

The Bobbie Christmas No-Homework Method for Critique Circles that Work Special Report #101

After many years of frustration with a variety of critique circles, I created a list of what works, eliminating what does not work in critique circles. When you are ready to form a critique circle, this guide allows you to create one that will sustain itself for years, assist all members alike, and allow you time to write your own work, because you won't have to spend hours at home evaluating the work of members in your circle.

This information and much, much more appears in *Ask The Book Doctor: How to Beat the Competition and Sell Your Writing*, an e-book by Bobbie Christmas available by clicking on www.zebraeditor.com and going to "Tools for Writers." For other books and products by Bobbie Christmas, see the bottom of this report or go to www.zebraeditor.com. While at www.zebraeditor.com, be sure to sign up for the free e-zine for writers simply by clicking on "Free Newsletter." I never send spam or share or sell your address. I promise.

–Bobbie Christmas, book doctor, award-winning author and darned nice person

1. Decide the focus of the group. You may choose to accept all prose writers, both fiction and nonfiction; only novelists; only writers of children's books, only poets; only writers of a specific genre, such as science fiction or romance; or whatever you choose, but do not mix poets with prose writers.
2. Potential members must submit five sample pages of their work to you. If you do not care for the style, subject matter, or level of competence, do not invite the person to join. Follow your gut feelings.
3. All members must endure a specified trial period, for example three meetings, to be sure he or she participates well, is helpful to others in the group, and fits in with the group. After the trial period, you can decide whether to ask the person to join. Once your group is formed, members vote on replacement participants, if someone drops out.

4. Select potential members whose writing is at about the same level, so that all participants will be able to assist each other equally.
5. Hold membership down to seven. With more participants, some members will not get to share their writing; with fewer participants, and you'll have to cancel meetings for lack of attendance.
6. Meet at least every two weeks. Even better, plan to meet every week, so that you won't go a month without a meeting, if a holiday interferes.
7. Demand a quorum of at least three people, for a meeting to be held.
8. Do not socialize/share food/go out as a group elsewhere. This rule keeps your group from becoming a social group instead of a critique circle.
9. Write specific rules and goals, including this report, and distribute to all members. The rules do not have to be created democratically; you can set them yourself, but members must agree and abide by them.
10. Distribute names and contact information to all members.
11. Set a maximum number of pages allowable per person per session. I recommend five standard manuscript pages. Agree whether participants can come if they bring fewer or no pages. I allow it, myself, so I have a quorum at meetings.
12. Make all members bring their work in standard manuscript form, not only to standardize the reading material, but also to get everyone in the habit of presenting professionally formatted material. (See below for standard manuscript format)
13. Each person must bring the appropriate number of copies of the work to be read.
14. Decide whether evaluators will address technical flaws, such as punctuation errors, whether to write them on the manuscript and not mention them, or whether to let them slide and concentrate on greater

- issues. Obviously a quick critique cannot substitute for a careful line edit.
15. Each person must read his or her story aloud while others follow their printed copy and make notes on the paper. Reading aloud allows writers to hear their own work and identifies awkward or lengthy sentences. If you gasp for air, the sentence is too long.
 16. The person to the right of the person who reads work is the first to critique the work, following around the room until all members have a chance to speak.
 17. The work is evaluated one page at a time, to avoid duplication. To clarify, the person to the reader's right evaluates page one, then the person to his or her right evaluates page one, and so on, until all have spoken. If you agree with something already said, do not repeat it. If everything you have noted has already been said, pass and save time. Page two is addressed the same way, until all five pages have been addressed.
 18. Writers agree not to defend their work or explain it. Such discussions waste time and annoy people. When your work is being evaluated, listen to what others in the group say, make notes, and go home and decide what you will or won't change in your own work.
 19. Participants must agree to evaluate the work, not the writer. Statements with "you" in them are not allowed. Instead of a statement such as this: "You did not develop the character," use wording such as "The character is not developed enough." Do not allow personal opinions or feelings to harm the group.
 20. Let all others know when you will be absent, so all will know how many copies to bring.
 21. No one is allowed to talk about any portion of a manuscript that is not yet written. Doing so wastes participants' time and dissipates energy needed to write the manuscript.
 22. Ideally all participants will have read and be familiar with the following books: *The Elements of Style* (Strunk & White), *On Writing*

Well (Zinnser), *Stein On Writing* (Stein), and, of course, *Write In Style* (Christmas).

23. Keep the following resources available to settle discussions: dictionary, thesaurus, *Chicago Manual of Style*, and if writing for periodicals, an *Associated Press Stylebook*.

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See www.ZebraEditor.com for more information on editing and writing

Standard Manuscript Format

Use 12-point Courier type. (Yes, many publishers accept Times Roman, but all of them accept Courier.) This is what 12-point Courier type looks like.

The title page for book manuscripts has its own format and should include all contact information and title, plus word count (not page count).

Double space every manuscript page.

Poetry—and poetry alone—can be single-spaced.

Margins should be at least one inch on all sides.

Chapter titles are in all caps.

New chapters begin at least one-third of the way down the page.

New paragraphs are indented five spaces.

Add space between paragraphs only to indicate a major scene change or time passage.

In the header, every page is numbered at the upper right hand side, and on the upper left is the title or a portion of the title of the manuscript, along with the author's name. See the header on this report for an example.

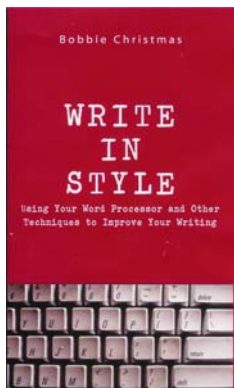
Do not justify type.

Space only once after a period. Spacing twice is the old typewriter style.
Computer style is only one space after a period.

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