

Practical Questions to Consider When Setting Up a Critique Group

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Writers and [illustrators](#) are often interested in joining a critique group. But sometimes no local critique group exists. Or if one does, it's full.

Here are some practical questions to consider when setting up a new critique group.

WHAT WILL THE CRITIQUE GROUP BE CALLED?

A name is optional, but choosing one is a good idea. It will help identify your group later should you wish to announce meetings via a listserv, newsletter, or by other means. Often, a group's name includes the city where meetings are held.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE GROUP?

Consider: Is it for writers, illustrators, or both?

If for writers, is it for children's literature of a certain genre or for a certain age group? Or will the group address any type of writing for children?

You might want to talk about your individual goals, and write down those that are shared. This reference may later serve you well, should your group wander from its mission.

Many groups spend time discussing [marketing](#) news, writing classes/conferences, recent achievements, or other information. If discussions take place after all manuscripts (or illustrations) have been shared and input offered, members on tight schedules might be more likely to attend.

WHERE WILL THE GROUP MEET?

If you meet at a consistent location, it may be less confusing for members. Some groups rotate meeting places if members are geographically spread. Some groups meet in homes. Public meeting places, such as a library or bookstore, eliminate members' feeling they need to "clean house" before a meeting; members may produce more work when other tasks are eliminated. If you meet in a public place, [check](#) to be sure this is OK with the manager.

ON WHAT DAY AND HOW OFTEN WILL THE GROUP MEET?

Setting a regular day, such as the third Saturday of each month, is easiest to remember.

Otherwise, one member of the group has the onus of creating a schedule and providing it to all members; this task can become tedious.

Most critique groups find that meeting once a month is sufficient, although some prefer to meet every two weeks.

WHAT TIME WILL THE GROUP MEET?

Setting a specific starting and ending time works best for most people; sticking to designated times is professional.

Allow people enough time to settle in, especially when the group is new.

Allow enough time for each person to have at least one work critiqued (a minimum of about 20 minutes per person). If your group has decided to share marketing information and other news of interest, allow enough time to do so.

HOW MANY MEMBERS WILL THE GROUP ACCOMMODATE?

A group of 5-8 people seems to work best for many groups, although other groups may function well with a few more or a few less members. Some groups may have monthly open meetings (where anyone interested is invited to attend); other groups prefer to be closed to new members once reaching a certain headcount. Consider if your group will be open only to SCBWI members or to anyone with interest. Consider your personal and shared goals, and decide as a group what might work best for you.

WHAT WILL PEOPLE NEED TO BRING TO THE MEETINGS?

WRITERS: Most writers bring enough copies of their manuscript for everyone. Some groups email manuscripts to their members in advance. It can be helpful to specify the expected length of manuscripts. One group, for example, requests a maximum of 10 double-spaced pages, and writers may bring any one of the following:

- one chapter of a children's book
- one picture book manuscript
- one entire short story for children
- 2-3 poems for children

ILLUSTRATORS: How many pictures?

HOW WILL WORK BE CRITIQUED?

Who will keep track of time and keep the group on task? Many groups have their members take turns doing this job.

Who will read manuscripts? Newer writers are often most comfortable reading their own manuscript, though it is generally more helpful to have someone other than the writer read a manuscript aloud. Work towards this goal.

Consider providing each member of your group with a copy of critiquing guidelines and advice.

HOW CAN I FIND PEOPLE INTERESTED IN JOINING A CRITIQUE GROUP?

Posting a message about your group at university, bookstore, or library bulletin boards will often solicit interest. Talking to your librarian or children's bookstore owner more in depth about your group may also prove helpful.

However, members of SCBWI-Michigan often have an easier route!

Contact your Network Area Coordinator. Ask him/her to refer interested members to your group. Place an announcement of your meetings in the calendar section of the *SCBWI-MI News* but schedule meetings well in advance to meet newsletter deadlines. Contact Lisa Wheeler at lawheel@home.com for particulars.

If you subscribe to our Mich-Kids listserv, post a message about your new critique group. Your email message will reach all subscribers, some who may not be aware of your group. Post your meeting date a few days prior to serve as a reminder to those interested.

Actively participate in SCBWI-MI events. When you meet other members, let them know you have a critique group that is looking for more people. Bring information about your group; attendees often seek to connect with existing critique groups. Make a notation on your nametag "Join our critique group!" and people will approach you.

Consider attending Critique Meets in addition to other SCBWI-MI events. Meets are facilitated by professional authors and illustrators whose critiquing styles you may wish to observe. Have confidence; know that very successful groups often begin with just two dedicated souls.

Critiquing Advice: SCBWI-MICHIGAN Guide for Writers' Critique Groups

You, the writer-

- Decide if you wish someone else to read your piece aloud. Hearing someone else read it can be illuminating.
- Make no apologies before reading. It is helpful, however, to state that your manuscripts is or isn't in first draft, and what kind of book or story it is.
- Listen respectfully to all criticism offered and take notes. Realize that each comment is an opinion and it's up to you to evaluate its worth to you. Realize also that some comments that seem valueless now may later appear more worthy. Time is a great digestive factor.
- Be aware of visible reactions to your writing: interest, boredom, excitement, incredulity, emotional involvement.
- By the end, have a feeling for whether your manuscript is appropriate for its intended audience. What are its strengths and weaknesses? Is it satisfying? Did you hear specific suggestions for improvement?

You, the critiquer-

- ALWAYS begin with a positive comment.
- Offer all criticism tentatively, as your opinion.
- Take notes, so you can be specific.
- Avoid telling how you would handle a writing problem. It's up to the author to do the fixing.
- Keep comments relevant to the manuscript being discussed.
- State your comment once only. If the writer needs elaboration, he or she will ask for it. If your turn is over and you feel your comments have been lost to the writer, write them down and hand them to him or her. Verbal rehashing is usually counter productive.

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