



BENEFITING FROM CRITIQUE GROUPS

by Dawn Lesley Stewart

At first, I could not bring myself to read my writing in front of other people. I felt self-conscious presenting my work. What if it wasn't good enough? Now I wonder why I waited so long to join a writing group. Today I belong to several groups, each focused on different aspects of writing. The advice and insight of my fellow writers has helped strengthen my words; and sharing the work lets me see my writing in new ways. My writing friends and I even share marketing tips. I highly recommend joining a writing group; but it's important to find one that supports your creative endeavors.

CHOOSING A GROUP

Ask questions to decide if the group meets your needs. How many members are in the group? Does the group have a membership limit? What do they write: poetry, nonfiction, short stories, novels, a specific genre? Do they write for adults or children? How often does the group meet: weekly, monthly? How often do they critique manuscripts, and how are the manuscripts chosen? Do members take the manuscripts home to read and then critique them at the next meeting? Or, are the manuscripts read and critiqued at the same meeting? How much time is allotted to each critique?

CONFIDENTIALITY

Members need to agree that all material discussed at meetings remains only between group members. In my experience, it's rare to hear of one writer accusing another of stealing an idea. You may want to attend a few meetings to become comfortable with the people before submitting your own material for review.

POSTING MANUSCRIPTS ONLINE

Some groups post manuscripts online for members to read and review. As a rule, I do not like posting my writing projects on the internet. It is too public, and even a "private" folder can be breached. However, I have posted short stories for online critique and received excellent feedback. Always be careful about what you post on the internet.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Before a manuscript is circulated for review, tell members what you hope to gain from the critique. You may only need an opinion of whether the characters' dialogue sounds real. Perhaps you want a general overview of whether the piece is appealing or if the

opening grabs attention. Maybe you prefer a thorough reading of your material. Encourage members to write notes on the photocopies you hand out and ask them for specific comments.

RESPECTING ONE ANOTHER

A good critique is helpful without being hurtful. The reviewers need to be honest but also tactful. Critiques point out what needs improving, but also mention the writer's strengths and what is working in the manuscript. A writer whose work is being reviewed should leave a critique session with positive feelings about the manuscript and increased motivation. I always end my review of another writer's work with upbeat insights about the writing.

SIFTING THROUGH THE COMMENTARY

After having your work reviewed, put the manuscript away for a few days. Give yourself a chance to digest everything that people said. Remember, this is your work, and you have final control of it. Some suggestions might be exactly what you feel the manuscript needs; other ideas may not suit your work or the direction in which you wish to take it. Use whatever you find helpful and move forward with inspiration and renewed energy.

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