WHAM's Authors Circle

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Authors often work alone. Joining a critique group offers an opportunity to network with others who share your passion. Writers share their work with members of the group who then comment on what they hear/read. Learning from their honest feedback will help improve the writing of both the one being critiqued and the one giving the critique. In addition, a critique group can include presentations on tools that support writing. Perhaps the most important aspect of a critique group is its ability to create friendships among its members.

WHAM's Authors Circle is a writers' critique group with a mission to help its members improve their craft while forming a network of supportive, local authors. Writers of all levels are invited into the Circle.

GUIDELINES FOR THE CIRCLE

1. **Be kind and supportive.**

Members of the Authors Circle should always critique with kindness meant to support fellow members and their work. There's no room for being negative or dismissive. Listen quietly to others and be respectful. Remember we are focusing on the writing and not the writer.

Note: Since the group is designed to help members improve their writing, the work presented in meetings should be unpublished. So, bring your works-in-progress, comments, and questions.

2. **Follow time limits.**

The amount of time allotted to a writer will depend on the number of people attending that month's Authors Circle. Writers should expect about 10 minutes to read 2-3 pages

of their work and then hear critiques. The Timekeeper will cut off the discussion if it exceeds time limits.

3. **Stay on topic (the writing).**

Many people in critique groups get off topic. Remember we are here to share our work and give and get critiques of our writing. Please stick to the writing. If someone writes a memoir about going to Paris, don't start talking about your own trip to Paris. If you are writing a mystery novel, don't go into details of a similar murder case IRL.

4. **Beware of your content and its possible impact on others.**

Although your writing may have political and inspirational themes, please do not use the group to proselytize your beliefs. Do not share writing that may be deemed pornographic or contain gratuitous violence. If you believe what you've written may trigger unwanted emotions in group members, please issue a "trigger warning" and ask the group if it is acceptable to share that sensitive content.

5. **Use the "sandwich method."**

Critiques should be gentle and constructive. A method to achieve this goal is called the "sandwich method." That technique involves beginning your critique with a positive comment, followed by constructive criticism, and ending with another positive comment. Consider the following examples from a Google AI Overview.

Step One: the positive opening

- Instead of: "This is pretty good."
- Try: "The opening paragraph grabs the reader's attention with its intriguing hook. The setting description immediately pulls the reader in."

Step Two: the constructive criticism

- Critique the work, not the writer: Use statements that describe the reader's experience.
    - Instead of: "You didn't develop this character enough".
    - Try: "It was difficult to connect with this character. Adding a scene showing their backstory might help to understand their motivations better".
- Focus on the big picture: Prioritize developmental concerns like plot, pacing, or characterization over minor grammar or spelling errors.
- Avoid rewriting: Suggest areas for improvement but allow the writer to find their own solutions.

- Ask guiding questions: Use questions to encourage the writer to think critically about their own work.
    - Instead of: "Cut this scene."
    - Try: "Is this scene necessary to move the plot forward, or does it slow the story down?".

Step Three: the positive closing

- Instead of: "Keep up the good work."
- Try: "The vivid description of the forest is truly a strength. It's exciting to see how that talent develops as you revise."

Step Four: other matters to consider

- Don't force it: If a genuine positive comment cannot be found, the method will appear insincere.
- Go beyond the sandwich: While the sandwich method is great for delivery, it should be paired with specific, thoughtful, and targeted feedback for the best results.
- If it's more helpful, use a checklist such as the one provided with this handout.

6. Do's and Don't

Consider the following guidelines from the International Writers Collective that present great advice for members of the Authors Circle.

- Top 5 do's and don'ts for receiving a critique

1. Do resist the urge to defend your work; try to remain silent and hear what's being said.
2. Don't dismiss people who misunderstand your piece; what they're saying still gives you valuable info about where you need to do some work.
3. Do be open and truly consider the feedback you're getting, while remembering that ultimately it needs to be in the service of *your work.*
4. Don't take a critique as a judgment of you or your abilities as a writer and do be aware that you're going to be more sensitive when it comes to personal material.
5. Do let your fellow writers know where you're struggling and particular questions you'd like them to address in their critique.

- Top 5 do's and don'ts for giving a critique

1. Do tell the writer what's working; be as specific as possible (rather than generally praising their piece)—this makes them feel good *and* gives them useful feedback.
2. Don't shy away from telling the writer what's not working—this type of feedback is essential! Keep in mind the aims of the critique: to help them master the technique (at least in our workshops), improve their draft and grow as a writer.
3. Don't try to tell the writer how to "fix it"—you just need to point out the problem areas; let the writer come up with the solutions.
4. Do take a minute to mentally edit your feedback—one or two strong, clear points are more valuable than a long, rambling list.
5. Do try to put yourself in the shoes of person you're critiquing; critique as you would like to be critiqued.

CHECKLIST (You don't need to follow this checklist. It's provided to give you some ideas for your critiquing.)

1. What is the genre of the work; e.g., poetry, fiction, memoir?
2. Who is the audience for this writing; e.g., readers of adult fiction or poetry, family members, children ages 3-6, 7-9, 10-13, young adults?
3. What was your impression of the work?
4. What worked well?
5. What brought you out of the writing?
6. What was the greatest strength of the piece?

NOTES (It's suggested you bring paper and pen to meetings so you can take notes when others are sharing their work and critiquing yours.)