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Writer's Digest Magazine**Writer's Digest Bookstore****Writer's Digest Book Club****Writer's Digest School****2nd Draft****Writer's Online Workshops****WritersMarket.com****Find the Right ONLINE CRITIQUE GROUP For You!****Improve your writing and expand your network of writing friends by joining a critique group you can attend from the comfort of your home.**

by Kate Reynolds

Every writer needs honest, constructive feedback. With increasing frequency, writers turn to online critique groups for that support. These virtual fraternities come in all flavors and sizes, from those specializing in science fiction, horror or children's books, to communities of general interest. There are groups for beginners; others cater to more advanced crowds. These choices can bewilder. Worse, a poor choice can undermine your confidence, clutter your mailbox and expose you to the risk of plagiarism. It's wise to research several groups before sharing work with people you'll probably never meet.

The pros

An online crit group may be your only choice if you're tight for time or live in a remote area. Fortunately, the Internet delivers incisive feedback when you want it, without parking hassles or frantic last-minute searches for a babysitter.

In an online crit group, you'll read and help shape other works in progress and perhaps be lucky enough to form lifelong friendships. Establishing relationships with other writers is fun, but it's also sound business. You're likely to come across published writers, agents and editors in an online group—people who can jump-start your writing career. Whatever you do, foster and keep those contacts. They're golden.

Online groups deliver rapid-fire feedback to help pinpoint a problem. The range of responses will sharpen your writing. Some "critters" specialize in grammar and syntax, while others may suggest ways to improve structure. You'll receive advice on plot, pacing, suspense and characterization. Seasoned writers are usually generous with hints and tips that improve your piece. A member of one of my groups wrote a poem, accepted suggestions and sold her poem the first time out. Such successes are not uncommon if you belong to a good group.

Beginners can find online guidance that speeds the learning process, but don't rely on a group to take the place of craft books and coursework. Use these tools together. You can read about a technique, put it to practice and get comments all on the same day—lightning turnaround impossible to achieve in face-to-face weekly meetings.

The cons

There are disadvantages to participating in critique groups. The quality of online feedback can be spotty. You will find expert advice, but it takes time to discover who offers help, who offers mere fluff, and who actually hinders. An unfair crit can introduce doubt and shake your resolve. Tough advice helps, but rudeness can do real damage. Don't be fooled into thinking that everyone who sounds authoritative knows what she's talking about. Use what seems right and forget the rest. In the end, it's your work.

Perhaps the biggest potential pitfall is computer security—or rather, the lack of security. Although copyright protection is strong in the United States and most other countries, there's no way to stop someone from plagiarizing and attempting to market your work. There are online literary predators who try to cash in on the vulnerable, and an archive can be a treasure trove for thieves.

On the other hand, crit groups can actually help stop plagiarism because by submitting your piece, you record proof that work went online at a specific time. To be on the safe side, find a group that doesn't keep archives or one with a moderator willing to purge archives regularly. Check for rules that protect confidentiality before you post work. Find a group that insists on participation and doesn't allow lurkers.

Joining up**Get Help From WD**

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the Web. All workshops are developed by professional, published writers who are experts in their fields. And the workshops are taught by some of the Web's best and most experienced instructors. Find out more at www.WritersOnlineWorkshops.com

Familiarize yourself with group rules to take best advantage of online crit groups. Some groups, for example, allow chatting while others restrict off-topic posts. There's no right or wrong choice. Decide whether you need the easy familiarity of a chatty group or serious commitment from a more publication-focused membership. High-quality groups have participation requirements. You'll often be expected to submit your own work and offer criticisms, usually a ratio of 1:2. Be generous by offering lots of pertinent crits.

Join several groups and observe the level of professionalism before submitting your own work. Are the submissions high quality? Are the critiques appropriate? Do group members offer meaningful feedback, including reasons for their suggestions for improvement? Does the group mention what's right with a piece as well as what's wrong?

Submitting and critiquing

When you submit a piece for evaluation, take care to hand in your

best work. Most critters hate being used principally as proofreaders—that's your job. In addition, you usually get less feedback the second time you hand in a piece.

When the crits start rolling in, take a deep breath. You'll need a thick skin. If you do get a harsh critique—or one that is just plain wrong—it's best to set it aside until you're ready to recover, regroup and respond. And you can turn away for a day or two in an online group.

But don't jump to the conclusion that a tough critique is necessarily bad. More often than not, harsh advice will help you strengthen your writing muscle, while hollow compliments help no one. Consider each crit with an open mind. Always remember to thank the person who spent time helping you—and don't argue. The group is critiquing your work, not you. You'll publish faster if you check your ego at the keyboard. Value honest feedback.

You'll be expected to help others in return, and a meticulous writer works as hard on crits as she does on her own submissions. Why? Because critiquing someone else's work strengthens your own self-editing skills. Even a novice can give a helpful crit specifying what works and what doesn't, without understanding the mechanics of craft.

Online Groups

Research the right one for you!

General critique groups

- Internet Writing Workshop: www.manistee.com/~lkraus/workshop
- My Writer Buddy: www.writerbuddy.com
- Stories.com: www.stories.com
- Thought Café: www.thoughtcafe.co.uk
- Toasted Cheese: www.toasted-cheese.com
- WriteCraft: www.writecraftweb.com
- The Write List: groups.yahoo.com/group/The-Write-List/

Genre critique groups

- Critters Workshop (science fiction, fantasy, horror): www.critters.org
- NovelDoc: www.noveldoc.com
- Online Writing Workshops (science fiction, fantasy, horror, romance): www.onlinewritingworkshop.com

- *SF Novelist (hard science)*: sfnovelist.com/index.html
- *Zeugma (poetry)*: www.zpoems.net
- *Science Fiction and Fantasy Workshop*:
www.burgoyne.com/pages/workshop

For more info

- *Internet Resources*:
www.internet-resources.com/writers/wrlinks-cnxxn.htm
- *Preditors & Editors Writing Workshops*:
anotherrealm.com/prededitors/pubwork.htm

Choosing the right one

Don't be afraid to leave a group that isn't working for you. Look for warning signs. You're in the wrong group if you're giving more value than you receive. You're in the wrong group if members aren't receptive to newcomers or if the crits lack substance. You're in the wrong group if members turn in writing so bad you cringe or if nobody understands your genre. Lastly, you're in the wrong group if—after careful consideration—you disagree with most of the crits.

But you're in the right group when you wake up and realize your prose has taken a leap in quality. You're in the right place when you recognize that people in your group have become dear friends. You really belong when another member sends a heartfelt thank-you note for your critique. You've found a home when you're ecstatic that another member has sold her piece.

One last step: After your critique group has helped you polish your gem, send it off to an editor. You've found your spot when your group cheers for your success.

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