

HOW TO ORGANIZE A LOCAL WRITERS CRITIQUE GROUP

A. FIND THE RIGHT PEOPLE: through an advertising letter; posters in Christian bookstores, local churches and libraries; also by word of mouth. Talk to others about your interest in writing. Many people are “closet” or secret writers who would love to share your interest. Pray about it. Ask the Lord to bring to mind the names of two or three friends who would be interested. Plan to start small and expand as God leads.

1. Prepare a news release for the local paper announcing the formation of your club. It could appear on the church page just prior to your meeting. Announce the formation of your club for the purpose of reading and critiquing each other’s manuscripts.

2. Put a notice on your church bulletin board, and/or place a notice in the newsletter or Sunday bulletin. Ask friends to do the same in their churches.

3. Contact your local community education program. Ask the creative writing instructor to make an announcement to the class.

4. Community and Christian radio stations. Some have a calendar of events program and will announce your meetings if you notify them well in advance.

B. LOCATE THE PERFECT PLACE TO MEET: home, library, church, meeting hall, bank meeting room...

C. SCHEDULE A REGULAR TIME FOR MEETING: monthly, bi-monthly, every two weeks. Make the schedule fit needs and available time of your members.

D. ESTABLISH RULES OF THE GAME: membership limits, critique groups, goals and purposes, officers, membership dues, etc. You want to write and not spend time in mechanics of organizing. Too tight a structure can kill by stifling. No structure will destroy by deterioration.

1. Select one or two members of the group to work with you as a committee: these will help you plan the activities of your club (i.e. eliminate refreshments, or keep them simple). Refreshments, dues—nothing should become a burden that detracts from the purpose of the group.

2. Keep on target: push each other toward professionalism. Schedule meetings to work, encourage, and motivate. Don’t let the meeting become just a conversation time or “social tea.”

E. IF MEETING TWICE A MONTH: one of the meetings is a critiquing session for which members bring manuscripts to read. Members conduct workshops at alternate meetings. Less experienced ones may enlarge upon an article from a writer’s magazine or arrange for an outside speaker. Workshops may cover such subjects as: writing a query letter and/or book proposal; how to prepare a manuscript; fiction techniques; market analysis; how to keep records for taxes, etc. Those who have attended writers’ conferences return with information that lends itself to this format. Order cassette tapes and listen to them at your meetings—or check them out for individual usage. Study markets and give other marketing help. Have a magazine exchange and/or book lending library to allow everyone to get acquainted with new or different markets.

© copyright 1984, Writers Information Network, Elaine Wright Colvin

© revised 1998, Mount Hermon Christian Writers Conference

CHRISTIAN WRITERS CRITIQUE GROUPS

SPECIAL SERVICES YOUR WORKSHOP GROUP CAN PROVIDE TO MEMBERS:

1. Ask members to report on the requirements of different magazines. Assign different markets and ask members to write for samples and writers guidelines to be shared at the next meeting. If possible study and analyze two or three issues of each magazine to determine type and style and length of material used.
2. Keep a card file listing denominational magazines which members subscribe to. Many of these are not available in libraries and members could share their copies.
3. Make a similar index or list of reference books and books about writing which members would be willing to loan to each other on a "sign-out" system.
4. Watch newspapers and magazines for names of published writers who live in your area. Occasionally invite one to speak at a meeting on a writing topic of special interest to your members.
5. If one of your members has success in publishing in a given field, invite him/her to share his/her methods as a speaker at one of your meetings.
6. Contact local community education, creative writing classes or conferences for the names of writers who might be willing to speak to your group.
7. Writers never tire of hearing how other writers work. Set aside a meeting or use a time when there are few manuscripts to read, and share methods of working, tools that help, writing habits, ways of breaking "writer's block" or specific techniques for handling various writing problems.
8. If you decide to collect dues, or donate to a "kitty" consider using some of the funds to purchase tapes about writing.
9. Plan a writers conference or seminar in your area. Writers Information Network maintains a list of writer/speakers. Some may be available in your area.
10. Watch the newspaper, writer's magazines, etc. for announcements of Writer's Conferences and seminars in your vicinity. Plan to attend or send a delegate. At least send for brochures and keep a file of speakers you might want to contact later for your own meetings.
11. Publish your own bi-monthly or quarterly newsletter to share news of member's sales and publications and to keep members informed of upcoming meetings and speakers.

HOW TO CONDUCT MEETINGS:

1. Keep the meetings informal and relaxed, but do have a format to follow.
2. Assign a chairperson for each meeting. This duty can rotate among members.
3. Use "name tags" so everyone can call everyone else by name.
4. You may want "sign in" sheets to note manuscripts brought for critiquing.
5. Include reporting sessions (rounds) to make everyone accountable for their writing.
6. Devotions and a prayer time can be a meaningful part of each meeting.
7. Keep track of each person's reading time and quietly interrupt when the limit is reached. This assures each member an opportunity to read and receive help. Don't allow anyone to monopolize the dialogue time. Do encourage newcomers and the shy, quieter members to take an active part.

CRITIQUE GROUP GUIDELINES

1. REMEMBER:

A. **Your are not a mutual admiration society**, but a body of Christian artists meeting to encourage and assist one another in the development of your craft for the glory of God.

B. **Your words are not chiseled in stone**, nor are they inspired as Scripture.

C. The critic's responsibility is to help the author improve his work, not cut him down to size, argue with his thesis, or demoralize him so he never writes another word.

D. You can't expect the same level of excellence from both beginner and experienced writer.

E. Each critique reflects the opinion of the critic and the author always has the final voice in how the work goes to the editor. A wise author, however, considers his critic's comments carefully, remembering that if the manuscript cannot stand on its own without verbal defense or explanation, it won't have much chance with an editor or reader.

2. Group meeting time is short, so Time Limits Must Be Set for each writer's manuscript. Show consideration for others in the group by cooperating with these time limits.

3. Each writer will be allowed to read his manuscript aloud, without either previous lengthy explanation or interruptions. Listen courteously and jot down comments to share later.

4. Group leaders will encourage, but never coerce shy persons to participate. Group members can help by avoiding the temptation to monopolize the discussion.

5. Be sensitive and gentle, "Speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). If someone in the group is particularly hard on a writer, balance the harsh comments with a touch of living confirmation.

6. Never attack the writer—his abilities or person. Instead, make positive suggestions that might improve his work, by calling attention to problem areas or weak spots and offering ideas for improvement.

7. Always begin by praising the author for the good features of his manuscript. It is a *rare* piece that has absolutely no redeeming qualities.

8. Give both general and specific comments. Be as constructive as you can.

9. AVOID:

a. being overly picky about grammar and mechanics. These are important and may be mentioned, but try to concentrate on structure and content.

b. commenting on minor doctrinal differences. Critique groups include people from widely diverse backgrounds and denominations, and do not exist to set people's doctrines straight.

10. Try to suggest possible markets.

11. Pay special attention to the following common problem areas:

- a. Beginnings: Are they arresting? Irresistible? Appropriate/
- b. Ideas: Are they valid? Practical? Fresh? Important?
- c. Author Attitude: Is he genuinely excited? Knowledgeable?
- d. Content: Is there extraneous material? Too little material?
- e. Structure: Is it logical? Coherent? Unified? Well-organized?
- f. Style: Is it readable? Anecdotal? Appropriate to subject or market? Proper length?

Tightly written?

g. Clarity: Is the meaning clear enough to stand without explanation? Brevity should never result in obscurity.

12. Respond to criticism properly. Never argue with your critics. Don't take criticisms personally, but evaluate them objectively., Pray for wisdom and grace to use each criticism as an avenue for learning and growth.