

**Volume**

**4**

**DISHING AS WELL AS YOU TAKE**

---

How to give and receive diplomatic critique

**Frances Pauli**

# Table of Contents

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| The Write Group .....      | 1 |
| The Right Attitude .....   | 3 |
| Critique Group Myths:..... | 4 |
| Diplomacy .....            | 5 |
| Grace .....                | 7 |
| Embrace the Horror .....   | 8 |



## The Write Group

*Writing groups, the best and worst tool you'll ever have.*

Most authors will tell you all about the necessity of having good “beta readers,” about the importance of getting “fresh eyes” to examine your writing, and about exactly how much they owe to their “group” or “critique circle.” They will also, invariably have a horror story or two to tell about the ones that weren’t quite so helpful.

The success of any writer’s group depends on the dove-tailing of its members needs with the needs of the group as a whole. Some groups may or may not serve the form and function that appeal to you, others may have the format you’re looking for, but for whatever reason, still not make a very good fit.

When shopping for a critique circle, there are many factors to consider, not the least of being: do I really want one? Whatever your needs and preferences are, getting the right group can be vital in ensuring that your experience is positive instead of devastating.

#1 Writer’s group or beta readers.

A writer’s group is a collection of authors all of whom have needs that the group should address. The format provides a diverse pool of skills and opinions, but also requires a give and take and will not allow (or should not allow) one person to dominate with their needs at the expense of other members. If you are willing to give as well as receive, the rewards here can be enormous.

Beta readers are not necessarily other writers. Certainly, they can be, but this situation often involves readers who exchange free or early access to an author’s works for feedback. While some writer’s groups exchange beta reads, usually a beta reader situation is a one way street with the author focusing on writing and not an exchange of criticism.

#2 Writing Workshop vs. Critique Group

A writer’s group can be strictly an exercise, seminar and workshop scenario, where authors come to learn and practice their skills with little or no feedback. It can also be a heavily formatted critique circle and/or any combination of the two. If what you want is practice and exercises, a critique group where there are strict set schedules and only one author at a time, formal critique is not going to meet your needs. The same is true of the author who really only wants a critique source...the writing seminar style group is likely to prove disappointing.

## **DIPLOMATIC CRITIQUE**

### #3 Compatibility

Even if you find a group that follows the format that you seek, compatibility can be an issue on many levels. A group that focuses on poetry will have little to offer the fiction writer, and a group that stresses literary fiction can be next to useless to the commercial genre author.

With beta readers, an author must find readers who enjoy and understand their particular genre, as well as their writing style. Having a reader continually disparage your work because they simply don't like the way or what you write is not beneficial as a tool for growth.

On the same note, working in a beta or group situation with someone who has a strong personality conflict can cause more problems than it provides benefits.

### #4 Help not Ego

A group that leans too far in either direction, be it too gentle or too harsh, will be of little use to anyone. A critique circle that provides nothing but praise and positive feedback may make its members feel good, but it will do little to advance their art or careers. Conversely, a group that sets out to trash one another's work only serves to feed some twisted sense of ego and superiority. Brutality will only make an author gun-shy and defensive and far less likely to hear anything legitimate inside the feedback barrage.

## The Right Attitude

In the event that you do find the right mesh of form, function and individual factors, a feedback situation will not work if you enter it with the wrong expectations and attitude. Too often, critique or any sort of feedback is viewed as a necessary evil. That kind of perspective can set the writer off on exactly the wrong foot when it comes to surviving and thriving in a world that is all about criticism and feedback.

Any author preparing to enter into a critique situation should do some deep soul searching and examine their honest feelings about feedback. Will you be able to distance criticism of your work from criticism of yourself? Do you feel defensive just at the thought of someone suggesting you make changes to your manuscript? If someone simply disliked your work, would you be able to allow them that opinion without taking that judgment to heart?

In all honesty, the answer to at least one of these questions will probably be nope...not ready for that. Most authors feel the initial sting of feedback, the cringe and knee-jerk urge to defend; however, the important thing is to figure out if you can learn to accept and work in that situation without allowing that instinct to win over.

Whatever your initial reaction to a comment on your work, to succeed in a feedback situation the author must be able to detach, to put aside defensiveness, argument, and hostility and absolutely consider that the feedback might be completely accurate.

That's not to say you'll have to agree with it in the end, but, for at least a moment, you must be able to allow that IT MIGHT be true. Otherwise the critique process will be completely useless to you. If you answer every change with argument, every comment with defense and interpret every suggestion as attack, then you will not function well, if at all, in a feedback environment.

Opinions and suggestions that an author is unable to honestly HEAR and CONSIDER will do nothing for them or their work. Not that there is anything wrong with feeling this way about your writing, in particular at the beginning. But, if this is the case, then a critique circle will only waste your time and your partners'.

## **Critique Group Myths:**

One of the things I hear over and over from new authors in reference to getting betas or feedback is that they are afraid someone will steal their work. I'd be lying if I said this never happened, but in truth, the odds are amazingly slim, particularly if you join a group that is professional and peopled with members whose integrity you trust. The incidence of story theft in the writing industry compared to the quantity of stories told is, in fact, miniscule. If you suspect someone in your feedback circle may be the sort to plagiarize, then most likely, you are not in a group that will meet your needs in other ways either.

The second thing I hear a lot in reference to critique groups is that the members or a particular member are giving inaccurate feedback in order to “sabotage” the other members. Again, I think this is fairly rare, often a poor reaction to very accurate and valid feedback by someone who is not ready to hear it, or the result of overly harsh or non-diplomatic critiquing styles. Like above, if you believe a member of your circle is doing this, it is probably time to evaluate both your group, and your readiness to accept feedback.

# Diplomacy

Giving honest, helpful, and gentle critique is a skill that should be actively cultivated by anyone in a position to either receive or provide feedback. Bad news can be handed over in a way that makes it either palatable or reprehensible, and the reception depends not ONLY on the willingness of the receiver to hear it, but also on the ability of the critique giver to convey clearly and politely what they mean.

Simple wording changes can turn a brutal response into a pleasant one. Keeping in mind what it will feel like to be on the other end of a critique can go a long way toward aiding diplomacy. If you participate in a group situation, in fact, odds are that you will eventually find yourself on the receiving end.

## #1 SHOULD

You should do this or that will almost always trigger a defensive response. In fact, in communications training therapists recommend eliminating “should” from one’s vocabulary altogether in the name of peace. Telling someone what they should do is not suggesting, it is bossing and should be avoided in critique situations.

On a similar note, “have to” and “can’t,” “don’t,” or “never” would fall into the same category.

## #2 Opinions vs. Fact

It doesn’t matter how great you are as a writer, you do not have the authority to tell another author what they must do to their work. Any and all feedback you give is opinion. It isn’t law, and there is no one, right way to write. Keeping this in mind, the beta reader can reword things to make the same comment far more palatable.

### **Example:**

Delete this. Shorten this paragraph and tighten your prose.

vs.

I would probably delete this. If you shortened this paragraph, the flow might benefit. If this were mine, I would tighten up a bit here.

Careful attention to how you word your feedback can do wonders for how it is taken. You can say exactly the same thing without feeling like an invader storming in to take over the manuscript. In fact, a critique partner is exactly that, a partner, and should behave that way whenever possible.

### #3 A little Explanation

I can't stress how much tempering a harsh change or suggestion with a gentle comment or explanation can help smooth the process along. If you suggest a change, take a minute to explain why and see how much better your feedback is received. Also, even the roughest work will have moments where it shines. Taking the time to point out the good as well as the bad is both polite and kind.

### #4 Worthless Feedback.

I like this. I don't like this. Neither of these statements does an author any good without a detailed "WHY" attached to them. If you can't explain or articulate clearly why you do or don't like something in a work, your best bet is to say nothing. Even the compliment, I like this, won't help the author if you can't explain why. How will they know what to repeat, or why the passage is working, if you cannot communicate this clearly to them.

Much better to say, this felt a little slow, or this part really amped up the tension and made me relate to the character. If you do or don't like anything about a work, have the courtesy to give the author something specific that they can use in relation to your comment.

### #5 Giving IS receiving.

Don't waste your time in the reviewer's chair. You can learn as much from other authors' mistakes and successes as you can from your own. Grab onto that opportunity to dissect what does and doesn't work for you in a story and apply that experience to your own writing!

# Grace

Once it is your manuscript under the microscope you will understand the need for diplomacy far more easily. The flip side of diplomatic critiquing; however, is taking criticism with a measure of grace and acceptance.

We mentioned this before, but it is worth repeating. You probably will bristle a little over feedback. Most likely, at least at first, it will sting a little. But putting the effort into opening your perception and allowing for the possibility that your manuscript might need work will go miles toward making you a better writer.

The truth is: your manuscript probably isn't perfect. In fact, it probably needs a lot of work. Even if it's spectacular, the chances are there are places where it could be improved. Because of all this, and because you want to make it the best it can be, it is vital to reasonably consider the feedback you get. You owe it to yourself and your story.

With that in mind however, consider the following.

#1 You are completely autonomous as the author of the story. It is yours. No one can make you change one word of it. Even if they hate it. You are free to thank them and happily ignore every suggestion they make (though I don't recommend it). Understanding this can go a long way toward diffusing any defensiveness you may be feeling.

There is no threat in a critique, because you are free to decide to ignore it.

#2 Feedback is amazingly difficult to get. Honest feedback, doubly so. Trust me on this, your friends and family will tire of reading every little vignette you toss off on your keyboard. Eventually they will make excuses, they will get busy. Finding someone who is happy to read and report on your writing is not an easy task. Cultivate a very grateful streak in this respect or you may find yourself far more on your own than you ever intended.

#3 Late feedback is far more excruciating than anything you get BEFORE the story is public.

Think on this. The mistakes your beta readers find, the things they suggest, the errors they point out, will hurt far more **after** the story is in print—when you are powerless to fix them. (Or it is already in the public eye) I consider critique (the more brutally honest the better) as my first line of defense against public embarrassment. From that perspective, it completely changes the equation from a necessary evil, to a saving grace.

## Embrace the Horror

You may not love criticism, dear author, but you have taken a nose dive into a world that is built upon it. Resisting that fact will only make things harder for you. While you may never learn to love someone pointing out your little flaws and weaknesses, eventually, you will get used to it.

More significantly, in the spectrum of negative feedback, that first critique scenario is small potatoes. After you have thickened your skin and taken it on the chin, and stepped bravely through the process, you will be tested again.

Because the next step, my friend, is rejection. When you send that beautiful, perfectly polished story out into the wilds, the REAL feedback will begin. It will not be gentle. Often, it won't even be diplomatic.

And if you are the luckiest or the most talented author in history, and you pass the gauntlet of submission without test, you are still not out of the woods. Now you get to meet your editor. (Yes, it still needs editing—even now) And if you are still lucky and your book is perfect (not going to happen) and you pass through your edits without despair, you are still not finished.

Now you meet the reviewers. These people live to tear your story apart. It is their sole purpose. Many will love it, maybe even most will, but eventually one will not. They will also not be shy about saying so, loudly and publicly.

But maybe you are even luckier, and your story is brilliant. The reviewers, all the reviewers, shower you with praise. Are you done? No, I'm afraid the toughest test is yet to come.

Now you face the readers. Some readers will love your story. Some will detest it. No matter whom you are. If you want to test this theory, find a social event and bring up Steven King. There will be two camps that answer, and they will NOT agree on his brilliance.

Sometimes, it is the readers who love your work that will be the most critical. In particular if they feel invested in your story, if they bond with it, fan it, follow it. Eventually, you will do the wrong thing. You will kill someone they love, love someone they hate, make the wrong move, take a wrong turn, and they will tell you all about it. Again, probably loudly and publicly.

But even then, you are free to take it as a compliment. You are the author. It is your story, and you have touched someone deeply enough to evoke a reaction. Pat yourself on the back, and write on.

But know, here at the start, that the way of our world is not, not ever, for the faint of heart. We are the storytellers, and we can take it, for the story's sake, for our own sake. It is our story, but we are compelled to share it. If that makes us vulnerable to criticism, it also labels us amongst the very bravest of the brave.