How to Survive a Critique...and More: Let's Talk Troubleshooting

Originally written as guest post for the Writer Unboxed *blog (http://writerunboxed.com/).*

In my book, *The Writing & Critique Group Survival Guide*, I've got a chapter about troubleshooting. It's toward the end of the book, after chapters on getting started and staying organized and learning some tools and tricks about critiquing. It's at the end, because—yes, even after you're an experienced critiquer, even after you've participated in a group for a few years, you can still run across problems. Groups are made of people, and people interact—not always as smoothly as we'd like.

The important thing is, I think, to catch these problems before they become, well...big problems. Most of us are nice people; as writers, we struggle enough having to make bad things happen to our characters. We don't like to complain, we don't really want to nag, and we are not at all happy with serious confrontations. But if you don't talk about something, guess what? It's not going away.

Here are some common situations that can make critique partners uncomfortable, unhappy, and—if not dealt with soon enough—angry:

- A critiquer pushing a writer (too hard or too frequently) to seriously change the direction or meaning of the writer's book
- A writer dismissing (out loud!) a critiquer's suggestion
- A writer resubmitting chapters multiple times, without weaving in much, or any, of the critique feedback they've received
- A critique-group member who isn't, at the moment, critiquing or being critiqued, but who also isn't paying attention to the discussion
- A critiquer who only skims the surface of submissions, catching missing commas, but not addressing bigger issues like plot and character

If you've been in a critique group, I'm willing to bet you've seen at least one of these scenarios. You may very well have been directly involved. We all have. The groups that not only survive these dynamics, though, but thrive through them, are the ones in which the members recognize and address the tensions before they get too high.

If you're not happy with the way someone is critiquing your work, tell them. Don't turn the conversation into an attack, and don't assume the critiquer is being too harsh (or too easy) on purpose. Be clear about your own goals for your project, and talk about the kind of critique that is the most helpful to you. You can do this at the meeting, or in private—use your judgment about which way will be the most comfortable, and most productive. Be polite and respectful about the effort the critiquer has put into their work, just as you want them to be respectful of yours.

If you're on the other side of the table, if someone comes to you with a complaint or a suggestion about the way you're critiquing, take a breath and listen. Try not to go instantly into defensive mode. It wasn't easy for the writer to approach you, but they're on the path toward doing the right thing...resolving a problem before it goes too far. If you don't understand what the writer wants you to do differently, ask questions—brainstorm. Work on this together, and the odds are good that you'll both go back to the group happier...and do better critiquing *and* writing.

The basis of a strong critique group is trust, but trust doesn't appear magically or instantly the moment a group forms, or a new member joins. Like everything else, trust requires time and energy. When a group's members work together toward that trust, they'll find themselves with a group that grows as they do, that has the flexibility and strength to last through all the changes the writers themselves will go through. A goal worth achieving, I think.