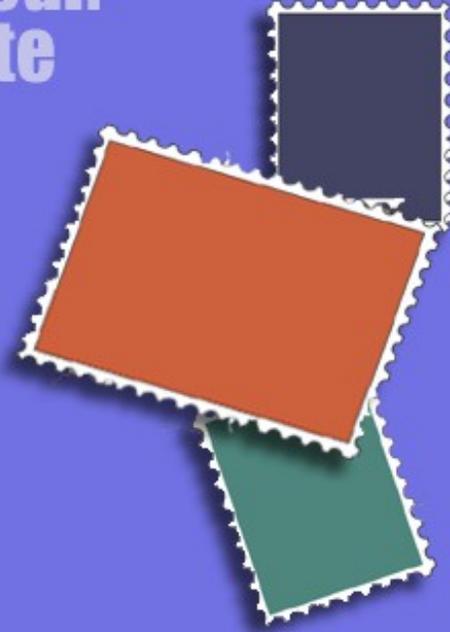


Writing From the Soul: Critiques Don't Bite

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The members of the MuseItUp Club are proud to offer you this **FREE** ebook. Within, you'll find helpful information on why and how critiques are an important area in a writer's life.

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Contents

Don't Be Afraid – Critiques Don't Hurt

By Lea Schizas

The Importance of Being a Careful Critiquer

By Tessa Johnstone

Writing Features – Critiquing Groups Effectively Improve Writing Results

by Jan Verhoeff

Critique Group Essay

By J. D. Webb

The Value of the Critique or The Invaluable Critique

By Charles Mossop

Critique Groups

By Lisa Haselton

Critique Groups: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

By Nancy Famolari

Critiques Do Help

By Jennifer Payton

My Critique Group

By Susan Stephenson

Helpful Writing Tool

By Jessica Kennedy

My Writing Career?

By Christine I. Speakman

Don't Stay Married To Your Words

By Donna M. McDine

Alpha Muser Artichoke: My Critique Group

By Michele M. Graf:

Guest appearances by: Amber – Bob – Gloria – Katie – Susan

The Benefits of Joining a Critique Group

By Gloria Oren

Introduction

"I'm a writer."

"Wow, that's so cool. Do you have an editor?"

"Um...no, they're too expensive."

"So you're editing your own work?"

"Yeah, why?"



Wow, that last question really punches reality to a seasoned writer. New writers read their work, edit to the best of their capability, and then when the rejections roll in they have no idea why.

It's because writers aren't the best subjects to review their own work. They know their stories inside out and miss obvious plot holes other readers will notice.

Within *Writing from the Soul: Critiques Don't Bite* you'll find valuable information from members of The MuseItUp Club, an award-winning writing community.

Their insight as to why critique groups are important, how they can help you, and why you should join one will inspire and motivate you.

And now, without further delay, we welcome you to

Writing From the Soul: Critiques Don't Bite

Don't Be Afraid – Critiques Don't Hurt By Lea Schizas



I'll never forget my first experience in a critique group. Some would say 'what a horrible experience', whereas I claim it was the best thing that ever happened to my writing career.

I was a newbie writer, no, let me clarify this. I've always had the passion to write. Won a few competitions in high school and then I got married once I graduated. It wasn't until 1999 when I picked up my first Writer's Digest magazine that the Muse began to enter my system. By then I had five kids and old enough they didn't need mommy 24/7. It was the year 2000 when I finally woke up from my self-induced coma of taking care of everyone else's needs but my own.

As a newbie writer introduced once again to the craft I wanted to join a few writers groups and critique groups to get in the swing of things. My writers groups, two that I distinctly remember, contained writers who hogged information. They would brag they sent out a query, or a submission, but when asked 'where' they clammed up as though the mere words blinded them some how. It didn't take me very long to realize these writers were very insecure about themselves because if they were confident they wouldn't fear other writers having the information and possibly submitting to the same venue as them.

Anyway...

My first critique group did not have any order, or at least I realized much later in time when I did join others with guidelines. This first critique group allowed members to sub whenever. No guidance as to how many should have critiqued. Many times there were no critiques offered. Once again, it slowly donned on me that critiques were given to 'cyber pals' and not to newcomers. I left that group within a couple of months.

The next critique group contained a more orderly guideline – once you critiqued someone else's piece then you were able to hand one in yourself. I did. My first critique – the one I am and will always be grateful for – was from a man. His words are still fresh in my head as though it was yesterday:

“Are you sure you want to be a writer? Why don't you stick with hairdressing.”

That, my dear friends, was the wisdom that started my writing career. Why? Because those words pissed me off so much I just had to show him that I did, indeed, have talent but searching for some guidance. I stuck it out because that is my personality. I will not give up because someone else told me so and that is exactly what you should never do. Do not quit because someone else does not have the grace and finesse to critique the right way.

As writers, we are the masters and creators of our work. We know exactly where we're heading with a story. However, when you have several writers pointing at the same passage, then as the master you must come down from your podium and objectively look at your work through their interpretations and thoughts. Only you have the mighty pen to change what will suit your manuscript, but you are risking a rejection if you do not, at least openly and honestly, reread your work with a reader's point of view. After all, the critiques are given based on what these writers are reading, so technically, they are your first readers.

A good critique group offers the good, the bad, and the very ugly. If you are afraid of criticism my advice to you is to get a tough skin. Critiques are like reviews – not all of them will be good. So get used to it. I personally love the groups that blend, dissect, toss, chop up, and spit out my manuscript because it's through these types of groups I know my work will only improve. These critique groups are honest but not rude. There is no room for rudeness or bashing. Critiques can be offered in diplomatic ways without any hurt feelings. The hurt feelings come in when a writer cradles their baby (AKA manuscript) and refuses to change anything. Then why join a critique group?

Before joining any critique group you must remember these points:

- Do not have your guard up. No one is out to get you.
- Be honest with your work and actually look at the areas others are telling you more work needs to be done
- Do not offer a negative critique to someone just because they did to you. We are not in high school anymore.
- Do not skim and offer a weak critique to someone because you have no time to 'really' look at their work. Be honest and tell them you will be a tad late because you are up to your eyeballs in work. We're humans with outside commitments so I am sure your members will understand. But make sure to hand one in.
- When you join a critique group and you are given their guidelines, look them over carefully, see if you can commit to their routine. The worse thing is to have everyone introduced to you, set a schedule, and then you disappear because you can't handle it. When you are told you will be critiquing once a week, you should know right off if that is something you can handle.

Critique groups offer many benefits to a writer:

Making contacts

Networking with other writers

Improving your work – and this last point is very important because many writers miss the most important area: when you critique other manuscripts you are honing your own work in

the process. How? By reading and spotting other writers' mistakes you will subconsciously avoid making those similar mistakes.

Now put on your tough skin and join a critique group.

Lea Schizas is an award-winning author and editor. She is the founder of the MuseItUp Club, The Muse Online Writers Conference, co-founder of Apollo's Lyre, and many yahoo groups. She is the mother of five and proud to say she still maintains some sanity.

Her newest book is a middle grade chapter book: Bubba and Giganto: Odds Against Us available through Barnes and Noble and other major online stores. It is published by 4RV Publishing. For more information on Lea Schizas, link here: <http://www.leaschizas.com>

The Importance of Being a Careful Critiquer by Tessa Johnstone



One of the most important influences on a writer is how his/her work is received. Not all of us were blessed with an encouraging parent. Growing up, I struggled with words to convey what I saw with my imagination, and met with resistance from those close to me. While my friends who said “what happens next?” certainly taught me how to plot, it was the friends who pointed out exactly where my story was unclear who really helped me to improve. Although it might not always seem like it, all comments on your writing can be worthwhile. Even if someone tells me they stopped reading on page three, that shows me I have to improve the pacing. If a critic tries too hard to poke holes in my story, that says more about his subjectivity than my writing. If I hold my temper I can find a nugget of useful advice in the harshest criticism.

In many of the writing classes and workshops I've taken, egos often get in the way. Some students seem to take a class only in the hope of being discovered, and published, which produces a far too competitive environment for learning. Many writers' groups start well but often turn into a mutual admiration society, afraid to hurt anyone's feelings. I have found the MuseItUp Club to be far more useful than a class or a face-to-face critique group, because I'm able to draw on the collective wisdom of 160-plus writers at different stages of their careers. The members are spread across Canada, the USA and Britain (some of us roam even farther - I am currently living in Switzerland). All of us are dedicated to making the critique group work, on both a small and large scale. The smaller groups are broken down by genre, so I can trust that my horror stories will be read and critiqued by people who understand the premise. When I'm ready to send my work to editors, I can count on my fellow Musers to guide me to the right markets and give me practical advice.

Learning to critique other writers on a weekly basis has been a useful tool for revising and editing my own work. Critiquing is a skill that must be learned through conscious application of certain principles. It requires objectivity and tact, but also requires reading with a more intense eye, and always with the writer's best interests at heart. Reading as a critiquer is not the same as reading as an editor, reviewer, or average reader.

When I critique, I read the piece at least three times. I read the first time for "gist," looking for what's the plot, who are the characters, where's it taking place, and so on. I read a second time for "errors" and "nit-picks," because grammar is our friend in communicating exactly what we mean. If something isn't clear to me, I try to intuit what the writer meant and offer

specific suggestions. The third time I read the submission over to look for general strengths and weaknesses.

Yes, this is a lot of work. Trust me, it gets easier with practice. And then a miracle will occur. You start to see your own stories in the same light. You think about who, what, why, where, how. You catch grammatical errors in your rewrite. You acknowledge the weak spots in your story and revise to fix them. You forgive yourself for mistakes. Learning to critique your fellow writer's work in-depth actually helps you to improve your own.

The MuseItUp Club exists entirely in cyberspace, another great advantage over many other groups. Those of us who are unable to make regular meetings in specific locations are able to participate in a serious critique group online. We offer each other emotional support, encouragement and the occasional prod in the right direction. We cheer our successes and console each other for rejections.

I am grateful to the Muse it up Club for the opportunity to grow and improve as a writer that would otherwise be unavailable to me. Life in the US Foreign Service has provided me with a varied resume and granted me much time to write. My stories have appeared in Noneuclidean Cafe, Crimson Highway, Dark Fire Fiction and Grim Graffiti Magazines, and I have a story forthcoming in Sinister Tales Magazine.

Writing Features - Critiquing Groups Effectively Improve Writing Results

By Jan Verhoeff



Words converge on the paper, I can't imagine not writing. The alternative isn't acceptable. I believe writing is not only therapeutic, but required in my life. Even when I'm not sitting at the computer, or in front of a pad of paper, I'm thinking about words. I'm putting words together in sentences and spewing them at those who surround me. Writing is breathing for me. It's mandatory.

My friends write, my family writes, writing is a genetic consequence of my DNA. I can't imagine not writing. My family and friends are my critiques. They critique what I say, what I write, what I do, and most of what I am. Is this a good thing? Of course, critiquing hones the craft.

Because I write in various genres, I have many critique groups to whom I pay homage. Kids Muse is my children's genre critique group and once a month (or so) I submit my work to this group and they review my children's writings. Sometimes I write something about children, submit it, and get a rash of reviewer comments that it wasn't FOR children, which usually annoys me, at first, until I reread the piece myself. It's amazing how often parenting gets in the way of writing for children. Parenting comes naturally. It influences my writing.

The critique helps me to focus my articles to the specific genre where they need to go. When my business counsel meets and reads through a piece only to commend me for my efforts at humor writing, I know that piece shouldn't go to the latest business trade journal. Can we say REWRITE?

But rewriting isn't really part of my genre. I try to avoid rewriting an article to fit a different genre. Instead, I write a new article for that genre and post my old article in the genre that it expressly fits. It works. By writing a new article, instead of adjusting, I find that I have two articles I can sell, distribute, and promote. Some of those articles become promotional writings, submitted to places like www.ezinearticles.com for self-promotional purposes to drive people to my websites, and others I can sell, or offer to magazines, web sites, ezines, or other paying distribution points.

Critique groups offer more than critiquing. They offer encouragement, motivation, and dedication to the craft. Some groups offer this in restrictive and compulsive writing requirements. I must write in that genre (or close) to submit to the group, and do so on a schedule. It keeps me moving in that direction. I keep writing. The groups offer resources, support, and the occasionally necessary discipline. Everyone needs structure. Critique groups offer structure.

Belonging to a critique group is like having a boss. You suddenly become accountable for your work, your efforts, and your results. You MUST move forward. Staying in a field of limbo isn't possible, you must strive to achieve. Achievements and accomplishments are an expected part of a critique group. If you're not achieving something, they begin to wonder what you're doing there, and they ASK. Critique Groups become auspiciously like your mother. They inquire as to what you're wasting your time on. They remind you that you're needed HERE. They become focused on who you are, help you find yourself, and remind you that you're not accomplishing much - if that's the case.

When you find yourself struggling with the overwhelming realities of life, critique groups, show you how to move beyond those disruptions and back to writing. By example they infuse dedication to your craft. Others experience similar issues, share them, and by sharing find encouragement for their own difficult moments in life.

Often I find critique groups as important to my own craft as publication. My work is safe in the group. We all have the same quandary, we can't publish the work, but we must be able to critique it. We must have a support network to encourage, read our work, and tell us if it's worth the effort to continue. Whether I blog about it on my writer blog at www.writertoughts.com or post a short story, essay or article on the critiquing site at www.lamarco.us/writers or share information about conferences, writing or speaking engagements and other writer publications at www.acewriters.com the requisite critique group means I have other writers who will look at, review and authenticate the value of my efforts, without publication.

Writers who do not network for resources, don't actually get very far in the business of writing. They don't accomplish much.

Jan Verhoeff services several genre, playfully capturing the hearts of her readers with various remedies, solutions and conclusions that support a selection of issues. Resisting the art of purple prose, Jan finds her specialty in professional writing, but soothes her creative spirit with adventures for children, loosely defined poetry, and journaling essays about the acts of living. You can find her work, or a list of her efforts, at www.janverhoeff.com along with links to friends, businesses, and others who may benefit your writing efforts.

After a year of community college, a failed anger management class, and one less Political Science Instructor, Jan Verhoeff settled right into driving a truck. 486 pages and 200,000 miles later and Jan had written her first book, a horror of sorts, called "The Ooze from Hell" It bombed with the first publisher, and has never been heard from since. But Jan knew driving a truck wasn't her cup of tea.

She played secretary, parts runner, and bridal designer, long enough to figure out that she should have been a writer. Motherhood created the opportunity. As a stay at home mom, Jan had time to write and spent that time figuring out what genre to write. Within a short while she realized that to make money at writing, she'd have to stay in a common field, and she wrote business articles for magazines and business publications.

Fulfillment took another turn, a sharp turn to the left, and Jan began writing children's stories for her own children. Drama became a part of those writings, along with mystery, and enough adventure to keep life hopping. In 2001 she was reading "The Hardy Boys" to her growing boys and the youngest one spoke up and said, "Mom, why do all kids stories have two parents. Not all kids have two parents."

Within a few hours Jan prepared a query letter, offering the idea to a prominent publisher. Rejected. Several more rejections followed, and Jan started writing the books. Writing the books offered a means of communicating to her children that it was okay to be part of a single parent family. Getting them published seemed to be the problem. Self-Publication became the option.

Writing had to be profitable. As a single mom, Jan had to earn enough to keep the kids in college, keep wheels on the car and potato soup on the table. Something had to give. Copywriting can be quite profitable. Jan learned to write copy and content for the Internet. Marketing was a great way to increase her income and she loved it. Jan Verhoeff became a profitable writer, pursuing her favorite topics, business and kids.

For more information about Jan visit her website at <http://janverhoeff.com> or her business site at <http://acewriters.com> to learn about writing for profit.

Critique Group Essay by J. D. Webb



Anyone who says they don't welcome help with a writing project from a critique group is losing out on ways to improve his/her writing. I have been involved with the Museicians long fiction group in the MuseItUp club for over two years. This group of excellent writers gives me a chance to look at my work from a different perspective. I submit my stories to a competent and wonderful writing group before I submit it to the Museicians. They critique it again and their salient and insightful comments when infused into my work make it better.

One of the important aspects of this group is that they are gentle but honest in their assessment of what I submit. And when one of them says they don't like a particular scene or paragraph, they have a darn good reason. I treasure each and every comment made. After I take the Museicians' suggestions and read back my story, I smile when I realize that piece has been strengthened. It's like having a quality editor revamp the book before it goes to publication. In this case, before it goes to an agent for representation.

Authors are bombarded with rejection and disappointment. My Muse group always has something nice to say about a paragraph or phrase that I've worked hard to perfect. And often they have a way to improve upon my "perfection". I would feel an integral part of my writing team was missing if I could not capitalize upon their input.

Many writers hesitate to expose secret ideas for their unpublished work. Someone might steal the idea. I think all the original ideas have been used. We authors add conflict or suspense to formulae concocted long ago. And suppose someone "copied" your idea? Do you think they will approach it exactly the same way using your exact words? Of course not. Frankly, I don't mind getting a sense of whether my idea is a good one or needs work. It may have a fatal flaw, which needs correction.

One of the benefits of this group is that we regularly must submit work. It forces us to meet a deadline, which we must do to be successful in the real world. We have to practice our craft and that is immensely valuable. You cannot improve if you don't write.

In a critique group be ready for honest criticism, criticism that will likely hurt the first time, perhaps every time. Some members will deliver that criticism more bluntly than others. You might consider it a disheartening experience, but remember that what you're getting are only opinions, and every group is made up of disparate personalities, each with different tastes. All critiquers are there to improve their writing. They figure that's why you're there, too. So accept the criticisms you agree with, thank everyone who offered a critique, and consider this

preparation for the publishing process -- for the time when you'll have a real editor going over your manuscript and asking for changes prior to publication. Having your work critiqued takes courage; the feedback you receive can seem harsh. But it's the only way you'll know whether you're improving as a writer, and it's the most constructive proving ground for your story before you submit it for publication.

Another advantage is that this is one place you can “talk shop” and no one is bored. We all like to talk about writing. Not everyone wants to listen. Make no mistake – some critique groups are good and some just wish to bash everyone else. A good critique group is a valuable asset. If you get into a bashing type group – get out. We get enough bashing from professionals. My philosophy is the more people who read and comment on my work, the better.

I profoundly thank, Charles Mossop, Jennifer Payton, Jill Brock and Paula Graham. I could not ask for a wiser, more competent bunch of friends. You are the purveyors of constructive criticism in the finest sense of the term.

J. D. (Dave) Webb resides in Illinois with his wife of 40 years and their toy poodle, Ginger, losing all family votes 2 to 1. Dave became a full-time author in 2002 after spending 25 years in corporate management. A company purge promoted him to cobbler and he owned a shoe repair and sales shop for 11 years. During these careers he wrote short stories and suppressed an urge to write a novel. After making a conscious decision to live at the poverty level, those novels began forcing their way out.

Mystery author J D Webb www.jdwebb.com
Shepherd's Pie (Golden Wings Award Winner)
Moon Over Chicago (2008 Eppie finalist)
Her Name Is Mommy (Now Available)
The Smudge (coming 2008)
Aftermath (coming 2009)
Published by www.wings-press.com

The Value of the Critique
or
The Invaluable Critique
By Charles Mossop



When I retired from a long career in post-secondary education during which I had published many nonfiction articles and essays, I promised myself I would follow a long-held dream of writing a historical novel. I had read some historical novels over the years as time allowed, and was anxious to see if I could produce one myself. I had a storyline in mind for some time, and so, six years ago after two busy years of retirement and after thinking and re-thinking the storyline, I finally sat down at my computer and created a file called Jade Hunter.

From the moment I typed the first word, I knew two things: first, I absolutely loved writing fiction, and second, I was determined to get Jade Hunter published if I possibly could. Well, ultimately it was published in June of 2007, but only after many revisions and the excising of just over 56,000 words of sub-plot and sheer verbosity I finally realized I just didn't need. I smoothed out the dialogue, sharpened up the descriptions, worked out problems of point of view (POV) and clarified the characters.

And all of this was done through the help of other writers who candidly but gently showed me where I was going wrong. It was from those writers, those good friends, who generously shared their skills with me that I learned the inestimable value of the critique.

I did not work on the novel to the exclusion of everything else, however. I had always enjoyed short stories, mysteries in particular, and after about eight months of steady work on the novel I started two short stories. One was set in Ming Dynasty China, and the other aboard a British warship of the late eighteenth century. They were both murder mysteries and they established two characters about whom I still write today. The first is Magistrate Lin Jiang of the city of Xiaolong in China, and the second is Captain Sir John Square of His Britannic Majesty's Royal Navy.

It was during an Internet search for a magazine to which I could submit these stories for possible publication – neither of them was finished, by the way, but I had high hopes nevertheless – that I came across information on an entity called The Museitup Club. The

very strangeness of the name intrigued me and I explored a little further. It wasn't long before I discovered that if you joined the club you were placed by the moderator into a four or five person critique group to which each member in turn submitted samples of their work to be scrutinized by the other members.

"Not likely," said I.

I had visions of my writing coming back with comments on it such as don't quit your day job, or simply good grief, but in spite of those visions there was a small part of me that harbored a desire to know what other writers might think of my work. In addition, I was fast coming to the conclusion that there were important things I needed to learn about the craft of writing. That is to say, in my work on the novel and the two short stories I knew I could handle the history well enough, but I was realizing there were a lot of things I didn't know about plotting, POV, characterization and other such things.

So with a good deal of trepidation, I wrote an email to the moderator and asked, tentatively, mind you, about joining. She told me there was a specific group for mystery writers, and that I should send her a sample of my work. I did that, albeit rather nervously, and soon found myself a member of a critique group called the Museicians.

In a couple of weeks or so my turn came around and I submitted to the group the first part of the story about Lin Jiang, my Ming Dynasty crime-fighting civic magistrate. The story was called Magistrate Lin and the Testimony of the Household Gods, and I awaited the critiques with a combination of excitement and something close to dread. By the time my turn had come I had seen the group's critiques of other people's submissions, and they were thoughtful, careful pieces of work. I was impressed. But, I said to myself, these people are writers, whereas I am not. One or two of them were even published authors, and I began to wonder what I was doing by getting involved in this process.

As the week rolled by the critiques came in one by one, and I found myself in a completely new world. Yes, they identified many problems, but they certainly did not look on my story with disdain or condescension. On the contrary, their critiques were full of helpful information, great tips, and helpful suggestions. They were honest and forthright, but never abrasive. I revised that part of the story according to their advice, and when my turn came around again, I submitted another couple of thousand words. More help, more suggestions, more revisions.

The important thing I noticed immediately was that the revisions or corrections were left up to me. Everyone invited me to consider their suggestions, but made it clear it was I who had the final choice about what I did. That's a critical point, because that is how the story remained mine and was not turned into something essentially written by someone else.

Eventually, with the help of the Museicians, I revised and reworked the entire story. As I read the critiques of my work and that of others in the group I also learned a great deal about editing and about how to provide useful critiques to other writers without usurping their ownership of their work.

A few weeks after finishing the story, I sent a query letter (the secrets of which, incidentally, I had also learned from the Museitup Club members and the club moderator) to a mystery magazine and was astounded when they replied and asked for the manuscript. It was the first place I had tried, and I had heard all manner of tales about endless rejections before finally being published, but two weeks later they sent an email asking if I would allow them to publish the Magistrate Lin story. Allow them? Were they kidding?

I know now that in its original form, no one would have touched the story. It had become a publishable piece because of the critiques I had received and the consequent changes I had made based on sound, constructive criticism. The value of those critiques cannot be overestimated.

Over the years that followed I submitted many other stories to the Museicians, and I learned more and more all the time. I took what I had learned and applied it to Jade Hunter and reworked the entire manuscript. Having learned to value the critique as a tool for improvement and learning, I asked three people who were not members of the Museicians to read the manuscript. I did not submit any sections of Jade Hunter to the Museicians, but I made use of the lessons learned. After the trial readings were finished I sent a query letter to a publisher recommended to me by the moderator of the Museitup Club. I sent it on Christmas Eve to be precise, confident the editors would not read it until after the holidays when they might perhaps be in a good mood! However, there was an almost immediate response with a request for the manuscript. Two weeks later came the offer of a contract to publish.

I am still a member of the Museicians, and continue to learn from my friends and colleagues in the group. It was through their critiques that I was ultimately able to publish my work. I have now had ten short stories published as well as the novel, and I have a second novel in its final revision stages. I have been invited to contribute to anthologies, and I also write a monthly column in *The Muse Marquee*, an online publication for writers. I am also on the editorial staff of a mystery magazine; a position in which I am able to use the editorial and critique skills I continue to learn from the Museicians.

It is vital to have your work read by others and to listen to the critiques they offer. Very few writers indeed are able to work in isolation. You need to be in touch with others, to read their work and let them read yours. My membership in the Museicians is a sort of on-going apprenticeship, a learning experience that continues to prove invaluable. I owe my career as a writer to the care and attention the Museicians pay to the critiques they offer.

So, if you have not yet taken the step of letting your work be read by others, I urge you to do so soon. It is one of the most important things you can do.

Retired after a thirty-two year academic career, Charles Mossop now lives on Vancouver Island where he writes historical fiction, works in his garden and continues his study of classical guitar. Thanks to his background in anthropology and oriental studies, his work as a university teacher and administrator involved travel throughout the world including over fifty visits to China, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Europe. A lover of mystery stories, his flash fiction has appeared in *Flashshot* (<http://flashshot.tripod.com>) and

his short story “Magistrate Lin and the Testimony of the Household Gods” will soon appear in “Over My Dead Body,” (<http://www.overmydeadbody.com>).

Charles’s stories are usually set in fifteenth century China or eighteenth century Europe, and in the latter case he specializes in maritime history and life aboard wooden-walled ships of war. As he says, “Murder and intrigue can be found everywhere; all you have to do is select a place to put them.”

Critique Groups by Lisa Haselton



Writers are a solitary sort. Writing, as with any craft, can't be improved upon without feedback. I've been a part of a few types of critique groups over the years. Each one had its own dynamic, strengths and weaknesses.

I had a local weekly writing/critique group which gave positive feedback only. I might know what you're thinking right now. But, hear me out. It was an open group, meaning anyone could stop in any week and participate. There wasn't any attendance; no one kept tabs. It was total free will. The first portion of the two-hour meeting was open to people who brought a piece they'd worked on from the previous week. Each individual read their piece out loud and got feedback – positive only. Bear with me. Next, the group decided on a prompt. It could be anything: a word, a picture, a phrase, something from a writing prompt book, whatever, as long as everyone agreed to it. Then folks agreed to a time limit and wrote for that amount of time on the given prompt. The group gathered back at the set time and had a round robin. Everyone who wanted to read their piece read it and received positive comments. We went around the group until all who wanted to share had a chance. The 'only positive' comments put me off at first, but, honestly, how can you critique a piece that was written off the cuff in less than 30 minutes? People spoke to what worked for them, and it built confidence – gave me new ideas. I learned some things that worked and some that didn't.

At first I didn't think the group would help me. I was used to formal groups where certain people were expected to bring/submit certain pieces for each meeting. But I found this group immensely beneficial for my muse. I showed up each week with my blank page, and when I went home after a couple of hours I had a short story. It could be the start of something longer. It could be complete. It could be total crap. It could be a masterpiece. But, you know what? I never would have had it if I hadn't gone to the group. Benefits of this group: It pushed me out of my 'normal' writing and gave me a totally different aspect to add to my experience. It's always quite interesting to see how a group of writers tackle the same prompt, which leads me to new ideas. And with a group of individuals all writing on the exact same prompt, it proves to me that no one can write the same piece I write. And, it's amazingly powerful to become comfortable hearing your own voice reading your own words in a public venue – great for building confidence.

The most beneficial formal in-person critique group I belonged to was a group that met monthly for three hours. It was a group of six and our format was that everyone would bring a piece, or pieces, to each meeting. A certain amount of time was allowed for reading and more time for verbal critiques. Someone other than the author read the work. The author sat and listened to the piece being read, then sat quietly as the group talked about what they liked and what they felt could be improved. At the end of the timed crit, the author could ask a couple of questions for clarification, but mostly the author was there to gather comments and not debate opinions given. The group was a mixture of poets, fiction

writers, memoir, short story, and novel writers. Benefits of this group: I learned a lot by hearing someone unrelated to the piece read it out loud. Issues were quickly apparent.

I've taken quite a few writing classes over the years and they generally offer critiques from the instructor, and in a few instances, from the entire class. One particular class in the past year was a full-class critique on every submission. We each only had one chance to submit one piece. On my submission, each person found a different area to comment on – no two crits were similar. That was a real eye opener. Sure there were points of agreement with the overall storyline or characters, but every critique was unique, and what I came away with was the true understanding that submitting a piece for publication is a matter of getting the manuscript in front of the right person at the right time. Everyone has an opinion based on experiences to date. Having one person totally disagree with a word or a line or a paragraph or a chapter isn't the end of the world. I take the comments I agree with and make changes, others I keep in the back of my mind in case they come up again. Benefits of this group: Realizing it's up to me to write the story "I" want to write. I can accept or ignore any feedback based on what works for me.

As of this writing I belong to two online critique groups. One for short stories and one geared to novel writing. Each has submission dates and every person crits all submissions. In the short story group I submit a piece every five weeks and crit one piece each of the other four weeks. The novel group currently has two submission dates per month and we all submit and critique each time. Benefits of these groups: Written critiques for everything I submit. Comfort of working on the pieces whenever my schedule allows. Perhaps more honest feedback because there is the lack of face-to-face contact.

In any critique group I am exposed to other writing styles and other author voices. I learn by doing. I learn by listening. I learn by participating. I feel all of that adds to my ability to improve my own writing. More importantly, I have built many relationships over the years with other writers, and there is nothing better than writers helping writers. Because of my critique groups I have found markets to submit to, contests to enter, and new subjects I'm interested in pursuing. I believe that getting published has a lot to do with networking, and for a shy person, that concept is overwhelmingly scary. Because of my critique groups, and because I've learned that one negative opinion doesn't mean I'm a poor writer, and because I've been encouraged to submit my pieces, I have become published – and all of that started with critique groups.

Critiques do help. It certainly takes some adjusting to receiving critiques on a piece that is near and dear to your heart, but once you learn to listen to what is being said without taking it personally, your writing will improve. Good writing is needed in publications, and I can't imagine how I could continue to grow as a writer without working in some type of critique group. Writers are lucky when an editor or publisher sends back comments on a submitted piece. A critique group can be one person for a brief moment in time. But any feedback is better than no feedback, if a writer wants to improve.

I write because I have to. If I don't write I feel incomplete. I want to improve my writing and learn new techniques and meet other writers. So, for me, critique groups are a part of my writing life. I don't agree with everything everyone tells me about my piece. All

comments are opinions. I consider them and use what works for me to make my writing voice as strong as it can be.

Bio: Lisa Haselton is a fiction writer who mostly enjoys mystery and suspense, but also writes horror, humor, romance and poetry. She thanks the various critique groups she has belonged to as well as individual crit partners and classmates for aiding her in getting published. Without feedback, she couldn't fine tune her writing, nor reap the benefits of other points of view.

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Critique Groups: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

By Nancy Famolari



Critique groups can be either good, bad, or frankly ugly. As a writer hoping to improve your craft, you need to be an informed consumer. To achieve the benefits of a critique group you must make a choice that gives you a helpful rather than harmful experience.

During the past several years I have been a member of a variety of critique groups on-line and face-to-face and have experienced both the good and the bad. So far, I have escaped the ugly. Good critique groups can be invaluable. They give you insight into how others view your writing. Since many of us wear rose-colored glasses, and that's putting it mildly, when we read our own prose, getting some else's input can be invaluable. Reviewing someone else's work is equally beneficial. From experience, I can report that finding another's errors is far easier than finding your own, but it sensitizes you to things you should look for in your own work. If there are more experienced writers in the group, you can learn a great deal from their crits.

Critique groups come in many varieties; some are more valuable than others. James N. Frey in "How to Write a Damn Good Novel" distinguishes between "puff" groups and "destructive" groups. I think the term "destructive" is a bit over stated, but in fact it's the kind of group you want. Puff groups are happy, touchy-feely, primarily social groups. Negative criticism is discouraged. Every story you read is wonderful. You learn nothing from crits like that. They can make you feel happy that someone besides your mother, providing she isn't a group member, likes your work, but when the rejections pile up, you have to wonder about the advice you're getting. I have found that face-to-face groups are often like this, although they can also fall in the "destructive" category. Perhaps these groups avoid hard criticism because they don't want to offend people they know. Failure to give hard criticism is a cop out. You learn nothing. I stopped attending groups like that because they were a waste of my time.

"Destructive" groups, or I prefer "tough" groups, are beneficial if your goal is to improve your craft. In this type of group the members give hard criticism. They let you know where your story isn't cutting it. This may be difficult to take and it requires more work, but in the end it helps you get published. I have found on-line groups are often tough groups, perhaps because of the line-by-line crits and written feedback. I belong to several of these groups on the Muse and they are responsible for helping me get published. I would never have written, let alone published, in spec fiction without Mike Kechula's group. He makes you work and he's not an easy critic, but getting published regularly makes all the work worthwhile.

Likewise, the novel groups I belong to, Aphrodite's Muse and Muse-it-or-Lose-It, have helped me see the holes in my novels. I have a contract for a novel critiqued by one of these groups.

Finally, an ugly group is one that causes you to believe you have no talent in writing, and should look for a profession that requires minimal exposure to the written word. Often these groups are not intentionally ugly, it's simply a mismatch between the writer and the type of criticism the group provides. I mentioned in the beginning that you have to be an educated consumer. If you want to write detective fiction, don't join a romance group. If you want to write mainstream or genre fiction, a literary group is not for you. You may be able to learn something from being in a group outside your interest area, but too often it's discouraging to have criticism based on a different set of values. Criticism that doesn't focus on the problem at hand, even if well intentioned, may discourage you from pursuing your dream.

My advice is, "Shop around!" Not all critique groups are created equal; if the one you're in doesn't share your goals, or has a level of criticism that is either too hard or too easy for your stage of development – move on. There are many, many groups; find one that will help you become the writer you aspire to be. I guarantee they're out there.

Nancy Famolari is retired. She lives with her husband, five horses, two dogs and five white cats on a farm in the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania. Her stories and poems have appeared in Long Story Short, Flash Shot, Fiction Flyer, Lyrica, Alien Skin Magazine, Clockwise Cat and Matters of the Heart from the Museitup Press. She received an award from Fiction Flyer for one of her flash fiction stories. "Summer's Story," a novel based on her fourteen years of experience breeding, training and racing Standardbred horses, will be available soon from Red Rose Publishing. Her cozy mystery, Murder in Montbleu will be available from Red Rose Publishing in 2009.

Critiques Do Help By Jennifer Payton



I've been writing for as long as I can remember. When most of the neighborhood children were out playing during the summer and after school, I was content to sit in my room with a pen and paper and write. I also liked to draw, but as the years passed, writing overpowered my interest in art and became my true passion.

Though I've never been published, that is my goal, and I decided if I was ever going to achieve that goal, I would have to let others read my work and give me feedback on it. Not an easy thing to do for a person who is very private, very unsure of herself and her abilities, and by nature very sensitive. I had a teacher who always encouraged me in my writing, and she would read my work and give me feedback. She is the reason I kept writing, even when I felt I had no talent and didn't think I could go anywhere with it. She always told me that I could make a living as a writer and to this day, I consider her a mentor.

I knew, however, that I would need more than one person's opinion of my work. People interpret things differently. Multiple people who read the same piece of work often don't see that work the same way. Since I hadn't had much luck finding any writing groups in my area, I decided to take a creative writing class through our local community college and see if anyone knew of any. We have a major university here, so I thought there had to be some kind of writing group in existence.

The class was wonderful, as was the instructor, and I learned a lot. I met some talented writers and a handful of us ended up forming our own writing group. We met weekly and we would read and critique each other's work. Everyone would bring one chapter and we'd all listen as the author read it aloud, making notes as he or she read. Then, we would go around the table and give our impressions and feedback. When I give feedback I always try to highlight the positive first, and I try to convey the negative as diplomatically as possible. Unfortunately, no matter how well you feel you've delivered constructive feedback, some people don't like to hear that their writing isn't perfect. As a result, our writing group went from eight members to three.

The first group critique of my work that I ever received was a tough one. No one likes to be told their work isn't as good as they thought it was. I'm a basher by nature, which means I beat each chapter into submission with multiple editing passes before moving on to the next one. It should be perfect after all that work, right? Not necessarily, and that was hard to hear.

I particularly struggled when I was presented with feedback that resulted in a lot of rewriting. Those moments were the closest I'd ever come to having an anxiety attack. As time went on, though, it got easier and easier and I realized that the goal was not to be told you're work is perfect, but to make the work the best it can be. Lara, Andrea, and I were the remaining three members of the writing group and eventually, both of them moved to other states. For personal reasons, they didn't want to continue the writing group online, so I was left alone with no critique partners.

I struggled for months with whether or not to join an online writing group. I wasn't sure how much I would get out of one and finally came to the conclusion that I would never know unless I tried. So, I sent my writing sample into the MuseItUp Club in an effort to get into the Musician's critique group. I was nervous as I awaited a response and overjoyed when I learned I'd been accepted.

I've been a member of the Musicians for over two years now and I've grown so much as a writer due to the wonderful suggestions my critique partners give me. We've had members come and go in that two-year period, but each time a new member came aboard, he or she has shared the same commitment to the other members as the members who departed. We all understand that the purpose of our group is to help each other grow as writers and to help each other make our work the best it can possibly be.

There have been times I've been tempted to leave the group due to some rather mean spirited critiques I have received, but in the end, I've always decided to stick with it. While I may not always agree with every suggestion or observation made regarding my work, and while I do believe it is possible to critique another writer without being harsh or mean spirited, I realize that every critique has its value. Once I walk away and think about what was said, even if it made me cry when I initially read it, I'm always able to draw something useful out of it. If nothing else, it helps me thicken my skin. Not everyone will like what I write and not everyone will be kind about how they express that dislike.

To me, my critique group is invaluable. I don't know where I'd be without it and I cringe to think what my writing would be like had I not grown so much over the past two years. I don't know how any writer can move forward in their career and in improving their craft without a good critique group. And I believe it should be a group. One person's opinion is great, but if you have multiple opinions, I believe you will end up with a better piece because each person catches different things, each person interprets things differently, and each person will give you a different perspective on your writing. I'm thankful to Lea Schizas and the MuseItUp Club for the opportunity to belong to the Musicians, which is such a wonderful group of writers and friends. But mostly, I'm grateful to the Musicians (Charles, Paula, Dave, and Jill) for taking the time to read my work and give me honest, detailed feedback so I can make it the best it can be...and so I can be the best writer I can possibly be.

I was born in DeKalb IL, which incidentally is also where my mother was born. I lived in two small towns during the course of my life before moving back to DeKalb a few years ago. I work for a non-profit organization that helps low income families get help paying for child care. I love my work as it allows me to actually make a difference in people's lives. I

worked retail for 21 years before I started at 4-C and I have to say that overall, it was not a very fulfilling profession. It started out well, but the climate of our society has changed so much that working with the public no longer became enjoyable, which I find sad.

My initial creative outlets as a child were drawing and painting and music. I started learning piano at 7 and still play for my church every single Sunday. I can't remember precisely when my creative focus shifted from art to writing, as so many of my early drawings were accompanied by very short stories, but I definitely consider myself a writer as opposed to an artist or a musician.

I write primarily mysteries and suspense/crime novels, as those are primarily the kinds of books I read. I do enjoy all kinds of books, and my favorite genre aside from mystery/suspense is historical fiction. I'd love to try my hand at that someday, but find the research aspect a bit daunting with all the other obligations I have to fulfill in my everyday life. I'd also like to try my hand at chick lit someday. The few books I've read from that genre have been very enjoyable.

I have completed NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) three years running and plan to participate again this year. I so enjoy that entire process. I will participate in that program as long as they keep it going. 3 of my 7 rough drafts are complete because of NaNoWriMo.

As I just alluded to, I have 7 manuscripts in various stages of completion and I work on them as much as I can. I belong to the Museicians critique group through the MuseItUpClub and they are a wonderful group. Their support, encouragement and feedback have been invaluable.

I am as yet unpublished, but I hope to change that within the next year or so.

My Critique Group
by Susan Stephenson
www.coffscostwriters.com



There are currently four writers in our “Muse Mints” critique group: Kathleen, Kim, Gloria and Susan. One of us submits around 2000 words each Monday. During the following week, the other three critique that writing, trying to give honest but tactful feedback, and making suggestions for change. None of us has met in real life, but we’ve formed a wonderful, warm and supportive relationship via the internet.

A great benefit of my Muse Mint membership is the chance it gives me to look at my writing through someone else’s eyes. Even when I’ve put work away and revised it to the nth degree, there are times my crit friends have found major and minor problems.

The fact that I know I must submit work once a month is a discipline my writing needs. Critiquing other’s work has taught me much, exposing me to different minds and different genres. Because I want my critiques to be beneficial, I study the craft of writing even more. The knowledge of each group member is pooled, and we all learn from each other.

Muse Mints often provide me with a reality check. There is always variation in critiques, but when three writers comment on the same character inconsistency, I know it’s time for action. Sometimes a writer is too close to her work. My critique group helps me gain perspective.

The group has also been my refuge. When family and friends just don’t get it, my writing buddies are there to sympathize over recalcitrant characters or preposterous plot holes. After the sympathy, comes a co-operative effort to brainstorm a solution. A problem shared becomes a problem halved.

We have a strong support system. We Mints encourage, practice, and celebrate together. When Kim’s picture book, *Rainbow Sheep*, was published recently, we rejoiced. We take pride in every Muse Mint success. We prod and nudge each other toward taking action with our writing, so that it doesn’t languish too long in a drawer.

Apparently, some writers worry about sharing their work via a critique group, fearing plagiarism. I suppose that could happen. It's certainly not something I worry about in my group. As you get to know group members, you get a feeling for their honesty, their professionalism and their integrity. Trust develops from there.

I trust my Mints with my thoughts, my feelings, my hard work – my writing. I know they trust me. We trust each other to be punctual with submissions and critiques, honest, respectful, and human. It makes for a very special bond that empowers us all.

Thank you, Muse Mints!

Susan Stephenson has been published online and in print, (*Australian Traveller, Transitions Abroad*.) Her latest children's story, *Pet Problems*, is in the August 08 edition of *Rainbow Rumpus*. Like Erma Bombeck, Susan believes, "It takes a lot of courage to show your dreams to someone else." Find out more about Susan here:

<http://www.coffscoastwriters.com/susanstephenson.html>

Helpful Writing Tool By Jessica Kennedy



What can I say about my critique group? Their critiques give me an objective point of view. I am a better writer and am more aware of my weaknesses as a writer. I not only learn from having my own pieces critiqued, but by critiquing other's work and reading the critiques they supply other members.

We share our successes and failures openly, bounce ideas off one another and seek and give advice. I'm always cognizant of the fact I have a group of people working to achieve the exact goal I am.

Napoleon Hill in his book Think and Grow Rich encourages his readers to surround themselves with positive people. By doing so, you surround yourself with positive influences and ensure that an atmosphere ripe for success surrounds a person. My group revels in every success, because we have all had a part in each other's successes. It feeds our dedication to the art of writing and determination to get published.

Knowledge of magazine markets and editors; of book markets and publishers; and of literary agencies and agents is exchanged. The information helps group members to break into markets and gain representation.

It's like being a member of a team. We root for each other as we strive to succeed. In a profession that causes its participants to be solitary, the critique group supplies a social outlet and support group. It is the most useful tool in my writing bag.

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Jessica Kennedy, the Differently-abled Writer, is a multi-published author of children's short stories, inspirational essays & Christian essays. She is a legally blind, ventilator dependent, quadriplegic, making her dreams come true one story at a time.

My Writing Career?

Written by: Christine I Speakman



My writing career. My writing career? Do I even have a writing career? If I'm asking that question then maybe I don't, but then again what is a writing career?

There are some who will tell you that to have a writing career or to call yourself a writer you must write and be read (in print)...and paid. Others will say you are still a writer even if you haven't been paid, but other people, not just family, have to have read your work. Well, then, I must be a writer because I've had bits and pieces read by those in a critique group. No, that doesn't count; however, it could lead you to that one all-important status – being published.

Why a critique group? What's so great about a critique group? Well, those aren't easy questions to answer. They are actually quite personal questions. The more important question is – how deep do I want to share my reasons for joining critique groups? How much of me do I want to open up for viewing? Why hide now, after all I am a writer and there is always a little of our soul in each thing we write.

I have joined critique groups, on and off, over these last twenty-seven years for three reasons (one very naïve reason, but hey, I was only eighteen)

- 1) Thought I was pretty good with words (yup, the naïve stage of not knowing all I didn't know)
- 2) Was anything I wrote even remotely decent (surprise, surprise, seems I can turn a word or two)
- 3) I am a crappy grammarist (yup, and I can't spell worth a damn)

I discovered that there were a few problems with some critique groups:

- 1) Some people talked like I should know what they were talking about (Who or what is a white and skunk...oh, William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White – who? Style, writing has elements? Your writing reminds me of _____ and _____. Ah, who's _____ and _____?)
- 2) I don't kiss up to anyone. (Okay, so the majority of the critique group were students of the group leaders and I was the lone stranger, but come on...the leader liked it/everyone liked it and well, you get it.)
- 3) Too harsh without benefit of helping. Too wishy-washy without benefit of helping.

- 4) In person critique group versus Internet critique group. Hmmm, still figuring this one out, but both are about even.

But, all critique groups have the same common denominator...you need to feel comfortable. There must be a general well mixing of the members. This doesn't mean you have to always agree with each other or even like what someone says about your writing.

What it does mean is:

- 1) You have an open and relaxed environment in which you can goof up, make errors, actually write something stupid without fear of being hung out and horsewhipped.
- 2) You have a place to learn without ridicule or judgment.
- 3) You can develop trust in yourself and in your words.
- 4) You can leave. Yuppers, you can leave at anytime for any reason. Hey, you're not married or even dating these people.

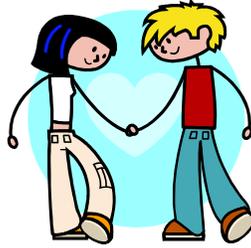
It also means you are not alone.

So, do I have a writing career? I have exactly what I want at this very precise moment, and that is fine by me.

My bio, you really want to read my bio? First and foremost, I love the written word. If I don't read or write something every day I'm just not a happy person. I am better at non-fiction than fiction, but like fiction better than non-fiction. I enjoy reviewing books (<http://www.fmam.biz/reviews/speakman/index.shtml> and <http://themusebookreviews.tripod.com/>). And my life is divided by 'before motherhood' and 'after motherhood' so currently I'm playing catch up with what I accomplished before and what makes me content now.

DON'T STAY MARRIED TO YOUR WORDS

by Donna M. McDine



My writing career began a little more than two years ago when I embarked on the Institute of Children's Literature (ICL) Writing for Children and Teenagers course. My instructor was the first to critique my manuscripts and with her encouragement I submitted two short stories and one non-fiction article. All three met with rejection.

Frustrated, but knowing rejection is inevitable, I visited the ICL and Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators (SCBWI) discussion boards. All the posts I read about critique groups strongly recommended that a writer get involved with at least one critique group. My networking on the boards proved to be quite beneficial. Several contacts directed me to critique groups that had openings. I immediately contacted several of them and ultimately joined three different groups. All three are conducted on-line and each person brings something different to the forum. For some writers' face-to-face critique groups work better, but in my personal experience with the time constraints of work and family I find an on-line group works to my benefit. To have a fresh set of eyes and perspective on a manuscript brings out what is and isn't working. Input from others is important, since writers' at times feel married to their words and may be reluctant to change something.

One of my non-fiction articles that met rejection several times took a completely different approach when one of the members of the critique group suggested to change the format and to reorganize the information. I took the opinion and input of my fellow member and edited and resubmitted my article to a different magazine. And to my delight the article was accepted for publication. I truly feel that if I did not change the article as suggested I'd still be seeking acceptance of this particular article. Yippee! :}

The critique of each member's manuscript not only benefits the person that submits, but the person that critiques. A wealth of information is exchanged and helps all involved in developing a stronger writing voice. It is a true give and take opportunity to learn and grow as a writer...resulting in a camaraderie that develops over time.

Go ahead, what are you waiting for, put yourself out there. You never know, the critique of your next manuscript may very well lead to an acceptance.

BIO:

Donna McDine is a native of Rockland County, New York and lives with her husband and two daughters. She writes, moms, and is a personal assistant from her home in Tappan.

Donna is a 2007 graduate of the ICL's, Writing for Children and Teenagers course, is currently enrolled in the ICL's Writing & Selling Children's Books course, and is in the development stages of a historical fiction manuscript. She is a member of the [SCBWI](#) and [Musing Our Children Group](#). Donna's publishing credits include [Stories for Children Magazine](#), Stories for Children Newsletter, [Kid Magazine Writers](#), [Long Story Short](#), [The National Writing for Children Center](#), [Institute of Children's Literature Rx for Writers](#), SCBWI Metro NY Newsletter, and [Once Upon A Time](#). With additional acceptances from Boys' Quest magazine to publish her non-fiction children's article entitled, "Fishing Through a Frozen Lake," December 2012 and Hopscotch For Girls magazine to publish a non-fiction article entitled, "Sports Buddies," April 2014. She is also a children's book reviewer for [Musing Our Children Group](#) and the Stories for Children Newsletter. Learn more about Donna's writing career at: <http://www.donnamcdine.com>, sign her guest book and receive a FREE copy of "Write What Inspires You! Author Interviews," compiled by Donna M. McDine.

Alpha Muser Artichoke: My Critique Group

Michele M. Graf

With original editing suggestions by: Amber / Bob / Gloria / Katie / Susan



"Participating in a writers' critique group is like sharing an artichoke," I explained to my fellow Alpha Musers one day. The analogy startled and jump-started them the first time I submitted it. I recooked my "Artichoke", seasoned with their suggestions, and resubmitted it a couple of months later. We had two new members the second time.

Two loved it; two said it was close, but not quite on target. One didn't understand the connection, but admitted it had been a long time since she'd eaten an artichoke.

Meet the *Muse Online Conference Nonfiction Genre Alpha Musers Critique Group* in action. They dug into my "Artichoke", enriched it well beyond its original presentation. Sometimes several agreed on a change, sometimes not. They told me where I was unclear or didn't reach my intended goal, what was missing, what was redundant, what would read better if moved, what worked, and cleaned up my punctuation.

I begin again, with these paragraphs:

Participating in a writers' critique group is like sharing an artichoke. Each person pulls a leaf from the outermost layer, and passes it to the next pair of hands. Eventually, the fuzzy "choke" is exposed and removed, leaving the artichoke's heart to savor.

Metaphorically, we edit our way to the heart of a piece of writing when we critique. Some grammar and punctuation problems are easy to fix; they remind me of the outer, annoying leaves of my artichoke. As we edit deeper, we can help uncover the fuzzy parts, the barriers that keep the writer separated from the essence of the text...

I won't **tell** you how a professional, effective critique group can help you reach that heart and your goals. Read the critique below -- what they did to my Artichoke **SHOWS** the group at work. You will see deep thoughts, a sense of humor, compassion, trust, and professional advice. Their contribution is the heart of what I tried to say.

I am grateful to the Alpha Musers for what I've learned, how I've grown as a writer, the bond we've developed, and what I've accomplished.

What follows is my second submission with combined suggested revisions and comments. Some edits are within the text, some noted at the end of paragraphs.

AlphaMuse Artichoke: My Critique Group

Participating in a writers' critique group is like sharing an artichoke. To begin with, somebody prepares it¹, creates a base, and discards those hard, discolored outer leaves² that no one wants.

¹[Maybe reword this. How does one "prepare" an artichoke? (Obviously I don't eat artichokes; my parents did when I was little, but, ah hmm, that was a long time ago)]

²[not sure I understand what these discarded leaves no one wants would be in the critique group, people who don't fit in, comes across sounding judgmental and a little threatening to the outsider??]

Someone pulls a leaf from the outer layer, and passes the vegetable around the table. Each person looks at the plant, and chooses which leaf to take, and how to eat it. No matter how much you love artichokes, you must wait your turn for the next leaf.

[LOVE THIS ANALOGY]

[Like some of the others, this analogy does not quite work for me. It's close, and I understand your intent ... it's just not quite as spot-on as it needs to be and needs explanation throughout.]

As the artichoke makes its way around the table the third, fourth, and tenth time, more tender leaves are exposed, and require a gentler touch¹.

¹[How many leaves are there? What do you mean, a gentler touch? Are they prone to falling off, to bruising?]

Eventually the choke itself must be carefully separated and the heart shared.

[I thought the center was called the "heart". Okay, now I see the heart, then what heck is a choke?]

[THIS SENTENCE IS PASSIVE AS WRITTEN]

[This metaphor isn't working for me, **but it could**. I would say "*each reader removes a leaf each time he reads a fellow writer's submission, further exposing the core, looking for the heart of the story,*" or something like that. Because sometimes the submission may be an article about something other than the writer's personal life.]

This image struck me as I thought about my experience as an Alpha[SPACE]Muse[R].

I met Carolyn Howard[-]Johnson, co-founder of the Muse [Online] Conference, in December 2005,¹ when she read poetry at the Palm Springs (CA) Desert Woman Book Faire.

¹, [NO COMMA AFTER 2005]

¹ [comma before and after 2005]

¹ [December of 2005]

Through her encouragement, I published a poem, and let myself believe I could do more.¹

¹[how about a stronger verb, perhaps "dared to believe..."]

¹[I like the "dared to believe" suggestion]

¹[explain what you mean here.]

The 2006 Muse [Online] Conference left me giddy and overwhelmed.¹

¹[Tell us more about the conference and why you were overwhelmed and inspired? Were there speakers – name some of them that you liked - and were all the attendees in a critique group?²]

How could so many people be so willing to share their talents – freely and with joy?¹

¹[Show an example of this.]

This shook the smart-kid paranoid part of me who always worried someone would steal my stuff. I decided to trust the universe, *said YES*¹ in spite of my fear, when a spot opened in a non-fiction critique group. I became an Alpha[SPACE]Muser on December 6, 2006.

¹[Since you're "saying" it, put it in quotes.]

¹[said YES /delete this]

We have a weekly commitment to each other and our craft:[SPACE] to either write and submit a 2000 word article, or critique an article¹ submitted by someone else. We help each other polish to publish.²

¹[is it only articles? Or could it be essays, memoirs, etc]

²[Suggest: *polish our work until it is ready for submission*]

²[Nice turn]

²[I think it would be helpful at this point in your article to describe the actual procedure we use, such as "*each week one person is scheduled to submit a nonfiction story, article, memoir excerpt*" (etc.). The other members of the group, each "critique" the submission by commenting, asking questions, and editing.]

[You moved from present tense in the last paragraph to past tense here. Personally, I like the present tense. You might want to consider writing the whole thing that way.]

{Author's note: *each person did a separate critique; I combined several suggestions in the following paragraph, and others later.*}

[When we initially joined online **Online**] [COMMA] **we shared bits of our personal stories** [to introduce ourselves,] **and submitted our first articles for [critique. Age]¹, geographic location, background, life and work experience, subjects of interest, style of writing, [AND] our passions² [.]– w[W]e are very different** [from each other]. **Our common bond is writing non-fiction.**

¹[suggest colon, then no capital beginning "age"]

² [Add comma. Nowadays, anytime there is a listing of three or more things, there is a comma after each and every one of them. Not the way I learned it in school, but hey! that was a long time ago—we won't say how long, of course!]

[We provide editorial assistance to catch When we receive each other's submissions, we look for] **typos, grammar goofs, incomplete sentences, tense shifts, and other proof-reading [ONE WORD] irregularities. We [look at analyze] content, context, [and] what makes sense.** [and what doesn't.]

[This paragraph could be combined with the one above where you describe process.]

Does the word/ sentence/ paragraph/ article mean what the author intends? Do we understand the purpose and audience of the piece? Has the author hit that mark?

How can we help?

[This is awkward. I had to read it several times, and I'm still not sure what you mean.]

Each of us has our strengths in writing and editing, plus strong opinions, which we mix with great amounts of kindness and awareness.

[I would mention only one strength per person – will make a stronger impression.]

[One individual **One of us**] can spot a passive sentence from 900 yards, and is great with dialog. [Another is **Others are**] brave and open enough to identify what's ambiguous, or doesn't make sense. [A third **Someone**] loves to see how the pieces would sound if rearranged, and is good with openings and endings. Another always gets to the heart of the piece. We all can spot grammatical errors, even when we can't name them (like gerunds, or double-hyphenated objectives).

[Yeah, nasty words like that.]

What We Do

We read with our hearts and minds, not just our eyes.

[I would say while we read with our minds, we also read with understanding hearts. If we read with our hearts, we may not be objective.]

Often our critiques are [almost] as long as the article¹ being critiqued.

¹[Insert: "itself."].

¹[suggest "that is"]

¹[SUGGEST: Often our critiques are longer than the article in question.]

We've let the group [into in to] places we've never shared before, tried out ideas with a sense of safety.¹

¹[But you are making assumptions here that aren't necessarily true – I have revealed some very personal things in previous writings that I have shared in classes and workshops and even published, about vulnerability, fears, sexuality and relationships].

We offer each other a non-judgmental [judgment¹ of our critique of each other's] works, words, and feelings.

¹["non-judgmental judgment" -- surely this is a contradiction]

[I think the idea of the group as a safe place is important, and not necessarily because we are sharing events that haven't been shared before. Whenever we write, we are offering a piece of ourselves - the ways we think, feel, and see the world. So, I can see expanding this part to include the general safety of knowing that other people aren't going to tear our writing apart.]

For instance, in late February 2007¹ I faced a serious health scare, which I shared with no one except my husband and a lady at a shoe store (long story). I thought I was handling it well; all I really did was not talk or write about it, as it tormented my soul. When it was over, I poured it into my submission, warning my fellow readers that there might be some uncomfortable material included.

¹[2007 should be bracketed on both ends with commas]

My Alpha[ADD SPACE] Muse[R] family held me close, gave me the comfort I desperately needed but could not ask for otherwise.

Because of them, I got it out of my head and private journal -- the genuine caring and compassion stretched way beyond our physical separation.

[This sentence is not quite clear as to meaning. Are you saying you wrote a non-fiction article about it?]

[I think this should be clarified – was the purpose of writing in this case to prepare something for publication or get something off your chest. It sounds like the latter and that is OK as long as you specify that sometimes we write to prepare work for publication, sometimes we write to connect with other writers or just to dig a little deeper into understanding ourselves, or something like that. After reading the work a second time, I suggest combining this with the friendship part. And here you could discuss the various topics that the group writes about.]

[I agree with Susan that it would be a good idea to talk about the different kinds of writing we do. Some of it is personal and of a more private nature, not initially intended for publication, and some of it is written with specific publishing "targets" in mind. Also, when something personal strikes a universal chord, we often encourage the writer to hone the story/article/essay further and submit it for publication.]

After [sharing this in my non-fiction group], I was able to open up with friends and relatives about what happened and found many had similar experiences, with both the health issues and sense of utter isolation. We vowed to reach out to each other in the future. We'd denied the people closest to us the opportunity to be there for us, as much as we'd denied ourselves the connection.

[I'm not sure this paragraph fits, unless you want to talk about how the emotional safety of the critique group can extend into our personal lives.]

Over time [COMMA] our submissions became more personal, writing about what was close to our hearts. As we got to know each other better¹, our critiques were richer in understanding. When one article talked about a situation with a particular relative, I had history to use to frame my response, to provide [more specific feedback that is more specific.]

¹[COLLOQUIALISM, NEED TO REWRITE THIS SENTENCE]

[But somehow, you need to show the reader that people in the group also have the ability to maintain enough distance from the work that they can critique it objectively. Right now it comes across as more of a group therapy.]

When something conjures up an experience, we share it. "Yes, I understand what you are talking about because¹ I . . ."²

¹[This is SO important – letting the writer know when they have done more than tell a personal tale, if they can do that and establish a universal connection with the work that will attract many readers, not just family and friends. Discuss this more]

²[ellipses are to be all together – no spaces before, between or after.]

This feedback goes beyond the basic "I got it!" level. Our ideas may be included in the revision, enriching the piece. We raise questions, [and] want to know more. Sometimes the questions may stretch beyond the boundary of the article, but often allow a rethinking, a new slant or approach[,] . A[and,] dammit¹, whole rewrite[,] [—] good practice to reach the final great copy we seek.

¹[Why the heck doesn't my spell check have that as a word, we ALL know what it means and use it!]

¹[Gets a little choppy here. And I might use darn it instead.]

I'd love to package the words that fully explain how much I've learned about my own writing by editing the work of others. Mistakes I make but don't catch, I can see in someone else's work. Oh, that's what it looks like! If I can help the other person fix the problem, I'm helping myself. Like many altruistic acts, there's a payoff for the giver as well as the recipient.

[I don't know that I would say that writing a critique is an altruistic act; as you say, there is a payoff, and we know it from the beginning, whereas true altruism doesn't care about a payoff. I do!]

[You might mention how reading good (and even not so good) writing always helps one's own work.]

[This is a good point and one you can expand upon.]

Our submissions are bolder, more complex, richer in detail, [and] deeper in concept. Our critiques mirror this, delving deeper into the why and how, the intricacies of

meaning. We focus more, I believe, on content and context than the earlier days.

[Our line edits are very specific. [repetitive]

[I would either move this and combine it with other, similar paragraphs above, or remove it.]

Our Progress

We've all moved forward in our confidence and what we've sent out to the world.

[SENTENCE STRUCTURE IS OFF - REWRITE]

Several of us were at the early learning stages of web site design, in those post-Muse days. We each developed at least one web site or blog; some have several sites now.

[I would emphasize the volume of writing and publication successes over web sites and blogs, which anyone can have.]

We found the courage to follow our passions:

-- **Bob** [use full names – good opportunity to promote each person and list web sites] **had his book** [working title?] **edited and met with a publisher. He also had a story published.** [What story and where was it published?]

-- **Gloria set up her Voice of Adoptees site, and was invited to be on a board, and receives requests from publicists and publishers** [such as ???] **to do book reviews for them.**

[THIS SENTENCE IS PASSIVE AS WRITTEN]

-- **Amber started up the beautiful Writer's Eye Magazine** [site],

[www.thewriterseye.com], her personal web site, [www.amberstarfire.com], and has had several articles and stories published. [in ???] .

[The Fiction Flyer Ezine, The Voice of Adoptees newsletter, and The Conscious Mind Journal]. [Actually, the web sites were not really related to my participation in the AlphaMusers, but I certainly don't mind them being mentioned! :-)]

-- **Val dropped out in January, for the greatest of reasons – her grant-writing¹ and consulting business grew and needed her.**

¹[NO HYPHEN]

¹[grantwriting is one word]

-- **Katie, a relatively new AlphaMuser, had three articles published recently.** [in ???]

[Although there's no way for you to know this, I've had about 45 non-fiction articles published in the last year to two years, and have finished a mg urban fantasy that is perilously close to sending out (am on the final read), done several book reviews and created a web site. On second thought, leave the web site off. It's raunchy.]

-- **Susan just joined us, and has numerous publishing credits. We welcome her to our group.**

-- **I was contacted¹ to review a nationally published book; provide online reviews to a national network; and have links all over the US, as the result of my Gluten-Free Travel blog. I published two poems during this time** [in ???] **and began an editing business, [and am] working on novels for two authors** [at the moment. now]

¹[THIS WORDING MAKES THE SENTENCE PASSIVE]

When Bob got the word to meet with [the a] publisher, he shared his joy with us, his writing support group, and promised he'd wear clean socks and not do anything toooooo weird.

When Gloria started her Voice of Adoptees site, I reminded the Muse Conference to think beyond their small circle about the issue. Many lives are touched by adoption.¹

They got it.

¹[THESE WORDS MAKE THIS SENTENCE PASSIVE]

[This information in this paragraph is too personal to be interesting to a reader who doesn't know them.]

We've been there as friends who care deeply for each other.

[Yes – the personal stories work better placed in the context of the friendships within the group than in the context of submission content.]

My father-in-law died last year; I was able to share with this group some of the angst I had. During a serious long-distance family problem, I leaned heavily on Gloria in private emails. Later, she and I shared obstinate-husband stories, as we dealt with their respective health issues.

We worried about each other's surgeries, power outages, family tragedies, and celebrated the joyous events. We did this with our hearts, not just words.

[Yes, this is good.]

Bottom Line

I've written, or worked at writing by [by or through?] editing, almost every week since I¹ joined this group. While many projects remain unfinished, I have produced ² [much more work since I have joined] and am proud of what I've written and edited.

¹[since this is past tense, make this "I've" to have your tenses in this sentence agree.]

²[This sounds like an incomplete phrase]

[This group has provided an environment where I can express my thoughts freely and where I have been able to experience tremendous growth as writer (or something like that)]

[I think this is an important aspect to highlight, and I think you might want to move it further up in the article. When we make a commitment to others to write and to edit, we are (generally) more motivated to keep that commitment.]

I've dealt with some strange moments and circumstances during the past year, and reached out to the group for support. I was able to trust and share deep emotions; the responses were what I needed most. I've been moved by many of the submissions, laughed and loved the incongruous images we've come up with, and felt the depth of what passionately stirs us.

This group has provided me with far more than editorial comments. Lea¹ gave us the opportunity to develop a community centered [around on] our need to express what is most important to us. We are the Alpha[SPACE]Musers.

¹[will all readers know who she is?]

Author's Note: *And that, my friends, is my critique group, a useful and rewarding team on my writing journey.*

###

Bios:

Michele M. Graf is a published poet, writer and editor. As a child, she convinced her parents there were monsters lurking in her room; she slept with a nightlight from the time she was quite young. Her parents didn't realize she needed the light to read to the monsters. She's written two NaNoWriMo novels. She and her husband spent ten years living and traveling in a motorhome all over the US and Canada. The working title of her image-filled book about the journey is *Heart, Soul, and Rough Edges*.

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The Benefits of Joining a Critique Group

By Gloria Oren



In 2003 when I took the Long Ridge Writers Group course, “Break Into Print”, I sought a way to get feedback on articles I wrote for my assignments. The solution I found was an online critique group based on writing genre. I joined the Nonfiction group of the Internet Writers Workshop. At first, the group was small, about eight to ten members, and slowly grew as word got out. I met some helpful people and received useful feedback. As the group grew and a more varied member population developed, the critiques changed. Little by little I felt I wasn’t getting the type of critique I needed, and the demand to submit four pieces a month became too much for my schedule, but I still remained on board.

Then I attended the 2006 Muse Online Conference which was a great push to my writing career. There I met a vast number of people in the field who opened their hearts and offered help to us newbies. I started thinking – “These are the kind of group members I would love to critique my work.”

Shortly after, I received an email from Lea asking if I wanted to join the AlphaMuser Nonfiction Critique group that covered nonfiction. I joined and haven’t looked back nor regretted it for one moment. At first, I was in both the first group and the AlphaMuser group. When the requirements became excessively demanding and I found myself unable to keep up with IWW so I dropped it.

What I found at AlphaMusers were great critiques, and people who understood that we each have opinions on certain issues; we critique the writing and grammar, not the person’s opinion. In the IWW group if I wrote something that people disagreed with, the comments, for the most part, were geared towards me and not my writing. Here at AlphaMusers I might get an alternative view in the form of a suggestion. This approach leads to more harmony amongst the members of the group and opens the door to becoming better writers. The fact that there are at the most six members to a group also enables each member to get to know the others on a much deeper level. In a group of 100 members, you never know whom you’ll get a critique from or whether you’ve received them all so you can start the revision.

The greatest benefit of the AlphaMuser group is the friendships I’ve developed, especially with one person. It seems that she just knows what I meant to say or notices an idea that I had more to say than I did and will prompt me to dig deeper in my revision on those points. Others comment on the grammar, ask questions on points they are confused about, and so on. Some even suggest alternative wordings. At first, I submitted the articles I had written

for the Long Ridge course and when I saw the responses and how helpful they were, I began submitting work from my autobiography that I'm working on. Without this group, the level of my work in progress wouldn't be the same.

I highly recommend joining a critique group at any stage in one's writing career. But before committing to join a group, I'd advise checking out the following:

1. What are the requirements?
2. How many members are there? Is it an open or closed group?
3. What types of critiques are given?
4. Is the group genre specific? If not, what is the genre that appears the most often?
5. Anything else that pertains to your individual needs.

It is critical to find a group that's a good fit for you. If something doesn't feel right, leave the group and search for another. On the Internet is there's bound to be a group that offers a supportive, professional environment to help your career as well as developing new friendships. I am thankful for being asked to join the AlphaMusers group and for the friendship and willingness to share more than critiques amongst our members. Like most groups, we have gone through some good times as well as some bad times. No matter what, someone is always there when you needed to connect. That gift has no money value. The helpful critiques are the cake, the essence of the group; the friendships the sweet bonus, the deeper connections that develop amongst the members.

Gloria Oren

Bio:

Gloria Oren has been honing her craft since she graduated from the Long Ridge Writer's Group's "Breaking Into Print" course. Gloria is an active member of several online writer's groups, a member of AuthorBound Review Panel, and a member of her local group the Redmond Association of Spokenword (RASP) where she participates in open mike gatherings.

Gloria writes about serious topics of life in an easy to understand engaging manner.

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Writing From the Soul: Critiques Don't Bite

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