to see what a new style brings to the story.
 - Repeated failure to critique others' work may result in loss of critique privileges.
 - You needn't belabor a criticism. One mention that the piece could "use more internalization," and offering an example is enough. Conversely, just saying "it was good" isn't much of a critique.
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RETURNING CRITIQUES

- Save the manuscript as a **separate file** version.
 - Return your critique by **midnight on Saturday**, the day before the meeting (earlier is even better), so the author has time to digest the feedback before discussion.
 - Email subject line:
[Your Name] – Critique for [Author's Name] – [Month]
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LIVE DISCUSSION

- Look for the Zoom link in your inbox. [It's usually the same link each month.]
- The discussion line-up is created according to the order in which submissions were sent to the group.

- Each writer decides how to use their allotted time. They have the floor. We talk about whatever aspect of their submission or other writing-related issue they choose.
 - When we have many submissions or want to watch the clock, we use a timer, and the facilitator will give a five-minute warning before time is up.
 - Regular members who did not submit work for that cycle are also allotted time to speak briefly at the end about what's happening in their writing life.
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MAKE THE MOST OF CRITICISM

- Critique group feedback isn't the final word. Everyone brings their own taste and style. Take what resonates and leave the rest. Still, if several readers point out the same issue, it's probably worth paying attention to. Give new ideas a chance to sink in.
- It's good form to thank your fellow writers for their feedback even if you don't agree. It's far better to learn of possible weaknesses and areas for improvement from thoughtful, supportive colleagues rather than from internet trolls or harsher public critics.
- Since we read only a portion of your story each month, and it may take a year to work through an entire novel, feedback tends to focus on prose, character, dialogue, and individual scenes rather than overall story structure. For big picture guidance, you may want to consult a developmental editor who can read the entire manuscript quickly.
- Devise a system for organizing feedback—five to eight critique files a month can become unwieldy. You might use Word Tools → Combine Documents to merge critiques into a single file.
- You'll likely make some corrections or edits right away, but don't let feedback bog you down. Some revisions can wait for the next draft.
- Keep moving forward toward 'The End!'