

“Beyond Show, Don’t Tell: Making Critique Work for You”
Presented by the New York City Writers Critique Group
at the McKee Story Expo on June 11 and 12, 2022

Outline & Notes written by Christopher Keelty, organizer and group founder

1. Who are we?

- The NYC Writers Critique Group started in 2014, and have been meeting once or twice a month ever since.
- Our group is free to attend and open to anyone who wants to participate.
- We don’t focus on a particular form of writing and don’t require experience.
 - You might ask whether inexperienced writers can offer insightful critique, to which I say very experienced writers can offer terrible suggestions.
- The focus is we are all here to help each other learn, improve, and write the best version of what we choose to write.
- Writing we have critiqued has gone on to be produced as independent films, as stage plays, with indie presses, and with Big Five publishers. Lin Liao Butler’s second book just came out, and Curtis Chin has a book scheduled for publication.

2. *(Members of the group offer brief introductions)*

3. What is this session for?

- The idea of this session is for you to see how our critique format works (and participate if you choose) so you can replicate if if you like. We’ll be doing two critiques, but also some advice about how to structure and moderate a group.

4. Meeting structure

- We start with a round of introductions, including an icebreaker question.
 - Each person in turn introduces themselves, shares a little about their background or interest in writing, and any news (bad or good) that they want to share.
 - The icebreaker question may be about the craft or the business of writing. At one point we alternated, but these days our group tends to prefer focusing on craft, with only occasional business topics.
 - The question works best if it’s something open to discussion, that everyone can have an opinion about. Topics that require expertise

(like “How to get an agent”) don’t tend to work as well—so we occasionally host special “discussion sessions” just for more in-depth topics like these.

- Before we began meeting on Zoom, the discussion was separate from introductions, and was a more free-form chat, with people interjecting as they liked. We find that does not work well on Zoom, so instead we fold it into introductions and ask people to wait their turn to speak.
- This takes roughly the first 30-45 minutes of each meeting (our meetings are three hours long). I believe it is very important, because it builds a sense of community, and gives newcomers a chance to get the vibe of the group before we go into the more structured critique session.
- We then move into critiques, which take the rest of the meeting.
- After each meeting, there is social time.
 - When we met in person, we’d head to a bar near our meeting site for drinks and food and chat. Everyone is always welcome.
 - On Zoom, we leave the chat open so people can hang out and socialize. It’s inferior, but still worthwhile and regularly my favorite part. Again, it builds that sense of community.

5. Critique format

- I want to mention in advance that while I don’t know where this format originated, I learned it from the Philadelphia Writers Meetup, and have adapted it very little from their approach.
- Our group requires that work is submitted and distributed to readers in advance—instead of the author reading aloud at the meeting, as some groups do.
 - This allows us to focus on the words as they appear on the page, not on how they sound coming from the author.
 - Submissions are limited to 4,000 words, or (if poetry or drama) 20 pages or less. Authors may go slightly over to finish a scene/paragraph/etc.
 - I will note that we accept any kind of work, and we do not censor work, but we ask authors to note at the top of the first page if their submission includes explicit sex or violence—so sensitive readers can decide whether they want to read.
- At the start of each critique, the author has a chance to make a comment or statement. This might be to give some background, ask questions, or inquire about particular aspects they’d like to hear critiqued.

- We then metaphorically “kill the author.” The author should not speak, and the group should try their best not to speak to the author—imagine this is a book group, and no one knows the author is in the room.
 - The moderator may need to gently remind commenters if people continually address the author, but this is not a rigid rule—occasional slip-ups are not a big problem.
 - The author’s silence IS a rigid rule. It is important the author only listen, for several reasons:
 - It avoids defensiveness.
 - It makes commenters more comfortable.
 - If there are elements of the work that are unclear, it allows the author to hear differing reader interpretations—something that’s impossible if the author interjects to say what is or is not correct.
 - It allows the author to focus on what they are hearing, rather than thinking about how they want to respond.
- Our critique is divided into sections:
 - Praise
 - What did people enjoy? What resounded with them in this work?
 - Constructive criticism
 - What didn’t work? What took readers out of the piece?
 - This section is focused on bigger-picture comments (structure, character, dialogue, etc) and we ask people to hold small specific comments for the next section, “Nitpicks.”
 - There are two standard disclaimers I give here as moderator:
 - For the author: We are not a jury. Everyone participating here is trying to help you write the best version of what you want to write. But you are under no obligation to take our advice. If you hear something you disagree with, please feel free to ignore it.
 - For participants: We’re here to hear differing opinions, not to come to consensus. That means if you disagree with another comment, please feel free to speak up and say so, but we want to avoid back-and-forth arguments about who is right and who is wrong. That’s not our goal.
 - Constructive criticism should be just that: Constructive!

- Our goal is to help each other, so comments should be supportive, not try to tear each other down.
- Remember, we are criticizing the WORK, not the AUTHOR.
- If a comment is overly negative or personal, the moderator should interrupt to gently get the commenter back on track.
- Nitpicks
 - This is for smaller stuff like grammar, misspellings, fact-checks, etc.
 - We save this for last because if we run short on time, we will skip it.
- Finally, the critique ends with a round of applause, to thank the author for their courage in sharing their work and congratulate them on creating something.
- The author then has the chance to respond, however they see fit.
 - I have another standard disclaimer here: We all hear that little voice that says we should respond to each and every piece of criticism we heard. IGNORE THAT VOICE. It is not productive or helpful for anyone to respond to everything. But if there were specific comments to which you wanted to respond, questions you wanted to answer, or questions of your own you wish to ask, this is the time.
- After the author's comments, we applaud once again and the critique is ended.

5. On the role of the moderator

- I wanted to offer some thoughts and advice on moderating a group like this. I am not our group's only moderator, but I am the most frequent moderator, and I've learned quite a bit in nearly eight years doing this.
- Remember the moderator sets the tone for the whole group. People will follow your example, consciously or unconsciously. Be welcoming, warm, and show your commitment to open dialogue.
- Your main goal is to keep the group on topic, keep the atmosphere friendly and welcoming, and watch the time.
 - Most often this means reminding people we don't want back-and-forth arguments, or pulling attention back to the topic at hand if someone wanders off to talking about a movie they saw recently, or something like that.

- In particular, there will sometimes be moments where someone says “this work we’re critiquing reminds me of another book/movie/tv show” and then people slip into talking about that.
- Don’t jump in immediately if you sense someone is off-topic or out of line. Give them a little space, to see if they are fumbling toward a point. You may also find the group will self-police, with other members speaking up so you don’t have to always be the boss.
 - The exceptions:
 - When a back-and-forth argument develops, letting it go on will only lead to the participants getting angry with each other. Stop it early, remind them “we don’t want to get into arguments, you both made your points, and we should move on.”
 - If someone is clearly saying something disrespectful or offensive, interrupt and point it out—gently. Don’t let something like racism or other discrimination go unrecognized, the group will notice! But don’t assume the commenter MEANT to be hateful, give them a chance to self-correct. Always assume positive intent.
 - That doesn’t mean to ignore it if someone demonstrates their intent is NOT positive.
- Keep time, but be flexible. If it’s clear the group has a lot more to say on a topic, shift timing so they can.
 - A polite announcement is useful to say we are short on time, and ask people to keep their comments brief so everyone has a chance to speak.
- If one person is dominating conversation, you can wait to call on them (if you’re calling on people) or politely say that “We’d like to give space to her from some people who haven’t spoken much.”
- On that note, do not fear silence! Sometimes people are shy or hesitant to speak. Allowing a few seconds of silence will often give them the space they need to speak up.
- We have only one unbreakable rule in our group: Everyone is welcome, everyone is equal, everyone is treated with respect.
 - If someone accidentally breaks this rule, the moderator should offer gentle correction.
 - If someone deliberately or repeatedly break this rule, they are removed from that meeting (this is easier on Zoom than

in person!) and the organizers committee will discuss whether further action is appropriate.

- This has only happened once in our eight-year existence.
 - That said, as moderator, you should be prepared to act just in case. Do not allow anyone to disrespect your writers! It will poison the whole dynamic of your group.
- As founder of this group, one of the best and most important pieces of advice I can give you is to include a diverse group of writers on an organizers committee! Don't do it by yourself!
 - First, this shows your members that your group is inclusive, open, and welcoming.
 - Second, and perhaps more importantly, it empowers writers with different perspectives to speak up about issues they perceive.
 - Many of my co-organizers are attending these demonstration sessions as critique partners, and I want to say how grateful I am to them—and to everyone in the group—for making it the insightful, nurturing, and welcoming space it has become.
- Above all, I just want to emphasize that a critique group is only as good as its participants. As this group's founder, I sometimes receive praise for its quality, and I always say the credit goes to the group members, who are universally kind, insightful, and nurturing. What I will take credit for is helping create an environment those people thought was worth their time and dedication—and if you decide to start a group like this, I wish you the best in doing the same.