

Guidelines for Critique Workshops

Adapted from the 1996 VCWC Handout

For those of you who are new to critiquing, here are a few rules of thumb, both for participating in and for running an effective group.

- Allot an equal amount of time for each reader and the critique of that reader. If you have four hours and six readers, for example, each reader gets 40 minutes. Note that this does not allow for any time to chat between readers. Since chatting is bound to happen, you'll need to work that into each reader's time.
- Generally, it's better use of everyone's time if you, the writer, have worked beyond the first draft. When it's your turn to read, keep your verbal introduction to a minimum. If the piece needs a big preamble, it needs work. Tell your group specifics such as fiction or non-fiction, length, and intended age group. If you're reading past the first chapter from a novel or other longer work, use your introduction to remind your group where you left off last time.
- Once you have read your piece, simply listen to your group's comments. Don't defend your work or explain it unless someone asks a direct question. Make notes of what people are saying; you won't remember it all when your adrenaline level settles down.
- After everyone has spoken, feel free to ask questions if you need clarification, but please try not to cut into the next reader's time.
- When it's your turn to listen and critique, keep your comments concise and to the point. It helps to make notes. Explain both what you like and what bothers you, because there is value to the writer in hearing both. Avoid commenting on a point already made, except to add your opinion to the first.
- Here are a few things to consider: Is the work focused? Where does the work carry your interest? Where does it lag? Is the tone consistent throughout? Is there a clear beginning, middle and end? Is the sentence structure varied? Are the verbs strong? Are there clichés?
- For non-Fiction: Does the work have a fresh slant, a good intro (or hook) and clarity of purpose? Is it well organized with specifics followed by examples or details? Are transitions in place and effective?
- For fiction: Look for conflict or narrative tension. Are the setting, time and place clear? Well laid out? Do the characters have depth, individuality, reality, motivation? Is the dialogue distinctive to each character and is it true to life? Is the point of view consistent? Does the piece engage the five senses? Are the metaphors accurate and unmixed? Do you hear any purple prose?
- Focus your commentary and personal reaction or opinion on those things that seem most important to you. And remember, honesty and humor work wonders.

Next time, we'll look at guidelines from other organizations. Questions about workshops? Call Greg Elliot (818)991-0783, or e-mail him at MrkDurgent@aol.com.