

That's Debatable: Critique Groups
Pro: Critique Groups: The Support You Need
By Jodi Anderson

To critique group or not to critique group? In my opinion, the right fit in a critique group (much like a well-fitting brassiere) can be not only helpful, but uplifting as well. It can be the most important step a writer takes to improve his work.

As a writer we often find ourselves blurry-eyed from multiple readings of our work in order to tighten, correct and fill the plot holes. This can also lead to head injuries because of the banging of our forehead against the keyboard or nearest wall because of the inability to edit further. So, what is a bruised and half-blind writer to do? Why, find a critique group that is a professional mix of the editing your work needs to take it to the next level, and a sympathetic support system, of course!

While your friends and family may mean well, they are not writers (well, unless they are) and often want to spare your feelings. If you find the right critique group/partner they will share with you the things you need to do to improve your manuscript, and hopefully they will do it in a respectful manner. The key is to be part of a group that offers useful, uplifting advice that helps all the members hone their skills as writers.

Oftentimes, it is easier for us to see mistakes in the work of others. Looking critically at someone else's manuscript may help you start to see and correct similar flaws in your own. You will grow exponentially in learning about what works and what doesn't.

In setting up a critique group, make sure you set guidelines and boundaries that will help this be a productive endeavor. Getting the most from your time is important. Your first attempt at a critique group or partner may not be the right fit. When you realize this, be honest and move on to find one that is beneficial to you and the others.

A supportive, productive, and constructive critique group can make all the difference in your manuscript. But, just as importantly, they will offer the support only another writer can offer. And isn't that something we can all use? I know I can, and I get it from my critique group.

Con: Say NO to Critique Groups
By Deb Buckingham

Okay, this comes from an unpublished author of one brilliant book yet-to-be-picked-up by one brilliant agent; however, I know how to write and use words to get my story across. The use of critique groups is not something I want to entertain.

Here's my story.

I began writing a year and a half ago and finished a novel in nine months, taking the next three months to do edits with the help of one fabulous editor.

I found myself lurking in critique groups to see what all the hype was about, when I heard them criticize the work of those yet to find their voice. I want those who critique me to be somewhat above my level of writing or, at the very least, where I currently am. How can I "trust" those that critique to know what they're talking about? How can I take what they say and change everything they suggest only to find that my voice is gone, and everything I thought I knew about my story is now something completely different? I'm a

good writer, dang it!

Critique groups are just that: a place for people to be taken down a peg--criticized for the work they created. Okay, maybe it's not that bad, but people definitely walk away feeling like what they wrote wasn't good enough. Not that I'm perfect, because God knows I'm not. I'm just sayin'.

It's hard to find a group where writing level, focus, and critiquing philosophy is the same. And then there are the groups that make you take the work home with you. Now you have 10 stories to critique—where do you fit that in with your own writing timelines? I found myself procrastinating, and then ranting and raving because I did just that.

My other concern is that critique groups can be out of tune with each others' genre. I write romance/mom-lit, something kind of new to the writing world. Something a bit more humorous than your typical romance, consisting of a 40-year-old wife and mother trying to find herself in the rut of everyday life. I never ran across anyone who wrote that, so when they (those who signed up to be in this critique group) honed in on my work, they just plain didn't get it. That was hard for me to explain, so I just stopped. "You don't get it," is all I kept saying. If I could find a group that was made up of published writers in my genre, I might consider it, if the levels matched, and the philosophies matched...and...and...

With all that said, it is my opinion, and only one opinion. You have to decide what works for you and if you're willing to put yourself out there. I, on the other hand, would prefer not to. I say, "Say NO to Critique Groups."

*Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume VIII, Issue 6,
November, December 2009*