



Critiquing Critique Clubs

When joining a writing group, you have to make sure you're in good company. Here's how.

by Gigi Rosenberg

I quit my last critique group when I looked around the room at our fourth meeting, just after reading a rough draft of my new piece, and realized I was the only one who had laughed at the funny parts. Our teacher looked like she had just smelled an old sock, and others stared at the floor. The comments were short on praise and long on generalized put-downs. Nobody mentioned any jewels, even small ones.

The group's comments seemed in cahoots with my inner Simon Cowell—smart, but dismissive. “It’s just an opinion,” my inner Cowell said. But that night, as I slunk back to my car, an expanding pit grew in

my stomach; I felt the words “loser writer” smeared all over me. *Why bother?* a voice echoed in my mind. *What’s wrong here? Is it me, or is it the group?* I remembered other critique groups where I had left the meetings with my fingers on fire. I couldn’t wait to get back to the writing desk. Then, I was indignant, a little angry. But it was an anger directed outward, back into the writing. How does this work? What makes one group inspiring and another demoralizing? Shouldn’t the point of a group be to keep me writing? Not as a “loser writer,” but as a “productively angry or inspired” writer?

After years in and out of critique groups, with paid and unpaid leaders

and sometimes no leader at all, this is what I’ve learned: A good reader must see the jewels in any piece of writing (her own or someone else’s), especially first drafts, and ask questions—not proclaim vague judgments—about the parts that lack focus.

My best reader has the nose of a bloodhound. She can smell the slightest whiff of something “good” just emerging. She asks hard questions. She asks dumb questions. Sometimes her questions irritate me, especially when they poke the places where I had glossed over something. What I’d left out or skimmed over was usually painful, but it also was often the scene or the detail that would catapult my story from good to great.

My good reader’s comments speak to the part of me that has been waiting years for someone to say: “Tell me more. What really happened? Let it rip.” Her queries lead me back to the writing—and, always, to a stronger draft.

Sometimes I hear the voices of readers back at my writing desk. They cheer me on; they’re both honest and patient. They give me the courage to put on my diving gear and descend into the deep, sometimes tender layers, to reveal the secrets, the longing and the conflict that lie at the core of any good story.

When the tables turn and I’m critiquing another writer’s work, especially a first draft, I ask myself: Where do I sense the most energy? If something stops me in my tracks, I note where I feel most engaged. I aim to give the writer my subjective experience of being in the world he created on the page. Where is this world unnecessarily blurry or bewildering? Where do I feel this world fully alive? When I’m bored, I foster my curious self and ask questions, assuming my boredom is where the writer may have been hiding.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Is your critique group working for you? Take this quiz to see if you should hit the road.

- 1. Are you writing more?
- 2. Are your fingers “on fire” after you meet?
- 3. Can you take any irritability or anger and let it propel you back to writing?
- 4. Do you feel the focus of the group is on the work, or is time wasted on non-writing topics?
- 5. Are your colleagues as serious about their writing as you are?
- 6. Do you think your readers’ notes lead you to better writing?
- 7. Does the group support your ambitions as a writer?
- 8. Does your group “get” you? In other words, do they laugh at the funny parts?

If you answered “yes” to six out of eight questions, then you’re probably in a good group that’s helping more than hindering. If not, politely excuse yourself. Then find some readers—one or two will suffice—who support the writer you aspire to be.

Talking to others about their work can teach you the valuable skill of being able to talk to yourself about your own material. In the end, it helps me balance my inevitable inner Cowell with my inner Natalie Goldberg. And when you have the right group—a productive one where the teacher never looks like she just

smelled a dirty sock—it’ll show in the most important place of all, the reason everyone’s there to begin with: the writing.

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[QUOTE]

➔ “Know your literary tradition, savor it, steal from it, but when you sit down to write, forget about worshipping greatness and fetishizing masterpieces.”

Allegra Goodman in “Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work,” The New York Times, March 12, 2001.

[EXERCISE YOUR PEN]

The Coma

Write from the point of view of a person in a coma. This is a permanent condition. The patient will probably never come out of the coma, but still haltingly comprehends the outer world. The voices of loved ones are familiar, even intimately familiar, but the comatose character cannot attach names to the voices. The patient has lost this capacity. 500 words.

This is an exercise about death-in-life. The person who is telling us this story is technically alive and is obviously narrating the tale for us—to us—but people in the room with him do not really know if the comatose person is alive or dead. This is also simply an exercise in sensory deprivation, like Plato’s cave—shadows thrown against the wall of a character’s consciousness. The people in this piece will be barely human—they’ll be words, perhaps an odor, maybe a dim memory evoked.

Excerpted from The 4 A.M.

Breakthrough: Unconventional Writing Exercises That Transform Your Fiction by Brian Kiteley.

[CONVERSATION]

➔ Gigi Rosenberg describes the ups and downs of writing groups, and the ways you can critique material so everyone leaves wanting to write more. [What makes a great critique group, and what tips do you have for writers looking to start one?](#)

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