

Guide for Starting an SCWW Chapter Critique Group

Anyone interested in starting a new chapter would benefit from attending at least one meeting with an established chapter. Other assistance is available from SCWW Chapter Liaison, Bob Strother at bstrother4180@charter.net

Finding others in your area interested in participating

The SCWW has a listing of its members from around the state, many of whom are not currently affiliated with existing local chapters. This resource is available for all SCWW members. Posting notices in local bookstores and ads in local newspapers will also help bring in interested participants. Other methods may include going on-line, or working through local civic, fraternal, or religious organizations. Remember – there are no minimum membership requirements for starting a chapter. As few as a half-dozen dedicated writers can make for stimulating critique discussions.

Finding a location to hold your meetings

This may be a public facility (i.e. library), private business (i.e. bookstore), or any other location where the members can be afforded a comfortable, relaxed setting conducive to open discussion. Ideally, the meeting place should be available for regularly scheduled meeting dates (third Tuesdays, first Thursdays, etc.) each month.

Holding an organizational meeting

Once your prospective chapter members have been identified, set up a meeting to introduce yourselves, elect a chapter president (and possibly an alternate or vice president), and establish mutually agreeable meeting days and times and general guidelines* for the group. This is also a good time to pass out SCWW membership applications and information on “critiquing etiquette” (See Guidelines for Critiquing).

*General guidelines may include: Number of meetings per month, duration of meetings, maximum length of manuscripts to be read/critiqued per participant (this may depend on the length and/or on whether the manuscripts are simply brought to each meeting or mailed out to members in advance), if the group will entertain only specific categories of writing (poetry, fiction, non-fiction, etc.) or specific genres (romance, mystery, science fiction, etc.), and whether there will be written comments as well as verbal discussion.

Conducting the meetings

Begin the meeting with any pertinent SCWW-related news. If there are visitors present, have the members introduce themselves and briefly describe their writing interests. Briefly summarize the group’s guidelines for the visitors’ benefit. Ask if anyone has news of their own to report – submissions, rejections, ***getting published!***

Have a sign-in sheet to identify the number of readers and determine the allowable timeframe for each participant's reading/critique. Monitor the time and terminate discussion, if necessary, to ensure everyone has a chance to read.

Readings should be conducted in a nurturing environment that allows writers to share their work without fear. It's always helpful to start a critique with a positive observation before delving into what might be taken as negative comments.

Keep the critiquing on track – ***about the writing!*** Avoid tangential discussions that may distract from the subject at hand and cheat the reader out of valuable critiquing time.

Monitor participation by visitors to ensure that they *do become paid-up members of the SCWW within a reasonable period of time*. Most visitors should be able to decide whether they want to join the group after two or three meetings.

Other potential activities

Consider starting a chapter newsletter (on-line or otherwise). Select an editor from among the group. Designate a different "reviewer" for each reader. Have the reviewers provide brief synopses of the works and critique discussions for inclusion in the newsletter. Include other topics of interest such as contests and submission opportunities.

Consider a chapter website. If the technical expertise is available within your group, this is an excellent means of attracting new members and keeping the chapter members up to date in addition to (or in place of) the newsletter.

Guidelines for Critiquing

Tips for Critiquers

- State first what works for you, then what might improve the piece. Be specific. Be kind.
- Do not be overly picky about small details--typos, spelling, grammar. Unless stated, these are not final drafts.
- Avoid repeating another's comments in detail. It is all right to say you agree, or to not comment at all.

Tips for Receivers

- Consider asking another to read your material so that you can hear it objectively.
- Listen carefully to critiquing; do not interrupt; do not defend the work or overly explain. The material should explain itself. If it does not, rewrite.
- Accept each comment as a catalyst for your writing. Use each one to improve your writing skills and take you closer to publication. Do not allow inappropriate

sensitivity to discourage your efforts. Better to hear what might improve the piece than to waste postage and time sending it out prematurely.

Guidelines for the Critique

Fiction

Warm Up

How did you feel when the reader finished the last word? Example:
When you finished reading, I felt:

Eager to learn what happens next
Confused by Olivia's determination to return to show biz
Cheated at the abrupt conclusion
Delighted by Rick's humor
Concern for Meg

Big Picture

1. Is the title effective? Does it get your attention and hint at the content?
2. Is the story question [i.e., What is the main character's conflict(s)/ex. Will Marty get a baby?] clearly presented early on?
3. How is the main character different at the end of the story from the beginning? What is/are the events which led to the change?
4. Are the lead and conclusion effective?
5. Would the basic idea appeal to the target market?
6. Does the manuscript begin in the right place?
7. Are there ineffective repetitions--words, thoughts?
8. Are the characters well drawn and fleshed out?
9. Does the plot flow naturally from the characters' action and reaction?

Fine Tuning

1. Did the writer show, not tell?
2. Are good word pictures, metaphors, and other figures of speech employed?
3. Did the writer appeal to the five senses?
4. Is vocabulary level appropriate?
5. Is the writing tight?
6. Is the passive voice avoided?
7. Were specifics used?

Wrapping Up

1. What would make this piece even better?
2. What is a possible market for this piece?

Non - Fiction

Warm Up

How did you feel at the when the reader finished the last word? Example:
When you finished reading, I felt:

I could identify a take-away
Encouraged
Like I learned something new
Confused
Indifferent

Big Picture

1. Is the title effective? Does it get your attention and hint at the content?
2. Is the theme clearly presented?
3. Are the lead and conclusion effective?
4. Would the basic idea appeal to the target market?
5. Does the manuscript begin in the right place?
6. Does the material flow in logical order, or should it be rearranged?
7. Are all paragraphs related to the subject?
8. Are there ineffective repetitions--words, thoughts?

Fine Tuning

1. Did the writer show, not tell?
2. Are good word pictures, metaphors, and other figures of speech employed?
3. Did the writer appeal to the five senses?
4. Is vocabulary level appropriate?
5. Is the writing tight?
6. Is the passive voice avoided?
7. Were specifics used?

Wrapping Up

1. What would make this piece even better?
2. What is a possible market for this piece?

Some of this material adapted from Donna Clark Goodrich's packet: *How to Start & Run a Christian Writers' Club*.