

Andover SCBWI Critique Group Guidelines

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Welcome to our critique group! Whether you are a writer or illustrator, novice or experienced, published or pre-published, whether you visit us once or return and become a full member, we welcome you.

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About Our Group

- Our members are actively writing and/or illustrating fiction and nonfiction books, magazine articles, and poetry for children ages zero through teens. Some of us have had work published; others are working toward that goal.
- We are sponsored by [Friends of Memorial Hall Library](#), whose support allows us to use [library meeting space](#) and a library Zoom account. For more information, go to www.mhl.org. Memorial Hall's physical and online collections include many excellent resources for writers, as well as regularly-updated collections for children and teens. Critique group members are encouraged, but not required, to join [Friends of Memorial Hall Library](#).
- We are affiliated with the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) and receive support and advice from the New England chapter. For more

information, go to www.scbwi.org and www.nescbwi.org. We encourage everyone who is serious about writing or illustrating for children to join SCBWI. Information about free preview and dues here: <https://www.scbwi.org/membership>

- We usually meet the second Wednesday of the month from 7–8:30 P.M (sometimes the first Wednesday). Some meetings are hybrid and others are fully remote on Zoom. See the current year’s schedule, sent via email. No meeting is fully in-person; there is always a remote option.
 - Hybrid meetings happen both at Memorial Hall Library, Elm Square, Andover, in the ground floor Activity Room, and on Zoom.
 - Fully remote meetings are on Zoom only.
 - The second-Wednesday meeting schedule may vary due to holiday conflicts or library events. See the schedule for the current year.
 - For hybrid meetings: If Andover public schools are closed due to weather, or if the library is closed, we will be fully remote on Zoom.
- Marianne keeps a Gmail list of active members and members who are on a temporary break. About ten days ahead, Marianne sends an email to the whole group, indicating whose turn it is to submit for the upcoming meeting. The critique rotation list is attached to that email; it’s a record of who’s on the active list and can be used to estimate how soon your first or next turn will be. (See Membership below.)
- FYI: Because we are always open, we are sometimes a big group. One benefit is that we don’t need to cancel or reschedule meetings if some people can’t make it. Another benefit is the wide range of perspectives you receive about your work. One downside is that members submit infrequently compared with small groups.

Membership

We have three kinds of membership: Full, Guest, and Inactive.

Full Members:

- Have attended at least two out of three meetings in the prior three-month period.
- Are on the critique rotation list and have regular opportunities to have their work critiqued, as well as the opportunity to critique other members’ work.
- If a Full Member’s attendance drops below two out of three meetings, the member is taken off critique rotation and becomes Inactive until attendance is back up. (Established, active participants may get an occasional pass due to extenuating circumstances.)

- If a Member knows she or he will miss the meeting during which he or she is scheduled to submit, the member alerts the group and the next person down the list (who is scheduled for the following month) can take their spot. The Member can then take their turn next month, or they can “skip to double” their spot the next time they roll around on the list.

Guest / Inactive Members:

- Have attended fewer than two meetings in the past three-month period.
- Are not on the critique submission rotation list, but have the opportunity to critique others’ work, and to benefit from the discussion of others’ work.
- Are added to the rotation list after participating in two meetings during a three-month period. How soon the new member’s first critique happens after that date depends on group size.

Exceptions: A member who has been attending regularly and knows and announces in advance that they will be unable to attend for three or more months for whatever reason (out of town, conflicting commitment, etc.), is added to the bottom of the rotation list their first meeting back.

Attendance Note: A member who misses a meeting may submit critiques via email; if the member cc’s Marianne then the member is counted as attending that meeting.

“On Deck”: We critique four members’ work at each monthly meeting, on a rotating schedule. If someone who is scheduled cannot submit, that person emails the whole group and the first member who is scheduled for the next month (“on deck”) may sub instead. Whoever submits moves up the list. The one who misses goes into the first spot on the next month or doubles up for the next time their spot rolls around (their choice).

A note about geography

We limit new membership to people who live within driving distance of Andover, Massachusetts, because we are sponsored by the Andover library. However, well-established members who move to another location may choose to stay with the group if they are able to continue to attend meetings remotely.

Background and Basics

What IS a critique group?

Critique groups are made up of fellow writers and illustrators who meet for the purpose of providing constructive advice and feedback on each other’s works in progress. See also “Notes about the critique process,” below.

Before the meeting: Submissions and critiques

- Submitters send their manuscripts (Word or Google docs for manuscript, PDFs for art/dummies) several days ahead of the meeting.
- Members read and critique the works before the meeting. Comment in the files using [Track Changes](#) and comments. Or, print the files and write in the margins by hand. (Up to you how to get those notes to the submitter.)

A typical meeting: News/Business and Critiquing

- We begin with news and business from 7 – 7:10 (conference info, news about submissions/rejections, group business, blog business).
- Critiquing begins at 7:10. We need to start on time to end on time.
- The person at the top of the rotation list goes first.
- The facilitator keeps the conversation on topic (or tries to!). A timekeeper tracks how many minutes are left in each discussion.
 - If it's a hybrid meeting, we take turns between online and in person critiques.
- Each critique can last up to 20 minutes. We complete four critiques each meeting.
 - Meetings must end promptly at 8:30 so we can pack up equipment and clear the building by 8:45.
- **AFTER THE MEETING:** All members email their comments to the submitters. Or if you and the submitter are both in person, you may hand off a printout with notes.

What to Submit for Critique:

Writing

- Up to 5–6 double-spaced pages, or 1500–2000 words, per submission. (Most word processors have a tool for word count.) This translates to the entire manuscript of a picture book or magazine story, or a chapter or scene in a longer work.
- Submission of multiple unrelated works for the same critique slot is discouraged, even if the total word count falls within limits. Multiple related works (e.g. a set of poems, or a picture book manuscript with its pitch and query letter) are fine.
- If you're submitting a chapter from a longer work, PLEASE include a brief synopsis of what has come before. That way critiquers won't be asking questions that are answered in previous chapters.
 - Synopses do not count toward your total word count unless you're submitting a synopsis for critique.

- If the sub is over 1500 words, put a note in the manuscript marking the 1500-word point so readers know they may stop there. Do not go over 2000 words, and do not go up to 2000 words and leave the reader hanging in the middle of a scene. Find a comfortable break point.
- If your chapters are significantly over 1500 words, you have a couple of options:
 - Find a point to break your submission and submit it over two submission turns.
 - OR announce that you're skipping your turn and let someone else submit. Then, the next time your turn rolls around, you have two submission slots and up to 3000 words, plus or minus.*
- **FORMATTING:** You do not have to format as if you're submitting to an agent or publisher, but following these guidelines helps critiquers:
 - Double-space your work and indent paragraphs as appropriate.
 - Include a **header or footer** with this information: **Your Name / Title of Work / Page number.**
 - Name your file with identifying information, for example "LastName_Book Title_Ch 1.docx" **NOT** "Sub to Critique Group.docx."
- Try to send your file by the Friday before the meeting, along with a brief note saying what you need most from this critique (plot, length, characterization, etc.). This gives members time to review ahead of time.
- Send your work by **REPLYING ALL** to the reminder email and attaching the file. **DO NOT CHANGE THE SUBJECT LINE.** Doing so makes it difficult for others to find your submission.
- It's okay to bring something other than manuscript for critique—for example, a cover letter, query, plot outline, synopsis, marketing plan.
 - If a synopsis is submitted to set context for a chapter submission, it is not included in the word count and will not be critiqued.

Illustration

- Send a PDF of the work in progress. If you have a book dummy or several related illustrations (e.g. character design sheet, sketches for a whole picture book) you may send them all at once.
- For in-person meetings, it may be helpful to bring a printout of the art in case we're having technical difficulties and cannot project the art onto the screen. (Zoom participants will see it through screenshare.)

* **PLEASE!** If you are not substantially ready to submit by one week ahead of the meeting, email the group to pass your spot to someone else. Reason: Even if you think you can get your submission ready in time, a system crash, accident, virus (computer or human), etc. can derail your plans. It's sad for you, but it's a loss for the whole group too, because the critique slot is wasted.

If you pass on your turn, you have two options:

- Take your turn the following month instead.
- Double up your time and word count the next time you come up in rotation.

Let the group know which option you choose, when you pass.

Notes about the Critique Process:

- Members need to know that their ideas and works in progress are safe, in order to participate. NEVER talk about the work of other members outside of the group. NEVER mention works-in-progress online. NEVER use another member's ideas in your own work (it's okay to use ideas that members share about your work). Delete other members' works in progress from your computer after critiquing.
- You should expect to hear about the good and the bad, the graceful and awkward, the beautiful and the ugly. That is the point of critiquing: providing useful, constructive criticism to improve each others' work.
- Expect to disagree with others, about your own work and about others' work. That's okay; the purpose of a critique group isn't to agree. The purpose is for the author or artist to collect a variety of viewpoints, some of which will be useful for revision.
- You do not have to act on all of the suggestions from everyone in the group—in fact it won't be possible, because some advice will conflict. All viewpoints are valid, but YOU are the one who decides which suggested changes will strengthen your work.
- It can be difficult at first to hear criticism of your creative output, but it's an essential part of the process if you hope to grow as a writer or artist. Accept all comments graciously—the ones you agree with, and the ones you don't.
- Remember the “constructive” in constructive criticism. Critique others as you would have them critique you. “Sandwich” comments about things that could be strengthened between comments about things that are already working well. And remember—if a writer doesn't know something is good, they might delete it!
- And remember that our discussion time is limited! Choose one or two things to comment on—the ones you think may need discussion—and count on your written notes to convey the rest.

Beyond the Meetings

Facebook Group

We keep a private [Facebook Group](#) for group conversation and news in between our meetings. It has quite a few alumni of the group and the Writers' Rumpus blog, in addition to current members. Anyone who's on the rotation list is welcome to join. Contact Hilary Margitich, the current admin for the FB group.

Writers' Rumpus blog

Some past and present members of the group keep a blog, [Writers' Rumpus](#), where we post on Tuesdays, with occasional posts on Fridays. The blog also has pages of [helpful resources](#). The blog started in 2013, and while our following is only a few thousand, those who know us, respect us. (For at least one of our members, Writers' Rumpus helped get her manuscript read by an editor who was familiar with the blog.)

Please follow our blog and explore the wealth of content. If you're new to kidlit, it's a great way to learn about the kidlit world.

Ways to connect with the blog:

URL: www.writersrumpus.com

The best way to subscribe to the blog is to sign up for emails using the widget in the right-hand column of the blog. The blog has some social media accounts, but WordPress doesn't reliably publish to them (see below). If you have a WordPress account, you can subscribe to the blog through WordPress Reader.

- Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Writers-Rumpus-Blog/177046879129765> (The auto-populate from WordPress no longer works, even though WP says it does.)
- Twitter / X: @writersrumpus (Sporadically active. The kidlit community has mostly decamped to [BlueSky](#). If you'd like to commit to supporting a WR presence on BlueSky, let us know! We could set up a WR account.)
- Instagram: writersrumpus (Currently inactive. If you'd like to commit to posting blog posts on the Instagram account, please let us know!)

Contributing to the blog:

Any member who is on the rotation list is eligible to contribute, either as a one-time thing or on a regular basis. Consider blogging as a way to raise your online profile! Please

follow the blog and spend some time familiarizing yourself with its schedule and the type of content posted before signing up to contribute. If you'd like to contribute, send the admin, Laura Cooper, an email (cooperlaura@yahoo.com) saying what topic you'd like to post about, and she'll be in touch.

In-Person Meet-Ups

Sometimes, a group member schedules an informal in-person meet-up where we current and past members can get to know each other better as people and as kidlit book creators. These are fantastic opportunities! Feel free to organize one—at a restaurant, a park, a public event, or your own home if you're willing and able.