

The Writers' Loft

Picture Book Critique Group Guidelines

- The Writers' Loft Picture Book Critique Group (PBCG) meets on Wednesday mornings (10:30am- 12:30pm) and Thursday evenings (7-9pm).
- Participants and dates vary depending on people's schedules and holidays.
- Check the Loft calendar for the up-to-date meeting times:
<https://www.thewritersloft.org/calendar>.

Attendance

- You can attend more than one meeting but submit once per month.
- Meetings are limited to 6 people.
- No one who's wanted a critique has waited more than a month to get into a group.
- If you attend, you're expected to review others' manuscripts for a particular meeting.
- As we do for all Loft drop-in events, we request the \$5 donation (unless you're a member).

Scheduling

- We have an email distribution list we use to solicit interest in submitting/attending.
- At the end of the month prior, the group coordinator sends an email to the entire list asking who is interested in submitting or just attending any meeting during that month.
- The group coordinator makes a schedule that hopefully suits everyone. This schedule is emailed to the entire list at least a week prior to the first meeting of the month.
- A leader is identified for each meeting.
- Leaders email those attending their meeting, asking those submitting to send manuscripts to the group at least 3 days prior to their meeting.
- Please do all you can to avoid cancellation. Participants rely on the full group to receive all necessary feedback. If you have to cancel, please let your leader know as soon as possible so someone else can take the spot. If you cancel within a day or two of the meeting, or the day of, please submit your critiques electronically to others in the group. (They will submit their critiques to you as well.)

Critique Submissions

- The number of submissions is limited to 4 manuscripts per meeting.
- Submissions may be one picture book manuscript totaling no more than 1,000 words, no exceptions. If something longer is submitted, the leader may ask you to send something else. Submissions of part of a longer story are not accepted.
- Please bring a **printed copy** or Microsoft Word 'revised' **electronic copy** of everyone else's manuscript to the meeting. After discussion, each edited manuscript is given (or emailed) to the writer.

Meeting Structure

- In the first 15 minutes, participants share personal and industry updates, ask questions, or discuss writing resources, etc. Please arrive on time for the social piece!
- The leader will divide up the remaining time evenly among the meeting's attendees. The leader or a second person may act as Timekeeper to keep the meeting moving along.
- Each manuscript is read and discussed one at a time, typically by a participant other than the writer. However, the writer can choose if it will be read out loud by the writer, someone other than the writer, or not at all.

Tips for Giving Criticism

- Arrive with the appropriate mindset: Please arrive with the attitude that we are all here to help others (and ourselves) get to the next level in our writing. If you don't have that attitude, then this group is not for you.
- Use the sandwich method: start with something you liked, then provide constructive criticism, then end with something you liked.
- 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."
- Don't rewrite in your own voice: Suggesting word choices or rephrasing to clarify unclear sections can often be helpful, but do not rewrite paragraphs, entire stanzas, or pages in your own voice.
- Don't take ownership: The writer makes the ultimate decision on whether to accept or reject any criticism. Even if you feel certain a change needs to be made, do not push the writer.
- Be nice & show respect: Even if you hate a piece of writing, the writer has invested time and effort on the manuscript. Phrase your criticism in a way that wouldn't offend you if it were your writing.

Tips for Receiving Criticism

- No draft is perfect: While you may feel strongly about a first, second, or tenth draft, it likely needs improvement. While the number of changes you make hopefully shrinks with each revision, don't stress if the editor returns with lots of red markings.
- Don't take it personally: Criticism of your work is not criticism of you as a person. While you have put a lot of effort into the manuscript, try to maintain a separation between you and your writing.
- Refrain from getting defensive in the moment. You don't need to defend your writing. Nobody is attacking it. Let it go if you don't agree with someone's critique.
- Everyone has an opinion: You might think it's perfect, others think it's too long, and still others think it's too short. Learn to classify voices offering criticism so you can decide which trumps which.

- Don't abuse your power: While the ultimate decision of what goes into your manuscript is yours, don't dismiss criticism that is harsh or might be difficult to implement. Sometimes following the hardest advice can be most worth it.
- Listen: Don't just hear, listen – especially if it's something you don't like. Often the most useful suggestions are the ones you find distasteful at first. Try others' ideas out. Be open-minded and challenge your assumptions. The more you listen, rewrite, and see improvements in your work, the easier it will become to accept criticism in the future.
- Wait: After hearing criticism, let it sit for a day or a week before going back and revising or thinking about changes. You should only make changes in your manuscript based on what rings truest to you.
- Remember that ultimately, ownership is yours: As Neil Gaiman said: "When people tell you there's something wrong with a story, they're almost always right. When they tell what it is that's wrong and how it can be fixed, they're almost always wrong." Listen to what people think doesn't work for your story, and then figure out how you want to fix it.

References and Additional Resources

- <http://ericaorloff.blogspot.com/2009/01/what-critique-is-and-isnt.html>
- <http://www.fmwriters.com/Visionback/Issue%205/butidon.htm>
- <http://robsanderswrites.blogspot.com/2012/02/beginning-critique-group.html>
- <http://www.joshfunkbooks.com/resources-for-writers>