

PW#1,028: The uncomfortable truth about writers' critique groups

Welcome!

Are you a fan of writers' critique groups? If so, I suggest you use them for nothing more than accountability.

Reading time: About 3 minutes

I'm about to commit professional heresy, so buckle up. This might sound curmudgeonly — okay, it's *definitely* curmudgeonly — but after 46 years in this business, I've earned the right to be occasionally cranky about things that waste writers' time.

I am totally opposed to writers' critique groups, unless they restrict themselves to community and accountability. (Note, I'm not talking about university-based writing programs where there is a qualified professor to lead discussions.)

The phrase “critique group” makes me clench my jaw and squint my eyes so I look a little like Clint Eastwood.

Critique groups, despite their popularity, often hinder rather than help serious writers. And they can flatten new writers like pancakes because these vulnerable people often take the group's feedback way too much to heart.

Here are four reasons for my opposition (and trust me, I've thought about this way more than is probably healthy):

1-Unknown skill levels often lead to bad advice

When you join a writers' critique group, odds are high you won't know much about the other members. (Or if you do, you'll feel uncomfortable asking some hard questions.) You might not even know much about the moderator or leader, assuming there is one.

Are these people excellent writers? Skilled at giving feedback? Are they well read? Are they familiar with your genre? And if you don't know this information, why would you expose yourself to criticism from them? Essentially, you're rolling the dice, buying a sealed box or signing a blank cheque (choose your metaphor!).

Here's the heart of the issue: Amateur feedback from other amateurs can be exceptionally counterproductive. Other group members may think your writing is terrible. And it may be. But it might also be superb, and these people don't have the skill, taste or wit to appreciate it. It may be like asking someone who eats only chicken nuggets to critique your *coq au vin*. (Or the reverse can also be true.)

Further, one or two highly articulate and strongly opinionated people often dominate critique groups. They try to impose their own ideas on everyone else and actively suppress other points of view. I have worked with many clients who have suffered mightily at the hands of such critique "partners."

2-Such groups lead to groupthink

Writers' groups often enforce consensus about "good" writing. The act of critiquing-by-committee leads to safe, bland prose that offends no one. Groups prefer to "smooth away" unique voices and actively discourage distinctive styles.

You have your own way of writing, even if you're new to it. Sure, your style may need some adjusting or sharpening, but why would you trust unknown people — of unknown capabilities — to provide you with that? Don't let them vote you off the island!

3-The paralysis of perpetual workshopping

Writers often get stuck in endless cycles of revision. They fear what others in their group are going to say, and they rethink and second-guess their own choices. Being in a group often causes people to become dependent on external validation when, really, they need to spend more time developing a strong internal compass.

Also, and this is not a minor point, you'd do better taking the time you're spending in meetings and reallocating it towards writing or editing or reading. Every hour you spend listening to Brad explain why your protagonist "wouldn't really do that" is an hour you're not putting your own words on the page.

4-They can make it hard to separate writing from editing

I have worked with many clients who need to present, say, 2,000 words to their critique group by such-and-such a date, and they don't feel secure sharing the draft they've just written ("It needs more work!"), so they become obsessed with editing it.

Of course, editing is *always* necessary, but the timeline imposed by many critique groups often forces writers into an uncomfortable place: They must edit before they're *ready* to do so. In short, they're being asked to frost a cake that's still in the oven.

In my 46 years as a writer and editor, I have learned that most writers benefit from a good long break AFTER writing and before they edit. This break gives them a better *perspective* on their work and ideas. (For most books and dissertations, I recommend taking at least six weeks.)

How to actually improve your writing

Serious writers are usually best served by reading widely, writing extensively and seeking professional editors. Yes, professional editing is expensive, but there are ways to make it more affordable. (For example, consider getting a "manuscript assessment" rather than a full edit.)

And, with an editor, you can check out the person's credentials beforehand, speak with their references and reassure yourself that this editor really knows what they're talking about. You wouldn't hire a plumber based on their enthusiasm alone — why do it with someone who's going to fix your prose?

There's a famous motto in law saying: "There's nothing more expensive than free legal advice." The same expression should apply to writing.

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Have you ever been a member of a writers' critique group? We can all learn from each other, so please, share your thoughts with my readers and me in the comments section of [my blog](#). If you comment on today's post (or any others) by Feb. 26, I'll put you in a draw for a digital copy of my first book, [8 1/2 Steps to Writing Faster, Better](#). To enter, please go to [my blog](#) and scroll down to the comments, directly underneath the related posts links. You don't have to join Disqus to post! Read my tutorial to learn how to post as a guest. (It's easy!)