

Critique Guidelines

RMFW critique groups strongly hold to the belief that all participants will respect each other's creative work. A critique group can help writers of any level of experience. However, some basic guidelines are provided in order to preserve respect for the writer's work and psyche.

Critique Format

The format for each critique group is determined by the critique group leader and varies group to group. The following guidelines for the Monday open critique session are provided as a sample.

Manuscripts presented for critique must be novel-length, commercial fiction and must be in the standard format accepted by agents and editors. Submissions should be double spaced, limited to 24-27 lines per page to give an average of 250 words per page, and printed in a #12 typewriter style font (like this Times New Roman font).

Critiques are limited to 10 pages. If you feel your scene must be read as a whole, contact the Critique Chair for special arrangements. Bring 10 paper-clipped copies. Each manuscript is handed out for written comments. It is not necessary to read at each session. (Closed groups may make their own rules as to length of submissions.)

Four of five manuscripts will be read, silently or aloud, at each session. Those who read at previous meetings are among the last to read at the next meeting. Call the Critique Chair if you plan to read.

Non-members aren't eligible to read.

Readers are encouraged to bring sections with which they are having difficulty. The first time a manuscript is presented, please bring the first 10 pages. For future readings, prepare a one page overview to benefit the person who is reading your story for the first time.

Submitting Your Work

It's a good idea to attend a critique group a few times before you bring your own work. This will give you a sense of how the group works and the feedback exchanged before you put your own work out there.

When you are ready to submit, follow the guidelines provided by your group leader. Guidelines vary from group to group, driven by the size of the group, genre, and the number of people who want to read. Some groups assign reading spots in advance, others accept all work and adjust the time spent critiquing according to the number of pieces to be reviewed.

Some groups read in advance, others may read on the spot, silently or aloud. Generally, about four people can read during one critique session.

Writers should bring enough copies for each attendee to have one copy (though two people can share without too much trouble if reading takes place during the session.)

The usual format is Courier 12-point font, double-spaced, with about 25-27 lines per page. This standard assures that every 10-page submission has approximately the same amount of text, so everyone submits an equal amount for review. Review the RMFW Contest Rules for more information about manuscript format. Standards for on-line critique groups will vary since submissions are often cut-and-pasted into email files. Some groups agree not to worry about page count or manuscript formats.

When you submit your work, tell the readers where you are in the story (page number or a reference like "halfway through") and provide some background if they need it to understand the work. If you have a specific question or want the group to focus on a certain area (such as dialogue, characters, choreography) ask the question as readers begin to read.

Be sensitive to the possibility that the content or language of your creative work may offend some readers. If you think your work may be considered offensive, issue a warning so that readers may excuse themselves if they wish. If you find someone else's work offensive, you may decline to read and critique it.

Offering Critique

Each participant has an opportunity to comment briefly on the work. Good readers are able to be honest without being brutal. If you are new to critique, watch the more experienced people to see how this is done. Some ideas for offering critique:

- Begin with positive comments. Appreciate the work by reflecting back what you liked, what resonated with you, what you remember (word choices, images, action, dialogue etc).
- Think about viewpoint, structure, characters, word choice, and be specific about the effect these things had on you as a reader.
- Note any confusion or problems you encountered when reading. If possible make a specific suggestion for improvement.

- Tell the writer how the piece made you curious—what questions you have, what interests you, what you want to know going forward. At critique, we don't get into having the author "explain" the work, so you don't actually expect these to be answered. If you want to further discuss the work with the author, do it outside of the group.
- Be sure to separate the character or narrator in the work from the author. Never refer to the character as "you" or assume that the story is about the author.
- Comment on the work itself, not on what you think it means, or should mean, or how you feel about the work or its subject. It is fine to say, "I don't usually read this kind of book" and refrain from comment if you have nothing helpful to offer.
- If you have a suggestion for reading that would help the writer (another novel, a book on craft) mention it or note it on the manuscript.
- Write your comments on grammar, spelling, and word choice on the manuscript. Don't take time to point them out verbally.
- Try not to repeat points that others have made. If you agree or disagree with a comment, note it on the MS so the writer will know.
- End with something affirming and positive. We need to acknowledge the fact that the writer was brave enough to put his/her work on the line.

Receiving Critique

When you are the person receiving critique:

- Just listen or take notes. Don't argue, explain or defend. Having a reader react immediately to your work and say what worked and what didn't is very valuable. If you explain too much, you dilute that reaction.
- Don't be intimidated by the writing ability of your fellow group members, or by their suggestions for improvement. Even the best writers have room to grow. Honest feedback may be difficult to hear but it's the best way to improve your work.
- Have fun, and don't take everyone's critique as gospel. You are the one who decides what works for you and your writing. Keep a firm hold on your style and voice and remember that every comment doesn't necessarily improve your work.
- Notify the critique leader if someone is being unfair in written comments.
- Realize that it's possible you won't "click" with a critique group--personalities, stories, writing styles, etc affect the ability for people to interact well and learn from one another. If this happens, try

a different group, or pair off with one or two members in your group and form a new group.

Critique Etiquette

Receiving criticism is never easy. Try to remember you are among friends who are trying to offer helpful suggestions. What is said is a comment on your work, not on you personally.

Each participant reads the submission then comments. If an area stands out, either praise it or give suggestions for improvement. In the interest in time, do not repeat comments already made unless you offer a different perspective. Comments concerning punctuation, grammar and typos can be made on the manuscript and do not need to be mentioned aloud. It is all right to say, "I have nothing to offer." Respect for other writers and their specific genre is an integral part of RMFW.

While your manuscript is being critiqued, you should refrain from comment or explanation except when specifically asked for clarification. No one may interrupt another person's critique. Time will be allowed at the end for open discussion.

6 Attendance at RMFW Critique Groups

You must be a paid member of RMFW to read at an official RMFW critique group (i.e. one that is listed in our newsletter and follows our guidelines). In certain groups, you may be asked to submit work before being allowed to join the group.

If a member exhibits disruptive, rude, or dangerous behavior, the critique leader has the authority to ask that member to leave the critique group. The leader should notify the critique chair when such action is taken so other critique leaders and RMFW board members can be made aware of the situation.