

## **General Guidelines for the Monday Night Critique Group at BAM**

First, and foremost, the critique group's goal is to help authors write better. Period.

Meetings start at 7 pm at Books-a-Million in the Spotsylvania Towne Center (Spotsylvania Mall for the oldsters like me). Please be on time. If you're late, you'll have to wait until everyone else has had their work critiqued before your work can be looked at.

Bring enough copies so everyone can evaluate your writing while you are reading it. I know this can be difficult to judge at times, but usually, no more than 10 copies are needed.

You can bring in double-sided copies to save on paper.

Copies should be a 12pt font (for old eyes), double-spaced (to allow for line-in line-out comments), and no more than five pages. You can bring a slightly longer piece, such that if we have enough time, we might be able to evaluate it. But don't expect this to happen at every meeting. Further, if we get a big crowd, we might need to scale back to less than five pages to ensure everyone gets some feedback.

Also, please put page numbers on your copy, it makes giving feedback a lot easier.

It is not a problem to have someone else read your content, just don't make that an expectation. No one is obligated to read it aloud for you. However, someone MAY do it as a favor to you.

There is no "leader" – only a facilitator, and that can be whoever is willing to volunteer to do it. The basic job of a facilitator is to keep the critique process going and to be as fair and impartial as possible if a decision/judgment needs to be made.

The accepted process is that the author (or their designee) reads their work aloud, while other critique members are looking at copies of it. Feedback starts from the person next to author and goes around the circle until it comes back to the author. No dialog is to be expected between the author and individual critique members, unless it is in the form of simple "yes" or "no" answers. After everyone has had a say about the piece, the writer can respond, briefly. Extended dialog drags out the critique session and runs the risk that other authors will not get their writing evaluated.

That said, to help critique members properly evaluate your piece, you may consider providing a context for your piece. For example, the genre, relative time period, setting (day, night, location, season), etc. For people who consistently attend, this is not really an issue, but since people can drop in at any time, this will give them a context that to better evaluate your writing.

### **What you should expect or not...**

If you don't want public comment on a piece of work, do not bring it to critique group.

If a critique member is uncomfortable with the material, or cannot offer feedback, you can always opt out of giving any.

Likewise, if you expect feedback on your work, you ought to provide feedback on other people's writings. Opting out is fine until you get a sense of what is expected, but doing so consistently is not very respectful of those who are taking the time to give you constructive feedback.

Don't expect only praise, but also don't expect to be insulted or degraded. Leave your ego at the door. Rude and disparaging remarks are not acceptable. The goal is to critique the writing, not the writer.

Do not argue about or defend your work. The goal is to suggest ways to make the piece work better. If you don't agree with someone's feedback, you aren't obligated to accept it.

Don't bring something you haven't proofread and is riddled with mistakes. Nobody is perfect, and no piece of writing is perfect either, but don't expect the critique group to proofread it for you.

Differing opinions are to be respected. You can always agree to disagree. Nothing wrong with that. Say specifically what does work, if it doesn't work, then why. Try to comment on both the positives and the negatives. The goal is to improve the work and help members learn to increase their skills.

Feedback should be in constructive terms. Instead of "I don't like this," try "You might consider this ...". Documenting where you're confused, or where you have questions is perfectly

acceptable. Writers often have issues where they understand the intent or consequence of an event, but the reader might not.

Make sure to indicate strengths and where the piece works well, that helps the writer just as much as where there are problems.

### **Some guidelines for giving useful feedback**

Please put your initials on the copy of the writing that has your written feedback. Feedback is not meant to be anonymous. Further, if the writer wants to ask about a comment, knowing who to talk to is helpful. Sometimes the issue comes down to something as mundane as penmanship. (“I can’t read what you wrote.”)

If you’re new to the critique process and are unsure what to comment upon, here is a small list of measures you might use to assess quality:

Jot down thoughts or impressions as you review the material. This could be valuable to the writer.

Any points of confusion, rephrasing if needed to clarify a section

More description if required to visualize the scene, or perhaps less description

More human interaction if needed

Tension may be sagging or too prolonged (many misdiagnosed story problems are sagging tension problems)

More or less action may be required

Pacing Problems: The story may drag or race too quickly at particular points

You may feel bored overall, or at certain points

Character problems: You may not care about a character or their situation. You may not feel a character’s personality; motivation may be lacking for their actions; characters may not have goal/mission/purpose in the story, they may not be learning or changing.

Characters may not be distinguishable from each other

Things may seem implausible, e.g., this would not likely happen in the real world, or a character, as developed, would not likely do such a thing.

Plotting problems: Events of the story may not flow logically, they may not be compelling enough.

Say what emotions you feel as you read. The author may or may not have intended to evoke those emotions.

The author may 'describe' the emotions of the character but you, as the reader, can't feel them.

Dialog problems: Stilted, too obvious, or an extended information dump, not fresh or unique enough, all characters sound the same, distracting use of dialect, slang, or cursing.

The command of the language/skill or quality of the writing or phrasing etc. is not optimal.

Ineffective word choices or repeated words. Some of us (such as myself) repeat the same word too many times, where that is a problem, please, please, point it out.

Spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors.

Unintended changes or inconsistencies in Point of View or past/present tense. Point of view is an aspect that causes a fair amount of problems for feedback. In large part because not everyone believes POV can shift in a scene or chapter. Instead of pursuing that argument, note where POVs shift, or are inconsistent, but don't waste time arguing for obedience to your POV rules. You might want to suggest different POV for a scene/chapter.

Also, be sure mention things that you love about the piece or that seem to work very well. Particularly, portions that are phrased beautifully

Note characters you love to love, or love to hate. This helps the writer gauge whether they are conveying the correct impression.

Sections that held your attention or had you spellbound