Guide to Critique Group Etiquette: 9 Embarrassing Mistakes That Make You Look Like an Amateur

As a writing critique group member, you walk a hair-thin line between appropriate ruthlessness and inappropriate intrusiveness. So how do you know where the boundaries are before you stumble into them? Here are nine mistakes it's never okay to make.

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As a writing critique group member, you walk a hair-thin line.

On one side, it's your duty to be ruthless—to uncover every error and inconsistency, every lazy line of prose or flabby phrase in a group mate's writing. On the other side, it's important not to intrude on the story elements that define another writer's work as *hers*.

Knowing the difference can make or break you in a serious critique group. And it's just one example of the unspoken rules of etiquette that many of the best use to choose (or remove) their members.

And they're right to. Because the rules of etiquette help balance feedback, protect each member's time, incubate talent, and grow writing skills—all vital elements of a strong writing critique group.

So how do you know where the boundaries are before you stumble into them? Here are nine mistakes it's never okay to make.

Mistake #1: Critiquing Another Writer's Style

Some writers prefer their sentences long and lush, unfolding slowly over clauses and subclauses until the full idea—never really realized until you reach the final word—blossoms, finally, all at once at the end. Some writers like their sentences short. Pithy. Neither are wrong.

If you think a story calls for a particular writing style, it may be okay to say so. Once. But if the writer sticks by the way she writes, it's time to back off.

Some argue you should never touch on writing style at all.

Mistake #2: Forcing Your Personal Vision onto Someone Else's Story

Like writing style above, a story's overarching vision is up to its writer.

Vision can cover anything from the writer's choice of genre, the story's tone, or the point of view she tells it in. Hate sci-fi? Keep it to yourself when you critique that cowboy space opera. And if you're no fan of the first-person narrative, don't say so in your critique.

You're a writer. You know it's pretty much impossible to find critiquers who fit your story's demographic. Keep that it in mind when you offer a critique, and keep your personal reading preferences out of it.

Mistake #3: Offering Solutions

Don't feel bad if you've made this mistake. Many, if not all, writers and critique groups have. When your job is to help improve a story, your natural inclination is likely to offer possible solutions. Don't.

The reason? You don't know the unspoken expectations a writer has for her work. You don't know the ins and outs of her worldview or the unconscious intricacies of the story she's trying to tell. Any solutions you could offer would be steeped in *your* worldview, which only matters when it's *your* story you're writing.

You don't want to accidentally muddy the author's clarity of vision before she has a chance to find it.

Like Neil Gaiman says, "when people tell you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they are almost always right. When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong."

Mistake #4: Dominating the Discussion

Much of the value of a critique group is getting multiple perspectives on your work. That way, when you hear the same criticism (or kudos) from multiple people, you can be reasonably sure it's an area that actually needs attention. But this only works if a writer gets multiple points of feedback.

So let somebody else speak.

Mistake #5: Ignoring the Big, Universal Issues

By now you know what you *shouldn't* focus on in your critique. So what *should* you focus on? Pretty much everything that isn't opinion.

For example, continuity errors—when Susie Q. had blonde curls on page five and then a brown ponytail on page six. Factual errors—when the main character's six shooter shot eight rounds. Plot holes—when the side character had the map to the safe zone and didn't use it to save her friends. Or word choice errors that confuse the author's intent—like when the writer said a character was *bemused* when she meant *amused*. Also good to note? Anything that's confusing or unclear, characters who lack depth, and lazy prose.

(Hey, wouldn't it be nice if there were a [writing critique checklist](#) of what to note and what to ignore in your next critique?)

Mistake #6: Arguing with Feedback

Criticism never feels good. But the point of a critique group is to get an outside perspective on your story when you're too close to it to do so. And the ideal critique group is one that is ruthless with your work.

You want every error illuminated. Every confusing line of prose or awkward phrase pointed out. You want every plot hole uncovered before a real reader can stumble into it.

You don't have to use feedback that isn't useful to you (especially if it veers into one of the intrusive faux pas on this list). But arguing will just make group members wary to share their observations. After that it won't be long before they (or you) are left wondering why you're in the group at all.

Mistake #7: Fixating on Spelling or Grammar Mistakes

The writing you see in critique groups is necessarily raw. Group readings are the pre-surgery consults where writers prep for character guttings, scene transplants, and other major overhauls. Most of the words you see will be rewritten uncounted times. Any thought and energy you put into making them perfect now will be wasted.

So save the cosmetic issues like spelling and grammar for the copyeditor.

Mistake #8:Being Too Honest (or Not Honest Enough)

Writers don't join critique groups to have their egos stroked (if you did, you're in the wrong place). Writers join critique groups to become better writers. And no writer improves if all anyone says about their work is, "I liked it."

So get in there. Get your hands dirty. Dig out those plot holes and inconsistencies. Point out those flabby sentences and confusing descriptions. And offer the kind of feedback that helps a writer grow.

But you also know how tough it can be to separate the work from the self. Writing is *personal*. And if a writer walks away from a critique feeling like they shouldn't be writing at all, the group failed. Remember it's possible to be ruthless without being rude.

Mistake #9: Showing Up Without Pages

Oh, the ultimate no-no. Showing up to the writing group without the writing.

This is a *big* taboo in serious critique groups. And you know why if you've found yourself in a group that *talks* more about writing than they actually write.

Look, you can always create a writing group that's about showing up to write. That's a phenomenal use of time for writers who don't have a lot of it and still want the community. But critique groups serve a different purpose. And many of them won't let you in if you show up without pages.

Bottom line, critique groups are about improving your writing. And to do that, you've got to do the work.

That's it. Now get out there and write!