The Write Stuff

Boosting your writing into a higher orbit

Setting up a writing critique group

– Tacey A. Rosolowski

Professional writers know that input from readers is essential for their success. Many leverage the power of numbers by joining a critique group that provides feedback from multiple perspectives. A critique group can be equally important to researchers, who rely on writing to secure grants and place articles that grow a career. (Listen to the story of how the Department of Surgical Oncology used critique to build faculty success.) A good critique group not only provides feedback. It's a setting where members develop their writing skills so they can avoid relying on "clinical intervention by language or writing advisers at the point of crisis," according to researchers Aitchison and Lee (1). No less important, a strong group engages members with the craft of writing through a network of relationships that can serve as a support system.

Given the benefits, it's no surprise that some critique groups endure for years. When they do, it's because members know that critique is a delicate process and they have mitigated the interpersonal stresses that can break up a group. It's important for any group to start off on the right track, so this article provides an overview of how to create an effective group with good communication. This information will also be useful if you are at the point of asking someone to read your work or if you want to be a more effective reader. If you are already involved in critique, it will give you a new way to think about reader-writer communication.

Setting up your group

First, think carefully about who you invite to join. A mix of disciplines and specialties can be helpful to writers who must communicate clearly to a range of audiences. Aim for varied publishing histories, skill levels, and styles of communication. Look for good communicators who listen well and who know when to be assertive and when to let someone else take the floor.

Next, decide on a format. Do you prefer a face-to-face group or online meetings via a conferencing service such as Zoom (see Resources)? Quarterly or monthly meetings? How long should the sessions be? How many writers will share work at each meeting, and will they send work in advance or distribute or read portions aloud at the meeting? There is no right answer. The ideal format is what works for everyone and the types of writing you intend to share. Agree to a format and then try it for a few meetings before assessing and modifying. In one commonly used model (2), the writer sits silently as readers present feedback but may respond during a discussion period. In any format, you must manage time, so decide on the time allotted for each writer to present. To minimize meandering discussions, consider a rule that writers cannot critique their own work while presenting. Determine a time limit for readers' feedback and appoint a timekeeper to keep people on track.

Readers tend to be kinder with their feedback when they know they will soon be on the writer's hot seat. Nonetheless, writers inevitably feel vulnerable in a critique group. To help groups avoid these situations, consider the following question: "If an artist invited you to her studio and asked you for impressions of a painting, would you grab a brush and start 'fixing' it to please yourself?" The answer is obvious: you wouldn't, not unless you were incredibly presumptuous. Unfortunately, people often are presumptuous when giving writing critique and this can lead to interpersonal stress. Groups need to keep in mind that the aim is *not* for a reader to show the writer how to produce work that *the reader* might have written. Critique aims to help the writer find his or her own voice.

Tips for writers: Cooling down the hot seat to start the communication process

Writers often hand over a piece of work with the attitude, "I'll take whatever comes." This can yield useful feedback, but asking for what you need is even better. That means you have to know what you need, and surprisingly few writers think about this. Take time to ask, "Where am I in the writing process?" and "What type of feedback will help me move ahead right now?" Requests can range from "I'll take whatever feedback you have to give" to "Please just give me your general impressions." One goal is to help your readers focus and use their time well. A second is to build your skill. You start to analyze when you say, "I don't think my abstract flows well and my methods section seems hard to follow. Do you have suggestions for me?"

By analyzing your work technically, you will start to depersonalize it so you can receive feedback less emotionally. You grow the thick skin all writers need to survive the hot seat. These skills will serve you as you navigate throughout publishing life.

Finally, by thinking about what you need now, you learn about your writing process. At times, reams of feedback can be so daunting that a writer will lose energy and procrastinate, compromising the ability to meet deadlines. If intuition tells you this might happen, ask specifically for what can move you forward. Inevitably, readers have responses to many aspects of your work, but sometimes knowing that you can set the limits on feedback can help you relax. You may find that you are open to additional topics in the discussion period.

At this point, you might be thinking, "Peer reviewers of grant applications and articles often pay no attention to this kind of thing, so why should a critique group be different?" The answer: because critique groups run on interpersonal relationships among human beings with messy writing processes and emotional reactions. Sensitivity to this fact will ensure that your group works well and endures. Start with a higher level of sensitivity so group members build trust, instead of going in with a "fix the painting" style that may require mending broken relationships later.

Tips for readers: Building trust and gaining insight

A reader should bring all of his or her expertise to critique and, at the same time, refrain from "fixing the work." It's easy to maintain this spirit if readers offer feedback in the first person to acknowledge they are giving opinions, not "writing truth." The statement, "I found the pacing slow here because I felt this information had already been communicated on page X," signals respect between colleagues, whereas "This is repetitive with slow pacing" sounds more like a marginal note from teacher to student. In addition, statements such as, "I don't think this works," "I found this unclear," or "I don't see your point" don't offer much help, so ideally the "I" statement contains a reaction *and* a reason that points to a solution*: "*I found the section on the scientific premise unclear because I didn't see a lot of references to previous research. I wondered whether another non-expert would have the same reaction." Readers should not forget to give positive feedback and include reasons here, too, since every writer needs to know what worked—and why—in order to be able to repeat it.

Giving reasons has an additional benefit: it forces readers to attend closely to the writing craft. Many readers feel that critique is only a price they pay to have their own work read. However, readers sharpen their analytical skills when they challenge themselves to offer writers reasons such as, "This sequence of ideas didn't convince me because I didn't see a synthesis of the specifics into a conclusion." Readers can exploit this benefit in their own writing by asking themselves key questions: "How can I push myself to analyze?" "What can I learn about good strategies or missteps?" "What can I learn about my own style from reading others' work?" "What can I learn about the writing process so I can manage my own more effectively?"

Another moment of awareness may come when a group has worked on multiple drafts from one piece of writing over a long period. Readers may have previous discussions in mind when they work with a new revision so they fail to notice missing information or are less effective at identifying new problems. Readers need to acknowledge when they are no longer helpful and the time has come for the writer to seek a fresh reading from another set of eyes. The best critique groups are based in trust and good communication as well as expertise. Members know they can rely on their colleagues to prioritize their best interests and support the future of their work.

Resources: How to use Zoom for online meetings

https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362613-How-Do-I-Host-A-Video-Meeting-

https://oit.colorado.edu/tutorial/zoom-host-meeting-and-invite-participants

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2. Chiam M, Pahuja S, Parker JEK. How to Run a Writing Workshop? On the Cultivation of Scholarly Ethics in 'Global' Legal Education. Australian Feminist Law Journal 2018,44: 289-302. doi: 10.1080/13200968.2018.1504608.