

Critique Groups: Finding the Right Fit

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You all know how *not* fun it is to shop for jeans, or a dress-shirt that doesn't strangle you. The hunt for a critique group can feel just as intimidating. Luckily you have many groups to choose from. And you have the tools—within yourself—to make the right choice.

Here's the equation: Goals + Guts = The Right Fit

What do you want out of a critique group? You want the basics—a place to feel welcome and supported, where you receive helpful feedback about your writing. And that's a good start.

Let's go a little further, though. Here are some questions for you to think about.

How many years have you been writing? How much experience do you have critiquing and being critiqued? Are you open to critiquing manuscripts for all genres, from young adult to picture books? Or do you want a narrower focus, only nonfiction or fantasy? Do you prefer interacting with writers in person or across the Internet. Do you work full-time, or do you have daytime hours available for critiquing? Assuming your goal is publication, do you see that goal as just around the corner, across town, or at the end of a long train journey. In other words, realistically, how high a level of the writing craft have you reached?

Are you interested in (eventually) submitting to agents or editors, or do you plan to self-publish?

Obviously, there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Even after you look closely at your goals, you may not meet them all. If you live in a small town or in the country, your odds of finding an in-person group are lower than if you live in a city. Whether or not it's your first choice, you may need to look for an online group. Stay open to the possibilities.

Similarly, don't rule out options just because you *think* you're not experienced enough. An unpublished writer can critique with a published writer, and someone who's been writing a year can exchange helpful feedback with someone who's been at it for five. Critiquing is a craft to be learned, like writing, and a group that has room for members who are growing their skills can become incredibly strong and productive.

So how do you know, after the goal-setting and self-interrogation, that you've found the right place? Here's where the *gut* part comes in. Trust yours. Get some information about the other group members. Sit in on a few sessions. Do some critiques, and get feedback on your project. Then ask yourself the really important question: how do you feel?

If you're bored or intimidated at the meetings, if the feedback isn't giving you anything to think about, if you aren't excited about your writing, don't stay. No door got locked behind you when you stepped in, nobody but you can make you stay. Be polite, say your thank yous, and head back out on your hunt.

Because when you find the right group, it will be worth all the time and worry. And you'll *know* you're there. You'll be comfortable and at ease. You'll leave each meeting charged up and excited about *everybody's* project, including your own. You'll want to squeeze more writing time out of your day, just so you can pass it to your critique partners and hear their thoughts.

You'll have set your goals and gone after them. And you'll have made your gut very, very happy.

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