Guidelines for the Short Fiction Virtual Group

This group meets virtually the second Thursday of each month, 6 PM, for the purpose of critiquing submitted short fiction up to 10K words.

In addition to the SCWA guidelines posted online to which all chapters must adhere, below are the procedural guidelines specific to the Short Fiction group.

New Members and Observers
Both new members and observers are asked to observe a session before participating. This will give them an opportunity to see how the group interacts and provides feedback. New members will be given access to the forum (explained below) and can download others' stories for the observation session. Observers are not given access to the forum until they become members.

Inherent Copyright Protection
All stories submitted for review are intended for the Short Fiction group only and have inherent copyright protection. Stories should not be shared with anyone outside of the Short Fiction group without express consent of the writer.

Using the Chapter's Online Forum
Notify the chapter leader you are interested in joining the group if you have not done so. They will give you access to the group's forum and notify you once access is granted. We use this forum for posting stories and use email for general communications within the group and can be accessed at https://myscwa.org/local-and-virtual-chapters. Scroll down to the bottom of the chapter list to Virtual Genre: Short Fiction. A meeting link has been posted under the topic title "Recurring Zoom link for monthly meetings" in the Short Fiction Group forum.

Submitting Your Work for Review
Each month, post your stories for review in the forum under the appropriate meeting date topic (e.g., July 14, 2022 Meeting). To post a story, reply to the topic with a brief comment (the system won't accept a blank reply) and attach your file. Your stories should be posted by midnight on Thursday, the week before the meeting, to give reviewers ample time to read your work (e.g., the posting deadline is July 7 for the July 14 meeting).
If you don't have a story to post for critique, you are welcome to join the meeting and review others' work. For privacy, only those registered to our group will have access to the forum.

Format your file for review as follows:

- Submit a Word doc (file type .doc or .docx) for best results.
- When you post your story in the forum, include comments in the post to let your fellow writers know where you're struggling and of any particular questions you'd like them to address in their critique (e.g., "Do I need to add more tension or conflict?").
- Add a trigger warning to your story if it contains potentially offensive material. Please review the SCWA policy on page 5. Talk to your chapter leader if you have questions.
- Be sure to include your name and email address on your story so others can send their written feedback to you.

Reviewing Others' Stories Before the Meeting

- Review others' critique pages in advance of the meeting to prepare for discussion. To review a file, just click on an attachment and the file will download.

- If a group member has flagged their story as potentially offensive, you can decline to read it and/or choose not to participate in a discussion of that particular story. Just let us know in the meeting that you wish to "pass."

- When reviewing a file, make notes for yourself to use during the discussion.

During the Meeting

- Log into Zoom on the meeting date so that we can resolve any audio/video issues and begin promptly at 6 pm. You will be placed in a waiting room until the host admits you. If you have questions about using Zoom, let your chapter leader know.
- Since the stories have been read in advance, we do not read the stories aloud during the meeting. As the writer, listen to all the feedback and don't defend your work or argue. When all reviewers have given feedback, we will then have an open discussion that includes the writer. See "How to Effectively Receive a Critique" on page 3.

- In the meeting, offer comments to others' stories by focusing on the big picture: what works, what needs improvement. Don't focus on grammar, punctuation, or typos unless it's a glaring issue or affects the story's meaning. You are free to note these items in the copy you return via email to the submitter. Use comments in Word to make specific references/comments.

- As a reviewer, be honest *and* supportive: "First do no harm." You're offering an opinion based on your writing knowledge and experience, but others may have different ideas. Diversity of thought is good— not a reason for conflict. While we want to offer suggestions for improvement, we also want to encourage others to keep writing. Writing is a journey we're all on. In the interest of time, as a reviewer, you can agree with someone else's feedback or parts of it, or say you have nothing to add. See "Tips for Giving Effective Critiques" on pages 3–4.

After the Meeting
After the meeting, email your feedback to the writers with 48 hours *if possible.*

How to Effectively Receive a Critique

1. Resist the urge to defend your work; try to remain silent and hear what's being said even if you don't agree with it.
2. Don't dismiss people who misunderstand your piece; what they're saying still gives you valuable info about where you need to do some work.
3. Consider the feedback you're getting, while remembering that ultimately it needs to be in the service of *your* story.
4. Don't take a critique as a judgment of you or your abilities as a writer.
5. Let your fellow writers know where you're struggling and of any particular questions you'd like them to address in their critique (e.g., "Do I need to add more conflict?").

Tips for Giving Effective Critiques

1. **Be Specific**
   When something is working (or not working), cite specific sentences/phrases/paragraphs in the writer's work that demonstrate your comments. For instance, don't just say, "This piece has beautiful language." Give a specific example of a line that really moved you. Or explain where you see weaknesses: "This character feels like a stereotype."

2. **Be Effective**
   Effective comment examples:
   - I was confused by…
   - I wasn't quite sure what you were getting at when you wrote …
   - I got a little lost at…
   - I really loved the section where…
   - I loved X. It really held my attention.

   Ineffective comment examples:
   - If I were you, I'd…
   - I think the story would be a lot better if you'd only…
   - This is how you should fix it.

3. **Be Concise**
   Don't ramble. Writers have a limited amount of feedback they can absorb before they become oversaturated. Make sure you're delivering your most salient points in a clear and direct way. If you're still gathering your thoughts, let others' jump in first. If someone else touches on one of your points, avoid repeating it. Focus on the two or three key things the writer should work on to advance their next draft versus offering a laundry list of everything you noticed, big and small.

4. **Be Honest**

Telling someone a story is working well when it isn't doesn't help anyone. Start with a positive comment about the work first, and then offer a suggestion about how the writer can strengthen the piece.

5. **Skip the Solutions**

The writer is the ultimate expert on their work and the final decision-maker. When providing critique, highlight areas that need a closer look, but don't steer their story. Offering things like, "If it were me, I would change the end of the story to this," or "Maybe you should make your character do this and then have this happen," is not helpful simply because it is not your work and you are not inside the writer's head and heart. Instead, if you don't think their ending is working, try to tell them why and then leave it up to them to decide if and how they want to change it. Remember: it's not your story.

We welcome your comments, questions, concerns, and suggestions, as we want this to be a rewarding, supportive, and FUN experience for all.

SCWA Policy on Potentially Offensive Material

SCWA respects and honors freedom of speech and the rights of writers to create uncensored material. SCWA also recognizes that some content may be considered offensive to some members, including violence, explicit sex, or hate speech. SCWA offers the following guidelines for dealing with potentially offensive material:

- It is the writer's responsibility to warn critique group readers about possible offensive content through trigger warnings. For example, a warning might say: "This submission contains material that some readers may find offensive." Some authors may want to be more specific, saying, "This piece contains graphic violence." or "This submission contains explicit sex." or "This piece contains hate speech."
- Readers may decline to participate in reading or critiquing the material.
- If a critique group declines to consider a particular work, the author can ask SCWA's chapter liaison to submit the material to a board member or other chapter members for a critique.

Thank you for your interest in the Short Fiction Virtual Group!

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