

Cochise Writers' Group: What We Do and What We Expect From Our Members

The Cochise Writers' Group is a professional organization. By "professional," we mean we are committed to doing the work needed to improve our own writing and to helping the other members of the group improve theirs. It does not mean we are necessarily making money from our writing—yet. This paper lays out how we run our meetings and what we expect of our members.

Meetings and Participation

- Meetings begin promptly at 4:00 p.m. Be on time, if not a little early. If you come in late, find a seat and get ready to work. Don't interrupt the group to explain or apologize.
- If you know ahead of time that you'll be late, or will miss a meeting, we appreciate it if you let at least one member of the group know so we're not wondering where you are, especially if your work is due to be critiqued.
- Attend every meeting, if possible. You will not get any value out of the group if you only show up once in a while. Professionalism includes committing to full participation.
 - If you need help with transportation, say so. Carpooling is often an option.
 - Another option is to join the group via a video conferencing app. We currently use [Zoom](#). With a little advance notice, this is easy to arrange. If your computer does not already have a webcam installed, you can buy one for around \$50, and Zoom's basic services are free.
- We use the first part of each meeting for writing- or publishing-related announcements or information. Please share personal news before or after the meeting, or after all the work is done.
- Be considerate of the author and speaker: avoid starting side conversations, passing hand-written notes, texting, or reading email. These distract other group members and mean you're missing what's being said. Remember, we learn by hearing what other members have to say about the work being critiqued, even when it's not our own. No, you can't multitask. Really.
- Work will be reviewed in the order of the meeting agenda, which is generally emailed to the group the Saturday before the meeting.
- Read and critique *all* of the work that's submitted. While you should email your critique to the group, we expect every member of the group to provide substantive verbal critique during the meetings.
 - "Substantive" critique means staying on topic while you discuss problems with, or good points of, plot, characterization, setting, pacing, word choice, point of view, etc. Use the appropriate critique guide. We have guides for fiction and memoir; general nonfiction; creative nonfiction; and poetry. They will be provided separately.
 - "Substantive critique" *does not* include discussing typos, punctuation or page formatting errors, and the like unless they significantly confused you. These things should be noted in the manuscript.
 - If you have no substantive comments, or if yours have already been covered, say so and let the next reviewer speak.
- Make every effort to stay caught up with the work. While we schedule two meetings to discuss each piece, if you get behind and only get to a work after the whole group has reviewed it, simply hand or send your marked-up copy to the author. If you feel you absolutely must discuss it, arrange a separate time to talk.
- Many new writers don't know how to critique. This is normal: it *is* a learned skill. These are the key things to know about critiquing.
 - *Always* discuss the work, *never* criticize the writer.
 - Be specific. Vague and generic statements like, "Well, I liked it..." have no value. Try to explain why you liked or had problems with something. Suggest solutions, if possible, but *do not* insist that the writer rewrite their story your way. It's *their* story, not yours.

- Critique is *not* only about the problems in a piece; authors need to hear what worked well too, and why. That said, don't worry about hurting someone's feelings by identifying problems. That's what we want and we've learned to have thick skins.
- There are many excellent resources available to help you learn how to critique.
 - Start by simply listening closely to what experienced group members say. Compare their comments to what you observed—or missed.
 - Group member Ross Lampert is currently writing several books on how to critique. The *Craft & Critique* series will be available from all the online book retailers when the series is published.
- Be sure to put your name on your critique and your name or initials in the filename of the copy you send back to the author. These help the author keep track of who said what in case they have questions later.

Submitting Your Work and Receiving Critique

- You *do not* have to submit work in order to be a valuable member of the group, or to learn from it, but your work will improve most if you do submit it.
- Writing is a craft; study it. New writers in particular have more to learn than they realize. Some group members have made books on writing from their collections available to be checked out. Feel free to borrow these books, but be sure return them in a timely way.
- We expect you to already have a firm grasp on the basics of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization. If you do not, you are not ready for this group and we strongly recommend taking one or more classes to bring your skills up to the necessary level.
- Email your work to the group as an attachment. We prefer Rich Text Format (.rtf) or the current Microsoft Word format (.docx) but PDF is OK too. Information on how to do this and on recommended manuscript format is available separately.
- When you send out your work, give it a filename that clearly identifies the work or the author. For example, "Chapter 3.rtf" is too generic: the group may be working on several Chapter 3s at once.
- Include the genre and/or other significant information about the work in the cover email the first time you submit it if doing so will help the group understand what they're about to read, or to warn them about subject matter that might be a problem.
- If a work is complex, it may help to provide a map of the story world; a list of the characters with brief descriptions of their appearance, relationships, and roles; and/or brief descriptions of equipment, technologies, or supernatural phenomena. This is especially true for science fiction and fantasy.
- We allow you to respond while your work is being critiqued but ask you to limit what you say.
 - *Do* ask questions if you don't understand something a reviewer said.
 - *Do not* explain your work. If you need to explain it, or some element of it, it's not clear enough. Readers will not have the opportunity to ask you for explanations, so everything the reader needs to know *must* be on the page. That said, if you've intentionally left something unclear because you're setting up a future event, *do* explain that if necessary.
 - "Spoilers" are not relevant in a critique group. Group members need to know about future events to understand how the story will develop.
 - *Do not* be defensive about your work. It's not under attack and we're on your side! Our objective is to help you make your work the best it can be. This also prepares you for what will happen after your work has been published. Defending your work against online attackers will just draw more attacks. Writers need to have a thick skin and this is the place to start growing it if needed.
- You *do not* have to take all reviewers' suggestions. For one thing, they may be contradictory! Use what makes sense to you. That said, do look for trends in our comments. If three or more of us said the same thing, that's a very strong sign there's a problem—or a real success.

Conclusion

Your work *will* get better if you actively participate in this group. We've seen it happen time after time. We look forward to seeing it happen with your work too.