

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 books, magazine articles, and poetry for children ages zero through teens. Some of us have had work published; most of us are working toward that goal.
- We are sponsored by Friends of Memorial Hall Library, whose support allows us to use [library meeting space](#) and/or 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 a regularly-updated collection for children and teens.
- 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 strongly encourage everyone who is serious about writing or illustrating for children to join SCBWI, and to attend the annual New England spring conference. It's worth the \$80 annual dues.
- We meet the second Wednesday of the month from 7–9 P.M. Pre-pandemic, we met at Memorial Hall Library, Elm Square, Andover, in the ground floor Activity Room. We switched to Zoom meetings in April 2020, and *may* start meeting in person again starting in May, 2022 (TBD).

- The second-Wednesday meeting schedule may vary due to library events, weather, or holidays. If there's a change in location or date, library staff notifies Marianne Knowles, who notifies the email list.
- For in-person meetings: If Andover public schools are closed due to weather, or if the library is closed, we reschedule. If school is not closed but the weather is iffy, we decide via e-mail whether to reschedule. Info on rescheduled dates is emailed to the membership list.
- Marianne keeps a Gmail list of active members and members who are on a temporary break. About ten days before each meeting, Marianne sends an email to the whole group, indicating whose turn it is to submit for that month. The critique rotation list is always attached to that email; it's a record of who's on the 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 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. (See below.)

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 (but see Attendance Note below).
- 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. (see

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.

Exception: 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, and waits for their turn to come up.

Attendance Note: A member may submit critiques via email or by dropping them off at the meeting even if he/she misses a meeting. This counts for attendance purposes, so please cc Marianne on the critiques. If a member finds he/she is submitting critiques via email more often than in person, the member should consider an online group instead.

“On Deck”: We critique five members’ work at each monthly meeting, on a rotating schedule. Since our group is always open, it tends to average about 15 members at any given time. So it can be three months between critiques. In practice, a writer can be critiqued more often by having work ready to submit if another member cannot attend the meeting they’re scheduled for. If someone who is scheduled cannot submit, a member who is scheduled for the next month (“on deck”) may subs instead. Starting in January, 2014, we will go in order of the list—first person on deck has first refusal, then it goes to second, etc. (formerly it was first-come, first-served). Whoever submits moves up the list. The one who misses goes into the first spot on the next month.

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.

A typical meeting: Business and Critiquing

- We begin with business from 7 – 7:20. Business includes sharing information about conferences, workshops, contests, and related opportunities; sharing correspondence from publishers; discussion of matters related to the running of the group, etc.
- Critiquing begins at 7:20, or sooner if business is done and everyone is present.
- The person at the top of the rotation list goes first. It’s expected but not required that the work was circulated prior to the meeting (see Critique Submissions below). Bring a few copies for visitors or in case some members did not print out their own.
- The member being critiqued (submitter) chooses the format of their own critique. The member may choose to read her/his own work aloud, may ask another member to read it, or may skip reading and go straight to critiquing if the work was circulated ahead. Similarly, the member decides whether to have others take turns describing individual reactions to the submission before group discussion begins, or whether to have an open discussion from the beginning. The member can also decide whether to listen quietly to the discussion, or whether to participate by answering questions.

- The facilitator makes sure that the conversation stays on topic, that everyone has an opportunity to contribute ideas and reactions, and keeps track of the time.
- Each critique can last up to 20 minutes, though it can end sooner by mutual agreement. We complete five critiques each meeting.

Critique Submissions:

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 the limits. Multiple related works (such as a set of poems, or a short work and a query letter for that same work) are fine.
- If you are over 1500 words you are asked to 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 or chapter. Find a comfortable break point.
- If your chapters are significantly over 1500 words, you have a couple of options:
 - You may find a point to break your submission and send it as two separate submissions, rather than sending the whole thing at once.
 - OR, you may announce that you’re skipping your turn that month and let someone else submit. Then, the next time your turn comes up, you can have two submission slots and send the whole thing (up to 3000 words, plus or minus). This is for your benefit as well as the group’s; it’s difficult to give a thoughtful query on a work longer than 1500 words given the time limits of the group.
- **FORMATTING:** You do not have to use the format that you’d use for submitting to an agent or publisher, but following these guidelines helps us in the critique process:
 - 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 “Ima_Writer_Book Title_Ch 1.docx” **NOT** “Sub to Critique Group.docx.”
- You are encouraged to circulate your submission 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, and results in more thorough critiques. Some members are not comfortable sharing their work electronically, and instead choose to share it during the meeting. That’s fine, too, though it works best for poems and picture books.

- Send your work by **REPLYING ALL** to the reminder email and attaching the file. For in-person meetings: Bring a copy for yourself and a few others in case some members weren't able to print your work (it happens).
- It's okay to bring something other than manuscript for critique—for example, a cover letter, query, plot outline, or synopsis. Note that if a synopsis is submitted in support of an excerpt from your book for reference only, it is not included in the word count and will not be critiqued.

Illustration

- Bring the original or a high-quality copy of the work in progress (sketches or finishes). If you have several related illustrations or a book dummy, you may bring them all at once.
- Just one copy or original of each illustration is enough. The illustrator puts the illustration(s) in the center of the table, allowing everyone to get a good view. Or, if you'd rather, bring equipment to display your work (computer & monitor, document camera & screen, etc.) The illustrator explains the context for the illustrations.

PLEASE!! If you are not substantially ready to submit by a week ahead of the meeting, plan to give up your spot to a member who is scheduled for the following month. Reason: Even if you think you can get your submission ready in time, a system crash, accident, virus (computer or human), etc. can thwart your best intentions. It's sad for you, but it's a loss for the whole group, too, because the critique time slot is wasted.

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 on the internet. NEVER use another member's ideas in your own work (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, she might delete it!

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

Our critique group keeps a group blog, [Writers’ Rumpus](#), where we post twice a week: Tuesdays and 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 past members, being associated with 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

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Writers-Rumpus-Blog/177046879129765>

Twitter: @writersrumpus

Instagram: writersrumpus (Currently inactive. If you’d like to commit to posting blog posts on the Instagram account, please let us know!)

Tumblr: writersrumpus.tumblr.com (inactive other than auto-posts)

You may subscribe to the blog using RSS or email signup; through Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr; or through the WordPress Reader (if you have a WordPress account).

Contributing to the blog:

Posting on the blog is an opportunity, not an obligation. Any member who is on the rotation list is invited to ask to join the blog, either as a one-time thing or on a regular basis. Please follow the blog and spend some time familiarizing yourself with its schedule and content before signing up to contribute. If you’d like to join, send Marianne an email (mpknowles85@verizon.net) saying what topic you’d like to post about, and she’ll send you an invitation to join the blog along with more particulars.