

# Critique Group Best Practices

created by the

Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators - Wisconsin region ([wisconsin.SCBWI.org](http://wisconsin.SCBWI.org))

Thank you for agreeing to help other creators as you seek input on your own work! A great way to do this is to join a critique group. Below are some helpful tips to help you and your group be the most effective it can be.

When submitting your work, it's a good idea to follow industry standard submission guidelines. Submissions should be formatted in 12-point font and double-spaced. Novels are usually submitted in chapters or groups of chapters. Picture books and early readers are usually submitted in their entirety. For more details, log in to [SCBWI.org](http://SCBWI.org), click on "Publications" and select *The Book*. It is a wealth of information from start to finish.

## Ground rules

**First and foremost, do not share other people's stories with anyone outside the group. Critiques are based on trust, and by joining a critique group, you are agreeing to keep stories confidential to their owners.**

Next, strive to give a thoughtful, complete critique in the time allotted. If you are unable to make the deadline, please alert the group. Then try to complete the critique as soon as possible. It's important to be a reliable, dependable group member so that everyone can proceed with revising based on the critiques provided.

Lastly, if you are looking for specific feedback, please mention that directly. For instance, you might say, "I'm wondering if the plot line is a little convoluted. Are you able to follow it easily? If not, where do you get lost? Any suggestions on simplifying?"

Now, on to giving helpful advice.

## How to give a good critique

Read the submission before reading anyone else's comments so that you can form your own opinion. Even if you reply with the same suggestions as others, this is valuable! Reinforced comments help creators to pinpoint trouble spots. All members of a critique group benefit from hearing members' thoughts, opinions and suggestions. Use "Reply All" so everyone can be part of the discussion.

Read the entire submission at least once before making comments or suggestions. Then, especially if you can't figure out what bothers you about a story, wait a day and let your subconscious figure it out. A second reading can be quite helpful.

Read it out loud at least once, perhaps for your second reading. You may discover a beautiful rhythm or, conversely, a tongue-twisting trouble-spot only by reading the story out loud. Readability is important.

Approach each critique with kindness and honesty. It's important to get honest feedback to improve a story. Just as important is the ability to say things in a constructive, positive manner.

Use the comment feature of your software program or *italics*, underlining, a **different colored font**, **highlighting**, or **bold** segments to make your notes easier to see.

Consider using the sandwich approach:

- Begin your critique by saying something positive about the work.
- Then, pose your suggestions for change. Be specific in your feedback. "This is a nice story," and, "I can already picture the illustrations," are not effective tools to help an author revise. Give the author an idea of what is working and what is not. For example, you might say, "I laughed out loud when the ant couldn't get the picnic basket into his anthill. That kind of humor will appeal to children." Or, "You might think about the length of your opening paragraph. It seems a bit description-heavy, and it's important in a picture book to introduce the character quickly." Consider using questions, such as "Have you considered ... " or "Do you think ..." etc. Oftentimes, questions trigger reflection.
- Finally, make a positive concluding statement.

In pointing out weak spots, be honest yet diplomatic. Comment on the specific issue in the writing or illustration, not on creators themselves. Remember above all else to nurture and support one another. **Never, ever rewrite or redraw another creator's work or demand that they incorporate your suggestions.** Their creations are their own. The advice of others are mere suggestions.

Things to keep in mind while critiquing:

- Story arc
- Character(s) realism within their world
- Narrative flow
- Descriptive imagery
- Too much description (not enough room for illustrator)
- Pacing of story
- Plot/timing

- Grammar/punctuation as an aid in understanding, not as a way to change the way a character speaks.

### **How to receive a critique**

Sort through the comments, think deeply, and make decisions on how to revise your story. Please know that you will receive a lot of feedback in this business. Remember that you do not have to, nor is it wise to, take every piece of advice and twist your story around. It's your prerogative as the creator to pick and choose from the suggestions offered.

Creators who put their egos aside, aren't on the defensive, and consider suggestions are more likely to improve. If you find that you are defensive and shut off to any suggestions, you might not be right for a crit group, and you may not grow as a writer. You might also try the suggestion realizing you can always revert to a previous version if your test segment doesn't work out. It's possible you might prefer the change.