

Introduction

"The lunatic the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact."

- Shakespeare

A Midsummer Night's Dream, 5.1

Writing is often a solitary pursuit. We writers spend a lot of time sitting at the keyboard or with a pen in hand. We have to. But at some point we have to come out from behind the desk and let someone else read our writing.

It's scary. It's time consuming. And it's absolutely necessary. This is much easier with a solid writers group.

When you are starting your group, think about what you want out of it. You'll need to think about the logistics: How frequently are you going to meet? Is everyone supposed to bring writing to every meeting?

But you also need to figure out what sort of culture you want in your group: Are you looking for editing grammarians or are you seeking overarching narrative guidance? Are the writers all looking to become published authors or is this a hobby group? Both? Do you take turns leading a critique or is it a free for all?

The ten topics I've included in this book will help you deliver constructive critiques, and assist building a positive culture of creativity.

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Thanks for reading and happy writing!

Hanna

The Flipside

Most of this book is written for a writer practicing their critique skills or setting up rules for a writer's group. But occasionally I'm going to throw in advice about receiving critique in these fun little boxes. Yay!

1. The Basics

Let's get beyond "I liked it" and "I didn't like it"

It's always nice when someone likes your work, but in a critique group we're looking to improve our writing. To take it to the next step, whatever that is. So while it's important to acknowledge these basic judgments of a creative piece, it's more important to get past them to the juicier 'why'.

So here is the first and most important rule: You can't stop with either "I liked it." or "I didn't like it." You must always follow-up with a specific description of *your why*. It's not Facebook. A 'like' is not enough.

What did you like and why? Did this character particularly engage you or come to life? Is the setting exceptionally vivid? Why is this section grating? Is the grammar forcing you out of the flow of the narrative? Was this action piece, or this leap in logic confusing? etc...

This interrogation into your emotional and professional reaction to a piece instantly makes your feedback more valuable and enhances your own inner editor's abilities. Once you get the hang of this, you'll do it automatically - you and your group will drop the "I liked"/"I didn't like" from your sentences and get straight to the meat of the critique.

A lot of what I'm going to talk about in the rest of this is built on the assumption that you are either actively practicing understanding where your reactions are stemming from or are already able to do this. You need to know why you liked or didn't like something before you can do things like deliver negative feedback with compassion or become aware of your own biases.

That's why this is number one.

2. Positive Reinforcement

"The artist's job is not to succumb to despair, but to find an antidote for the emptiness of existence."

- Gertrude Stein
Midnight in Paris

You started a writer's group to find and give support in writing. To become a better writer. This is going to necessitate talking a lot about writing that is weak, needs to be fixed, could use improvement, didn't work, or is clichéd. As you deliver your critiques, keep a couple things in mind:

A) Humans retain the negative things.

Negativity Bias! We hold onto negative impressions and social interactions longer and with more clarity than positive or neutral ones. As you are critiquing, remember this. Give extra emphasis to the things you liked as a way to balance out the effect of our negativity biases.

B) Sprinkle it in.

Some groups will want to divide their critiques into "the good stuff" and "the bad stuff". I prefer to read through the story and critique in a linear way. This means that the good and the bad will be sprinkled together instead of being dumped in one heap. The problem with putting all the good stuff together is that - if it's at the beginning, your writer might not be able to hold onto it as encouragement through the negatives. If it's at the end, the writer may already be too weighed down with all the work ahead to hear you.

C) Be honest.

You will occasionally be presented with something that really grates against your own writing sensibilities or simply isn't very good yet.

Take a deep breathe.

There is always something worthy in writing. There is something admirable in showing it to someone else. There is something in there you can honestly compliment. Don't shower something with praises if you didn't like it. If all you can find to love about a piece is one word choice, one character name, bring it up.

It's much easier to tear something down than build it up - in your writer's group, do the extra work.

Notebooks Out!

Hopefully you are planning to write down the criticism you receive from your writer's group, but be sure to jot down the things people liked too. It can be very helpful to have a little bundle of positive notes on your writing to refer to when you are in the throes of writer's block, or feeling discouraged.