

Title: **Don't Suffer Alone: Using a Critique Group to Enhance Your Writing Life**

By: Amber J. Keyser

Course Description

Much of a writer's life is spent hunched over a keyboard alone. But writing doesn't have to be a completely solitary endeavor. A good critique group can feed your creativity, hone your skills, keep you focused, and avert despair. In this workshop, we'll discuss the characteristics of a productive writing group and how to find one. Through hands-on activities, we'll explore how to give and receive constructive criticism. Finally, we'll focus on how critique and revision will help you produce your best possible work and have fun doing it. Several members of Amber Keyser's critique group, Viva Scriva, will be on hand to share the inner working of this productive bunch of writers.

BENEFITS OF BEING IN A CRITIQUE GROUP:

Improve craft (getting critique, giving critique, exercises)

Share contacts (editors, agents, conference organizers, librarians, book sellers)

Support/Encouragement (Art & Fear: Key is not-quitting)

Resources (articles, books, research materials, wrkshp activities like branding/ac memo, subscriptions)

Attend conferences/retreats together

DIY retreats

Share business tips (website design, business cards, brochures, etc)

Be accountable (goal setting, deadlines for writing)

Legitimize/value your work

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL GROUPS:

Similar level of dedication to craft (this is different from published vs. unpublished)

Knowledge of conventions of the genre (this doesn't mean you have to write the same genres)

Mutually agreed upon structure

Commitment to helping others do their best possible work (not a competition)

Safe & Fun Atmosphere

Respect

KEY TO IMPROVING YOUR CRAFT:

The best way to improve your own work is to learn how to give helpful, in-depth critique.

Receiving good critiques is useful too, but giving is better.

GIVING GOOD CRITIQUE:

Read Francine Prose's book *Reading Like a Writer*

Study craft – On Writing Well, Elements of Style

Study craft – plot, characterization, setting, theme

Practice on published works – get together and analyze books that work

Take time

1. 1st read – my emotional response,
2. Think about it – Why is X bugging me? What is not working? (See list of questions posed by Lori Calabreses)

3. 2nd read – write comments in margins, pointing out positives and negatives, asking questions
4. Organize an overview – a positive, things to consider, possible solutions to problems, another positive; Be specific, vague comments are not helpful

Think like a doctor: your emotional response to a piece are symptoms, diagnosis the underlying cause (characterization or plot or your own personal issues), come up with a cure/solution to try, do no harm.

Analyze the work not the author.

After reading through a manuscript, ask yourself...

1. Did you like the story? Why or why not? Does it flow? How is the pacing (too fast, too slow, just right)? Is there a beginning, a middle, and an end, and are they logical?
2. Does the beginning set up a problem or conflict? Did it catch your attention? Did you want to keep reading?
3. Are the characters' behavior consistent? Are the character's believable? Do the characters have good names?
4. Consider the audience-- is it age appropriate?
5. Can you restate the story in a single sentence?
6. Does the author show instead of tell?
7. Is it technically sound?-- point out bad punctuation, incorrect grammar, misspelled words, and formatting
8. Is the dialogue realistic? Does the dialogue help move the story along? Is there a perfect blend of dialogue with narration?
9. Is the title a good one?
10. Does the ending make sense and is it rewarding? Was the conflict or problem resolved? Does the main character undergo some sort of change?
11. Does the point of view work or would the story be better if it was told by another character?
12. Is there variation in sentence length? Too many short, too many long, or just right?
13. Excessive use of passive voice? ex: Emily was running to the store is passive voice. Should be...Emily ran to the store.
14. Is the story original and creative?
15. Does the setting work? Do you get a sense of when and where you're supposed to be?
16. Did the writer make use of all the senses?

By Lori Calabrese at <http://loricalabrese.com/2008/02/a-writers-critique-group/>

HOW TO RECEIVE

Set boundaries: your work is not you.

Ask for what you want up front: overall picture, detailed edit, I was trying to... Did I manage to...?

Listen carefully and write notes (covers up discomfort)

Ask for clarification: What if I did...? I was trying to do... How could I do it more effectively?

Say Thank you. – nothing else is necessary.

Take time to process through comments.

Take the comments seriously Remember, writing is craft – the more you do it, the more skillful you become.

My goal is to produce the best work I possibly can
Check out *The Writer's Book of Hope* by Ralph Keyes

HOW TO FIND A CRITIQUE GROUP

Events/Groups for Writers (SCBWI, Willamette Writers, Pacific NW Writers Association, Oregon Writers Colony, Wordos)

Search Online (The CBI Clubhouse, www.boost4writers.com, Yahoo! Groups, Google Groups, Craig's List)

Classes/Workshops

Bookstores

Libraries

Other Writers

Start your Own

WAYS TO STRUCTURE A CRITIQUE GROUP

Do you need a moderator? Will that role rotate?

How often will you meet?

Where will you meet?

What genres are allowed?

When should manuscripts be submitted to the group?

How will critiques be given? Time limits? Can the author speak? Written comments? Emailed comments?

Are the limits/quotas on number of manuscripts submitted?

What about resubmissions?

How will you handle new members?

READ MORE:

The care and feeding of high-functioning critique groups

Eric Withey at <http://www.writermag.com/wrt/default.aspx?c=a&id=4082>