

Tips for giving and receiving feedback, and establishing the etiquette for your meeting

Housekeeping basics

One group member will have been nominated as the **Room Host**, and this person will let you in to the session. Someone else needs to be the **Facilitator** for the session. The facilitator's job is to keep an eye on the time, move things along, remind everyone of any agreed etiquette and check that everyone has been given the opportunity to speak.

In your first meeting you'll probably want to spend some time introducing yourselves. You should then work out a rota for facilitators, or decide that one or two of you will take on the role with the agreement of all, and settle a few other housekeeping basics, as follows:

- The duration of each session – 60/90/120 minutes? I suggest you don't allow the session to run for more than two hours. If you plan to use the full two hours, do schedule a comfort break half-way through.
- Decide also on when (what dates/times) you will meet.
- Will each member read their piece aloud, in whole or in part? This can take up precious time (1000 words will take around 10 minutes), but it can also be useful in that the writer gets to practise this skill. It'll come in handy for public readings, once you are published! It also acts as a refresher for everyone, and it may help to highlight issues of interpretation and emphasis. A compromise might be to read the first page only – a taster. However, if you are writing picture books or poetry, I strongly recommend you read the whole thing out loud.
- For how long will each piece be 'up for discussion'? 15-20 minutes?
- Think too about having cameras on – no one should feel pressured to show their face, but it does help with participation and engagement.
- Will people speak in strict rotation, or will you try the free-form approach, with everyone chipping in? Be prepared to check on how this is working after a couple of sessions. Does everyone feel heard or is there a better way to help everyone to speak comfortably, as they wish?
- I strongly recommend you put up a 'clean' script for discussion on the day, rather than someone's annotated version. You can refer to your own notes, but a clean version on screen makes it easier for each speaker to say what they think, without being influenced or deterred by the comments of someone else.
- Try not to move your cursor while someone else is speaking – the software is very sensitive, and you may end up losing the page for everyone.
- The speaker alone uses their cursor to navigate the document while they are speaking – in effect, they 'hold the floor' until it is someone else's turn.

Giving constructive feedback

Look for something positive to say about another person's work, even if there are clear problems with it. I know I'd appreciate this, as the writer.

It's fine to say 'I liked it' or 'I enjoyed it' or 'I loved it', but try to pinpoint WHY, for the writer.

However, if something *isn't* working in a piece, but you're not sure why, it is perfectly okay to say so. It might be a case of saying 'I'm confused here.' 'I lost interest here.' 'I found this a bit forced.' Offer suggestions, as in 'have you tried...?' but remember it is not your job to re-write.

Part of your job, when giving feedback, is to let the writer know what you feel/understand/visualise when you read the piece. What intrigues you? Where does your attention wane? This helps the writer understand whether, or not they are succeeding in what they are trying to do.

Try commenting on the following:

- Are you given enough information to 'picture' the scene? Are similes/metaphors helpful or are they too florid/distracting?
- What do you learn from the dialogue? Does it sound natural and does it sing along, or is it slowing the pace? Can you follow who is speaking? Do the speech 'tags' feel clunky?
- What do you learn about characters? Do they interest you?
- Is the writing clear? Is there anything that could be cut?
- Do sentences have a good rhythm and flow? Are there any sections that need to speed up, or slow down?
- Is something being 'told' that might be 'shown' instead? There's nothing wrong with telling the reader 'She hated to be late', for example, and indeed it might be exactly right for the piece. But what if this was 'shown' as in 'She checked her watch again, then quickened her pace, breaking into an awkward trot.' Or similar. Showing in this way makes for a more immersive read. The reader's imagination is working with the writing to create meaning.
- What makes you want to read on, if anything? How does it make you feel?

Phrases such as 'have you considered...?' or 'it might be strengthened further by...?' can be helpful.

The question mark is wonderfully softening and accommodating – you might find it easier to frame your annotations as a question, eg: 'Did you mean this?' 'Why is he saying that?' 'I think you might have said this already?'

It may help to focus your constructive criticism on one macro aspect and one micro aspect.

Micro: individual words, punctuation, a simile, a verb choice, grammar, the opening sentence. Mention presentation issues such as typos and punctuation where necessary, but don't focus on these issues above all else.

Macro: the aspects that run through the whole piece, eg: a character and how they develop, plot, setting, structure, voice, mood, point of view, choice of tense, pace and narrative momentum.

Finally, respect the writer's vision and ownership of their work – never seek to impose your solution.

Receiving constructive feedback

My top tip may seem obvious, but please only submit writing that is 'work-in-progress' – ie it is a working draft that you wish to improve. Most of us are sensitive souls, and it is much harder to receive constructive criticism if you *don't* want to improve it! Before you start, try reminding yourself that you want to make your writing better, and the critique group's job is to offer constructive responses and suggestions to help you achieve this.

I'm also going to respectfully suggest the following:

- Don't attempt to 'explain' your work before you read. You will skew first impressions, and you need fresh eyes. If it is crucial that the reader understands something that has already happened in a previous chapter, write no more than TWO sentences in the comments box when you upload your file.
- Try not to apologise or preface your work with 'I'm sorry, this is really bad...'
- Don't interrupt others' discussion of your work. It can be tempting, if you feel someone has misunderstood a key passage, or the answer to their question lies in the preceding chapter, or the one that follows. The person making the critique is entitled to express their opinion, and if they haven't understood something, this may signify that there is a problem in the text – a passage you might want to revisit and reassess.

Of course, as a group you may feel that the writer *should* be brought into the discussion at a particular point – perhaps once everyone has had their initial say. This is something else for you to decide. The writer may also have questions they want to ask the rest of the group at the end.

Allow yourself a bit of time after the session to digest feedback; it can take a while to process its objective usefulness.

Finally, please remember that you don't have to act on any suggestions or advice. Reflect on it all, yes, but then retain only what is useful to you and discard the rest. This is your work, you know what you are trying to do, and only you can write it. It's a wonderful thing!