

SJVW CRITIQUE GROUPS: SOME BASICS

Here are some helpful guidelines for the formation of critique groups and their operation.

Leader. Each critique group requires a leader who basically sets up meetings, sends out reminders with time and location, and runs the critique session. Once your session is setup, and if everyone is comfortable, leadership can rotate to take the burden off of one person.

Size. Critique groups should be small. A recommended *maximum* size is eight people. Keep in mind that you will be sharing work and critiquing it. Too many in a group and one of two things may happen. The critique sessions will run too long, or submissions will be very short along with the time allotted for critique.

Participants. Critique group participants should be members of SJVW. A person may be invited to join the critique group for a trial session to see what it's like and then encouraged to join SJVW and experience all the benefits of membership including the critique group.

Organization. The organization of each session is normally determined by the group leader with input from participants. Here are some considerations.

- Do you want to verify ahead of time who is submitting for critique? This is useful for determining how much time to allot to each critique.
- Do you want to set a maximum word count? Some groups set a standard of 2,500 words maximum for a critique, with wiggle room if need be. Each group should see what works best with the number of participants in a given session.
- Do you want participants to read ahead of time or do a cold read while listening to a writer read aloud at the session? The latter takes up critique time, so many groups use a system by which pieces are read prior to the session (i.e., via Google docs or email exchange).
- Will you meet in person or via Zoom (or Google meets)? What method works best considering the number of people, the day and time, and the geographic distribution of participants?
- How often would you like to meet? The answer depends on the schedules of the participants. A typical scenario is once every two weeks or something like the second and fourth Tuesday (or Wednesday, for example) of each month. Once a month works for many groups. If sessions are spaced out more than once a month, participants may lose interest or not remember from session to session what people have written or what was critiqued if someone is submitting pieces of a longer work, for example.

Note that the organization for each session, including length of submissions and time limits for critiques, should be followed closely.

Content. Critiquing is an individual event. Each reader of a piece may see different things, which is one of the benefits for a writer. Here are some rules of thumb if you have not been involved in a critique group before.

- Focus as much on content as possible, leaving copyediting matters for when the work is closer to a final form. Content includes such things as:
 - Pacing
 - Tension, conflict
 - Plot (e.g., any holes?)
 - Character development and characterization (e.g., plausibility of character statements or actions)
 - Naturalness of dialogue and tag lines/actions
 - Description (e.g., can the reader visualize and/or feel what's happening? Is there enough sensory detail?)
 - Word choice
 - Classic rule of “show, don't tell”

This list is suggestive and not all-inclusive. As critique groups begin to work together, they will sort out the content of their sessions as well as the needs and expectations of the participants.

- Be honest.
- Be courteous and professional.
- Be critical, but also offer positive comments about anything that worked well or stood out.
- Ask the writer if your critique was helpful or if s/he might like you to focus on something in particular in the future.
- Keep in mind that nothing in progress is perfect.
- Have a thick skin. Fellow writers as critics are there to help, but they will be honest. The point of critiquing is to receive constructive ideas. In the end, the work is yours, so you are free to use all suggestions and comments as you see fit for your work.
- Avoid using the critique session to rewrite on the spot. Fellow writers are there to point things out. The critique session should not turn into a tutorial and rewrite session. This can cause the session to drag on. Ideally, participants listen to the critique, take notes, and then later work on revisions given the feedback received (if deemed necessary).

The SJVW branch hopes members will avail themselves of the opportunity to share and work together. If you are interested in forming or joining a critique group, please fill out our [Critique Group Questionnaire](#) so that we might best work at linking you with a group.

Happy writing!