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How to start a writers group that works

A good critique group needs commitment,
planning and focus to succeed

BY D.M. ROSNER

OFTEN, WRITERS ARE their own worst critics. As a member of a writers group for more than 10 years, I've found that participation in a good critique group not only helps me keep perspective and polish my writing, but also brings me inspiration during those inevitable dry spells. Experience has also taught me, however, that there are a number of pitfalls any new writers group should avoid. The following suggestions will help you get off to a good start.



Forming your group

All you really need to start your writers group are other writers and a place to meet with them. Here are some ideas:

- ▶ Ask any writers you know if they would like to form a group. If you don't know any other writers, try visiting a local college campus (evening writing classes draw writers of all ages and abilities) or writers conferences. You'll find listings in most writers magazines.
- ▶ Try to keep the group small. Having more than six or eight members limits the ability of the group to critique one another's work. If you have a larger group, you may need to limit critiques to a few members' works per meeting.
- ▶ At the initial meeting, decide how often, when, where and how long you

will meet. For instance, our group meets at 7 p.m. every other Monday, at members' homes or at coffee bars, for approximately two hours.

- ▶ Decide what type of writing you want to be the focus of your group. My group concentrates on fiction; others stick to romance or poetry. Some cover a wide range of genres.
- ▶ Discuss how much material each author can submit for critique at each meeting. Ten pages per person per meeting is generally a good place to start.
- ▶ Set up a system for critiques. Do members prefer to read the work at home beforehand and bring their comments to the meeting, or to have authors read their work aloud at the meeting and invite comments? Reading aloud helps catch errors and sound out dialogue.
- ▶ Set your ground rules, including

how to choose a leader or mediator. Clearly establish the group's expectations of new members either through bylaws or informally.

- ▶ Decide if members should report what they have accomplished since the previous meeting, and, if so, select someone to keep a record of this information.

A word about critiques

The purpose of a critique is to provide honest comments on members' work. If your members are new to the art of constructive criticism, you may want to create guidelines for critiquing. These could be helpful in reminding participants to share positive opinions, point out areas that need work and provide reasons for each criticism.

Here are some tips for critiquing:

- ▶ Don't forget that many writers—new writers in particular—have frag-

A writer's Bill of Rights

The right of the author to accept, reject or incorporate the fair and respectful opinions of others regarding his or her manuscript shall not be violated.

—WritersX4, an Oregon writers group (Richard Boich, Betty Henshaw, Marlene King, Lucia Smith)

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ile egos. You can, however, be too nice. If something about a member's piece isn't working for you, it's important to share that with the writer in a direct but tactful way.

- ▶ Give a balanced critique, taking care to point out the parts that work, as well as those that don't.
- ▶ Explain the reasons for your comments or suggestions.
- ▶ Don't argue with another member's opinion of your work. If you don't agree with the changes suggested, just don't use them. If you're not sure why the suggestion was made, politely ask the person giving the critique to clarify the comment.

Common pitfalls

Occasionally, we've asked a member to leave the group. We've learned from our mistakes over the years and have established bylaws and a careful screening process for new members. The following guidelines will help prevent problems:

- ▶ Be clear about exactly what you expect from your members. Some-

thing as simple as expecting them to come to every meeting can cause misunderstanding and resentment.

- ▶ Be sure all your members share the same level of dedication. Your group can be serious or informal, but it's best not to try to mix the two.
- ▶ Every member should be expected to put an equal level of effort into critiquing one another's work.
- ▶ If you have a problem with a member's level of participation or method of critiquing, the leader or mediator should talk to him or her as diplomatically as possible about the problem. This may not always work and the member may choose to drop out of the group. But sometimes, what seems to be a major problem is nothing more than a

minor misunderstanding blown out of proportion.

Keeping your group alive

My writers group recently celebrated its 10th anniversary. We've stayed together so long because, luckily, our members are serious writers who are dedicated to one another. Some members have come and gone. Many left only because they've moved out of state, and we all still keep in touch.

If you want your group to last, it's important to find other writers who share your level of dedication. Whenever new members join, explain your group's guidelines to them. Don't feel that your group has to be limited to its scheduled meetings. Our group holds a variety of special events, such as:

- ▶ Novel Day, during which we meet for a full day of work on our individual projects. Writing in a room full of other working writers is very inspiring. (We hold three or more such days each year.)
- ▶ An annual Halloween party, during which we read a story we've written for the occasion (and come dressed as one of our characters).
- ▶ An annual retreat, which is held over a long weekend, usually at a bed and breakfast.

Writers groups can be helpful, inspiring and a lot of fun. For more ideas, visit my group's Web site at www.6ftferrets.com.

D.M. Rosner has published essays, articles and short stories, and has worked as a radio journalist.

The 10 commandments of a writers group

1. We commit to the ground rules of the group.
2. We respect the talent, potential and work-product of fellow writers.
3. We evaluate the manuscript, not the person, with sensitivity and integrity.
4. We pledge a thorough reading and a line-by-line edit.
5. We support our fellow writers' efforts to reach their goals.
6. We labor to become professional writers.
7. We critique with an attitude of giving; receiving is the natural by-product.
8. We accept feedback in the spirit of learning and improving our craft.
9. We appreciate the courage it takes to share written work.
10. We never show up without our sense of humor.

—WritersX4

Register your group

Coming soon to writermag.com: A searchable directory of writing clubs in the United States and Canada. Watch for more details on the Web site and in *The Writer*.

10 ways to keep your writers group going

BY KATHY BRICCETTI

ARE YOU FORMING a writers group? Or does your existing group need rejuvenating? During any stage of the life of a writers group, pay attention to these 10 things to stay on track and remain productive.

1 Focus on the group's purpose. You are coming together to critique writing—not to socialize, discuss the latest bestsellers or conduct group therapy. Keep chitchat to a minimum and personal check-ins and announcements brief. Allow a short time for sharing market and writing tips, or relegate these to e-mails between meetings. Stay focused by using reminders or sticking to a routine.

2 Agree on a structure. Do you want to write together or just critique each other's work? Will you hire a facilitator or go leaderless? Decide whether to read manuscripts during the meeting or distribute them beforehand. Agree on a word or page limit. If writers need a nudge, assign dates for members to present work. Meet at the same time and day at least twice a month (every other week is ideal). Schedule meetings and locations several months in advance.

3 Set attendance expectations. Members should commit to attend all meetings except in the case of illness, emergencies and vacations. This is particularly important at the beginning of a group's life, when

members are building rapport and trust. But even established groups can become sluggish if members don't attend regularly.

4 Find the right size. Depending on how often members want to present work and how often the group meets, most groups find six to eight members to be ideal. When the number dwindles, and everyone agrees it's time, add members one at a time on a trial basis to ensure a mutual fit.

5 Decide on a format. For example, in the first round of feedback, tell the writer what works in the piece. Present critiques in turn and keep them brief, with no cross-talk during the initial go-round. Jot nitpicks on the page, and use group time to discuss reactions to the piece as a whole. Highlight or underline particularly good passages, and read these aloud to the writer. Then move on to what can be improved, and finally, allow time for the writer to ask clarifying questions.

6 Give constructive criticism. Critiques need to balance praise and constructive criticism. Be specific about what works and what doesn't. Don't spend time disagreeing with other critiques. Keep comments friendly, businesslike and impersonal. Critique the writing, not the writer.

7 Don't get defensive. Many groups have a no-talk rule for writers when their work is on the

table. Writers should not defend their intentions or justify their use of technique, but rather listen to how their written words have been received. Save questions for the end of the session. It's a good idea to write down all feedback, even if it sounds dead wrong. It may make perfect sense later.

8 Check in periodically. Take a half hour every six months to discuss what's going well and what would improve your group. Decide how to address members' concerns.

9 Be open-minded. Writers' varying abilities and experience should not be excessively disparate within a group (e.g., beginning writers and published authors), but some variety is healthy and mutually beneficial. Whatever the makeup of the group, members need to respect, at minimum, the goals of other writers.

10 Go on writing retreats. Organize an annual retreat to refuel and have fun together. Find a scenic spot to hold a writing marathon, fill a hat with prompts and write for the day, taking breaks to eat and stretch. Attend nearby writing conferences and workshops together. Finally, meet for dinner once or twice a year to celebrate your group's continued success.

Kathy Briccetti's work has appeared in national publications and on public radio. She is at work on a memoir.