



**Critiquing Guide  
For  
Women Who Write, Inc.**

## **Critiquing Goals in Women Who Write**

Women Who Write is a group that assists women in every phase of the writing process, by providing encouragement, assistance, and a sense of community to women writers who might otherwise be working in isolation. These goals should be kept in mind during the giving of critiques within our individual critique groups, particularly the goal of encouragement. We are committed to rendering critiques in a helpful, constructive way that will encourage writers to continue, rather than leave them feeling deflated.

### **"Sandwich Method" of Critiquing**

We subscribe to the "sandwich method" of critiquing, which is as follows:

- 1) Start out a critique by saying a few positive things about the manuscript.
- 2) After saying positive things, point out areas that may need changes. These are constructive suggestions, and should be delivered in a constructive fashion. For example, if you thought a portion of a manuscript was boring, instead of saying, "this was boring," or "this put me to sleep," use more helpful wording, such as, "this scene could use more action," or "this scene could use more tension." If you don't like a character (and the character isn't a villain, but someone you are supposed to like), instead of saying, "I hated her," point out something specific that needs work, such as "Her attitude is not relatable," or "Her behavior of doing x, y, z is not likeable." Concrete reasons are always better than vague statements in a critique, because a concrete reason, like "The dialogue feels unnatural," is more helpful than just saying, "I didn't like this scene." (See below for **Specific Areas For Critiquing**)
- 3) End your critique by saying something positive, even if you point out something you already mentioned as positive again. By ending on a positive note, the writer will feel encouraged to continue writing and revising the manuscript.

### **Notes on the "Sandwich Method" of Critiquing**

Please note that while this is a "happy" sandwich, because the constructive comments are wedged in between the positive remarks, your critiques should not be patronizing! Your critique should be your honest reaction to the manuscript. Just saying, "It was perfect, I loved it, don't change a thing," isn't helpful unless you truly believe that it was perfect, you loved it, and the writer shouldn't change a thing. We are all in critique groups to improve our manuscripts, so a critique that fails to provide any constructive feedback is not necessarily helpful.

### **Procedures for Delivering and Receiving Oral Critiques in Groups**

Individual groups may vary, but in general, when a person's manuscript is being critiqued, that person does not speak until all critiques have been delivered (unless asked a specific question requiring an immediate answer). This method gives every reader a chance to comment on the manuscript in an orderly fashion. Then, after all critiques have been given, the writer can comment or ask specific questions. This somewhat simulates the

submission process, because a writer doesn't have a chance to interact when an agent or editor is reading her manuscript. Other than submitting a query letter to an agent or editor, a writer has to be sure that her work speaks for itself. In the critique group, though, we do get the chance to respond *after* the critique.

If your manuscript was critiqued, remember that you do not need to incorporate every single comment into your revision. After the meeting, go home, look at all the comments you've received, and incorporate those that resonated with you. If you receive conflicting feedback, you have to sift through that feedback and determine what is best for your manuscript. Sometimes you may need to rewrite a scene in two different ways to see what works. This is all part of the revision process.

### **Specific Areas for Critiquing**

This list is not exhaustive, but these are the types of areas that can be covered during a critique (you do not have to cover all of these areas during each critique—these are just suggestions for what may be commented upon):

- 1) Pacing: Too fast, too slow, just right? Dragging in spots?
- 2) Story arc: Adequate beginning, middle, and end, or is one part too long or too rushed?
- 3) Ending: Is the ending satisfying, or does it go "over the top," meaning that too many good things happen to make it believable?
- 4) Characters: Are they likeable? Or if they're not supposed to be likeable, are they interesting? Are the characters clichés (such as a dumb blonde, or rugged cowboy), or do they have something to make them seem unique? Is the villain too much of a mustache twirler, meaning he is just pure evil and thus not completely realistic? Does the hero have grit and wit? Does the character come across as three-dimensional, or does he lack depth? Is the character relatable or sympathetic?
- 5) Point of view and tense: Is it the right point of view for this book? If the book is told in first person, would it be better told in third person limited POV, or vice-versa? If the book is omniscient, is the writer guilty of "head jumping" within the same scene, i.e., including more than one character's third person POV in an individual scene? Is it the right tense? For example, if it's told in past tense, would the book have more immediacy if it were told in present tense?
- 6) Plot: Is the plot appropriate for the genre, i.e., if it's a suspense book, does the plot include suspenseful moments? Is the plot too confusing or complex? Do the subplots enhance the main plot, or are they a distraction? Is one of the subplots taking over the main plot, and thus affecting the pacing?
- 7) Chapter endings: Do the chapter endings make the reader want to continue, or are the chapter endings so final and certain that there is no mystery or reason for the reader to be curious about what happens next?

8) Voice: Is the reader drawn into the voice of the narrator, whether it's first person, third person, or omniscient POV? Does the voice have a unique, identifiable sound to it, or could the voice use strengthening in spots to be more distinct from other books in the genre?

9) Show don't tell: Does the writer "tell" things that should be "shown" to the reader? Are there too many explanatory passages? Is emotion summed up too many times, such as "I felt angry," rather than showing, "I clenched my fist."

10) Conflict/tension: Is there enough conflict and tension in the manuscript, or is everything coming too easily and too happily for the characters?

11) Emotion: Is there enough emotion in the manuscript, such that the reader cares about the main character and is worried about the outcome? Does the reader get enough glimpses inside the main character's thoughts and heart?

12) Action and reaction: Does enough happen in the scene or book, or is it lean on action and plot? If something happens, do the characters demonstrate proper reactions where necessary, such as speaking up or showing body language?

13) Dialogue: Is the dialogue natural and enjoyable to read? Does the dialogue include too many of the niceties of normal conversation, such as, "Hi," "How are you," "Thank you," which we would say in real life, but we can eliminate in dialogue in novels. Is the dialogue unnatural because it includes information the speakers would already know—for example, "Hi, Steve. I heard you just broke your leg in a skiing accident. Are you doing better after your surgery yesterday?" Greg asked. (Steve would know he broke his leg in an accident, so Greg wouldn't need to specify like that. He would just call Steve and say, "Heard about what happened. You okay?") This is more natural dialogue; it's clipped in the way real people speak. In narrative, the writer can add in that Steve had just broken his leg skiing, if the reader needs this information.

14) The actual writing: Clarity is the most important thing. Is the writing clear? Is it nicely crafted, with original phrasing rather than clichés? Are there awkward sentences? Are there too many adverbs when stronger, more specific verbs could be chosen? Is the writing tight, or are there many areas that can cut without losing any meaning? Does the writer use original metaphors and similes, and not an excessive quantity of these, but just the right amount? Does the writer use rich wording or language that is appropriate for the manuscript? Does the writer avoid redundancy, and have a good mix of sentence pattern variety? Does the writer include sensory details and body language where necessary (but again, not an excessive number of these)?

15) Tone: Is the tone of the manuscript correct for what it is? For example, if it's a work of literary fiction, and there's a very raunchy romantic scene included, is the scene too raunchy for the book to qualify as literary fiction? If it's a fun personal essay, does the tone stay fun or does it switch abruptly? If it's comedy, is there one section that's way too heavy?

16) Accuracy: This category applies to historical fiction and nonfiction. Are the details accurate to the time period? Are the facts true or have they been distorted? Are more details needed? Are excessive details provided?

## **Comments on Punctuation and Spelling (in Oral vs. Written Critique)**

Punctuation and spelling errors can be pointed out in writing on the actual manuscript for the writer to review in private after the critique. Although punctuation and spelling are important for writers, it is not necessarily a helpful oral critique to say, "You missed a comma here" or "you spelled this word wrong." If a writer has a pattern of punctuating or spelling incorrectly, you can point it out once and mention that it was done a few times, but orally don't point out every instance of the misspelled word or incorrect punctuation. The categories above are much more important during an oral critique.

## **The Format for Typed or Written Critiques**

Different groups may have different rules on this, but in general, if you do not want to print out the manuscript and bring the marked-up hardcopy to the meeting, you can use Word Tracking Changes (by clicking on "Review" and then "Track Changes" and highlighting areas and clicking on "New Comment" to show a comment bubble). You can make your comments and email them to the writer. You may email your critique to all the other members too, so that everyone can see what your comments were, but please hold off on emailing them until the day of the meeting (so that no one's critique is influenced by another member's critique, and each critique truly represents the individual's opinion). Either way, please be sure that your name is somewhere on the actual critique, so that if the writer has a follow-up question, she knows whose critique it was.

## **Policy on Attendance and Absence from Critique Groups**

If you join an in-person critique group, you are expected to attend and do all critiques for each meeting. You may also submit or bring manuscripts when your group is accepting submissions. It is to your benefit to critique others' manuscripts, because your own writing will improve as you learn to think more critically about writing. Also, it is to your benefit to submit manuscripts and receive critiques, because it is often difficult to catch your own errors, and the feedback will help you get to the next level.

If you cannot attend a meeting, please let your group coordinator(s) know in advance whenever possible. Please do not miss a meeting without notifying a coordinator or other member of the group in advance either by email or telephone. If you are going to be absent, whenever possible, as a courtesy to the other members, you should provide critiques via email, snail mail, or in person at the next meeting for the manuscripts that were submitted for the meeting you missed. We sometimes have wait lists for critique groups, so if you have a pattern of unaccounted absences, the group coordinator may, at her discretion, ask you to bow out so that someone from the wait list may join in.

## **Submitting Manuscripts**

Please follow the submission rules of your group. In general, submissions are either sent a week in advance (or an agreed-upon time with your group), they are within the page limits specified by your group, and they are double-spaced or 1 1/2 spaced in Times New Roman or Cambria, 12 point font, in Word. Margins should be standard, approximately 1 inch all around. Your name, title, and genre (if not obvious) should appear on the first page. Please number your pages either with a header or standard page numbering.