The Critique Group Manifesto

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Stingy Scotsman Press

A Division of Pointless Grudge Enterprises

St. Louis, Missouri

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First release, December 2007

Version 3, August 2013

Cover designed by Yeti Machete Studios

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Starting or Participating in a Critique Group

So, you think you want to start a critique group. Why would you want to do something crazy like that? Oh, your writing isn't where you want it to be? I see. And you think surrounding yourself with several other people who may not know the difference between past perfect and passive voice is actually going to help you learn how to write? Think this proposed confederacy of dunces of yours is going to help you get your writing published?

Good idea.

From the perspective of a jaundiced and cynical eye, critique partners and critique groups don't make much sense. But I'm here to convince you critique groups work for exactly the same reason you think they won't. Critique Groups work because there are darned few writing gurus out there, and fewer who are willing to donate twenty hours of their time to help out a lesser talent. Why would they? For the mere benefit of improving the state of the Craft?

Screw that.

Factor in the number of these apocryphal benevolent gurus who ask for nothing in return and you begin to get some perspective on which of the following scenarios is more likely:

- An experienced and skilled editor will spend many hours helping you workshop your writing into a publishable manuscript for free.

- A fellow pilgrim to the Craft may have some experience with aspects and nuances of the master tapestry which you have not yet considered, learned, or adopted into an autonomic writing practice.

Should you find yourself privy to the first scenario, stop reading this book and get your pages to the guru now! You have won the wannabe lottery, my friend. Alternatively, if you have the $3,000 to $10,000 in disposable income necessary to hire a professional editor, no one will fault you for making the most of your resources. Given

the average advance for a first novel is down to between $5,000 and $11,000, I refrain from using the term "good investment" when speaking of editing services.

Publishing a fictional manuscript remains a gamble of long odds, and there is no guarantee a professionally-edited manuscript will get you an agent or a publishing contract any more than a $400 pair of athletic shoes will make the difference in securing an NBA contract. There are tens of thousands of writers vying for the attention of approximately 800 U.S. agents, who in turn are soliciting projects to a mere dozen major publishing houses. Long odds. The only sane reason to even attempt the feat is because you love writing more than you hate rejection.

Pssst. You *do* love writing more than you hate rejection? Right?

Which brings us to the second scenario: Stone soup. Take a group of writers, each of whom knows a handful of building blocks needed for unassailable writing. Bring them together to teach and learn from one another. Those writers cross-pollinate with other writers, teachers and critique groups, and suddenly you have formerly clueless writers on the path to their own guru writing epilates. Free of charge.

The downside is that the path to enlightenment takes a lot longer when you make it instead of buying it outright. The upside is by earning your Craft merit badges, you fully understand the fundamentals of great writing and every subsequent writing project you undertake begins with fewer and fewer roadblocks to the promised land of publishing.

Not every critique group begins with enough of the fundamental building blocks of writing Craft to be functional. Frankly, some of them are doomed from the start. But not every edit-for-hire specialist is worth the money you'll pay, either.

This guide book is designed to anticipate and avoid many of the stumbling blocks to a successful critique group experience. It was compiled from the experience of a dozens of successful writers, and what they shared about why critique groups work and why they don't.

The Ubiquitous Car Metaphor

Throughout this guide I will compare good writing to a well-designed car. Both serve a function; getting their passengers safely from one place to another, ostensibly for enjoyment. Both share an expectation of aesthetic considerations. Nobody wants to ride in your ’73 Mercury Bobcat with trashbags taped over the window openings and the floorboards rusted away. Likewise, nobody wants to slog through 435 pages of your novel when the first paragraph hints to the reader they may be slogging through random keystrokes thrashed by a dyslexic marmoset. A car is built to last for more than a single trip and a good novel is written to entertain generations through multiple readings.

If I charged you with building a rudimentary car from scratch, could you do it? You’ve driven countless automobiles, but what do you really know about cars? Could you cobble together a steering system? Do you understand all the complexities of combustion? A simple gear transmission system? How much more successful would your completed car project be if I grouped you with four or five others car builders who may or may not know a little bit about how the systems of a car work and work together?

The English language can be every bit as complicated as an automobile. There are as many different subsystems of a successful writing project as there are on a Model T. Yes, eventually you can figure out how to write well with no assistance from others. I’ve met plenty of folks who were sure they had nothing to learn from other writing wannabees. They read a lot of books and just kept writing away in their own little world until they developed a skill. Among the critiquing community, this mindset is referred to by a crude moniker, “smelling one’s own farts.” It can work. It can be a path to success. It will take you longer to hone your craft if you opt for this track.

Good and Bad Mechanics

Bad mechanics with good intentions are par for the course. Good mechanics with bad attitudes are not.

Your critique partners will never be flawless. You will get bad advice, and you will follow some of that bad device to your detriment.

Some critique group partners will be better than others just as some mechanics and engineers are more skilled than others. However if you look around a group of three or four other writers and come to the conclusion you have absolutely nothing to learn from any of them, follow your instincts and quit the group. Don't quit because you're right, because you aren't. Quit because you are a self-important jackass who will do more to undermine the nurturing environment of that critique group than any grammar-challenged beginner.

Everyone in a critique group is building their own prose vehicle using the resources of the collective membership's brainpower. This doesn't mean you are expected to race your vehicles against each other at the end of the day. Your crit group is a meeting of like-minded enthusiasts. It isn't a competition. If you are at a stage where you are fine-tuning the timing belt of your prose engine with a strobe spectrometer and you don't have the patience to walk across the room, put your arm around the befuddled newbie and say, "Hey friend, have you considered the concept of putting brakes on this thing?" then the problem is *you*, not the endless bafflement of needy newbies.

Unfortunately, not every one has the patience to teach newbies simple concepts. Impatient writers are not destined to have a satisfactory critique group experience. Ayn Rand said every act of altruism masks an act of selfishness. Teaching newbies forces experienced writers think about their own writing values. Teaching newbies helps experienced writers codify nuances of their craft which they've long understood, but may never have bothered to articulate before. Most of all, teaching newbies is the best way for experienced writers come to terms with the fact many of the unbreakable rules they put in their writer's toolbox back in middle school have changed. The language evolves, and sometimes newbies are closer to that evolutionary fulcrum than experienced writers.

The shortest road to success with any endeavor involves surrounding yourself with patient, articulate people who are more skilled than you are. If you follow this model long enough, one day

you'll find yourself struck by the realization you have become the most experienced, most skilled person in the room. So do you abandon the room for a fresh tier of gurus that will grow you to the next level? In time, yes. But first take a breath and ask yourself why those more skilled than yourself put up with *you* when you were the new kid on the block with little to teach and much to learn. Give a little back, and see what gifts come your way from a small investment in altruism.

What is a Critique Group?

A critique group is the regular gathering of two or more writers intent on improving their craft through a mutually cooperative discipline of learning and sharing. Much like a childhood game of playing "Teacher," critiquing involves taking turns pointing out mistakes and opportunities we are often unprepared to acknowledge in our own writing.

Each of us verbalize on a limited, rather specific *frequency*. For example, the average civilized adult speaks in passive voice because we associate passive voice as a function of politeness.

*"Gina, if you don't mind, the kids and I **will be leaving** now."*

We use chronological placement words in an effort to help a listener understand a sequence of events.

*"So **then** I opened the door. **After that** I reached around the door frame to turn on the light **before** I walked in that creepy house. **Then I eventually** saw something I couldn't believe."*

We begin sentences with empty, meaningless words which buy time for our brains to finish cobbling together what we want to say.

*"**Basically**, he didn't think it was true. **Understandably**, it was a lot to take in all at once."*

We add verity boosters to emphasize the integrity and importance of what we're saying.

*"**Seriously**, it was heavy. I mean **really, really** heavy. I'd have to say that was **unquestionably** the biggest hamburger I've ever **actually** seen."*

On the other hand, sometimes we use squishy, inexact words to hedge our own judgments in a shroud of humility.

*"It was **somewhere** around eight **or nine** feet tall. Grandma had to have planted it **back around** the late sixties, **I'm guessing.**"*

These are examples of the colloquial way most people speak English. We speak this way because the people around us speak this way and we have come to *think* on this flawed frequency. More often than not, it's our tendency to *write* on this same frequency, the same mental frequency we hear in our heads as our fingertips rain down on the keyboard.

This is where bad writing originates. We barely notice these imprecisions when we hear them in everyday speech but, when transcripted to the written word, these gaffes stand out like the bastard at a family reunion. How can we write boners as egregious as the previous examples? More often than not, we reread and edit our own work using the same flawed inner voice we used to write these terrible constructions. Critique groups are your opportunity to vet your writing for mistakes you have programmed yourself not to notice… and in the vetting your crit partners will teach your mental narrator to speak in crisper prose. Critique groups will teach you to think more articulately and thereby help you write with greater precision.

Beta Reader vs. Critique Partner

Many capable writers are confused about the difference between a critique partner and a beta reader. Stephen King and Dean Koontz write and lecture about a circle of trusted individuals who read and comment on drafts of their novels before they send a manuscript to an editor. To the uninitiated, this sounds as though King and Koontz have private critique groups at their beck and call.

These aren't critique groups. These are beta readers.

A critique group is a circle of committed writers seeking to teach and learn from one another for the mere price of the promise of reciprocal benefit.

A beta reader is any warm body you can talk into reading the entirety of your work and pass along some kind of judgment on what you've written.

Mr. King and Mr. Koontz have gurued themselves out of the teach-and-learn stage. Regardless of what you think of their writing, they have certified guru shingles hanging outside their writing caves. They are merely looking for trusted, big picture reactions to the entirety of themes, plots arcs, and emotional investment in their characters. No one is sending back pages with tense shift mistakes circled on page 47 of Martin Amis's latest manuscript because Martin caught them and fixed those tense shifts the first time he reread page 47.

Beta readers are a terrific resource. If you have a literate friend who will gift you the twenty hours of their life it takes to wade through a full-length manuscript, you are wise to make the most of their goodwill.

Back to the ubiquitous car metaphor: Critique group members are amateur mechanics. Beta readers are driving enthusiasts. Two different mindsets which will garner completely different feedback.

If you took your prototype automobile to a test track and let a driving enthusiast and a mechanic take it for a few laps, they may very well tell you the same thing using two different vocabularies. Your driving enthusiast friend will tell you he felt quite a bit of shimmy in the steering wheel when braking on the downhill slopes. Your mechanic friend will tell you your rotors are warped, but only the ones on the front wheels. Likewise, a beta reader will tell you, "Gee, Alicia, your novel was great, but I have to admit I kept getting the characters confused. It seemed like there were a lot of characters, and it got hard to keep track of them all." Your critique partners will ask you, "Alicia, what's with the phone book dump of the entire cast of characters in chapters one and two? Every major character should be introduced in a separate chapter. The reader must have sufficient time to mentally absorb a primary character before you hit them with the next one."

A beta reader will tell you what they didn't like. A good critique partner will give you an honest assessment of what isn't working in your story and offer solutions for how to fix it.

My personal advice is to exhaust the resources of your critique partners first, and then leverage any beta readers you can roust for one last round of edit input before you query. The quickest way to snuff out the goodwill of a beta reader is by sending them unvetted, amateur garbage filled with grammar, spelling, and logic mistakes. Send your beta readers something they have to slog through and they won't be so quick to volunteer to beta read next time.

Reading your book is an event. Imagine you are hosting a dinner party for a famous food critic (the agent or editor you want to represent you or buy your story). It's your critique group's job to help you clean your house and cook the food. That means they are probably going to see the embarrassing toenails you tossed in the potted plant, and they may spit out a petit-four or two in disgust. That's their job. Your beta reader should be the test-run guests who attend your practice party, enjoy the wine and hors d'oeuvres, and share their opinions about what works and which dishes could use a little more oregano. *Then* you send an invitation to the critic who matters most.

You only get one chance to sell an agent or editor on your skill. At the end of the day, theirs are the only opinions which count. Everything leading up to your query is practice and every criticism from your critique partners and beta readers is an opportunity for adjustment.

The Critique Group Blueprint

1. Find a group of committed, motivated writers, preferably in your same writing genre.
2. Negotiate a meeting time and place
3. Discuss your writing values.
4. Create a charter. Sign contracts.
5. Establish your individual writing project goals.
6. Determine the cycle breaks for your group.
7. Elect or appoint a group moderator.
8. Exchange pages
9. Read pages
10. Edit pages
11. Compile edits into a summary page.
12. Explain your opinions verbally.
13. Say nothing when others edit your work.
14. Ask clarifying questions.
15. Rinse and repeat.
16. Reevaluate your writing goals.
17. Reevaluate your cycle participation.

Critique Group  Manifesto	Critique Group Blueprint	Drawn By: Shawn Drawing No. 1026-B

Where Do You Find Critique Partners?

This is the 64 thousand dollar question, an important question to which I can only offer humble advice.

Face-to-face Critique Groups

The first place you should shop for critique partners are organized writer's groups in your city. University and college English departments also are breeding grounds for wannabe writers, and may have postings for critique groups. If you don't see the posting, it may fall to you to be the one to print out a flyer and start the process. Bookstore and Coffee house bulletin boards often have community postings for reading groups and writing circles.

First look for the **community of writers** in your area. If there are critique group potentials for a face-to-face group, that's where you'll find your founding members.

Online Critique Groups

Even rural areas can have a community of writers, but sometimes you are either far enough out in the hinterlands, or busy enough with your non-writing life it makes more sense for you to find digital partners interested in the Craft.

If an outright Internet search engine result list doesn't take you straight to the forum registration page for any number critique group sites, then follow the same advice I give for face to face crit groups. **Find your community of writers**. Google the words "Literary" "Writer" and "Blog." Look for litbloggers with current posts and active comment threads. Read the comments. When you find a commenter who doesn't sound like an idiot, click their name and link to *their* blog. Does she have an active community of commenters interested in the Craft on *her* blog? To paraphrase W. Mark Felt, follow the brainpower. *Cherchez le cerebellum*.

Google "Literary Agent Blog" and read inside baseball advice from working literary agents. Agent blogs are good sources for comments

and discussion by experienced writers who may have literary blogs of their own. Follow the brainpower. Comment on the posts. Make yourself known. Network. Ask the writers who know best where to find active online critique groups, and more specifically the one which suits your experience and writing values.

Characters You Don't Want to See in Your Crit Group

A really good, long-serving, quality critique group is more exception than rule. When you find yourself in a committed critique group with smart people whom you respect and who respect you, don't be the one to screw it up. Do your part to keep the wheels on a good thing while it's rolling.

The death knell of any critique group is almost always rooted in personality issues. If you have the foresight to avoid the problem people, or at least tactfully intervene with the problem people before the binding comes unstitched, you can increase the odds of a successful critique group experience.

Here's a start on a list of people you don't want in your critique group if you can avoid it.

Buddy Buddy

I put Buddy at the top of the list because this may be the most important nugget of wisdom I can offer you.

SHAWN'S LAW: Your critique partners may very well become terrific friends, but your friends will never, never, never become good critique partners.

A critique group is a workshop of writers immersed in the nuances of a hobby. Your friends, even if they are writers, won't have the dispassionate distance necessary to develop you. The instinct of your friends will be to protect and support you, not grow your skills.

Dearest Spouse

Oh man. Don't do it. If you don't understand why, see *Buddy Buddy* above. The second worst thing two writing spouses can do is lie to one another about the other's writing.

The *absolute worst* thing two writing spouses can do is be honest with one another about the other's writing.

You cannot be a good spouse and a good critique partner. I question whether or not your spouse can even be a good beta reader.

Madame Defarge

Madame D showed up at the first two critique meetings with a smile on her face and a song in her heart. She was chomping at the bit to share her writing and help others. But things didn't go so well at those first two meetings. Her crit partners didn't gush over the prologue to *Wind of Destiny* the way she envisioned. As a matter of fact, they had some issues with her spunky protagonist, Liberty McDaniels.

Now Madame D is set on her haunches, waiting for the chance to pay back her partners in kind. It's week nine and she's still looking for every vengeful opportunity to call her fellow critters on hypocrisies in their writing. She won't rest until her judgment stands vindicated, and that won't happen until she's proven to her haughty critique partners how unworthy they are to have ever passed judgment on her.

Fragile Frank

Is it really so important Frank sit through the gauntlet of a verbal critique? Can't you just e-mail him the critical points instead, maybe just saving the positive criticism for the face-to-face meeting? Must your group meet at the corner coffee shop? That's so… *open*. Other people can hear what you have to say about his writing and – after all – writing is such a personal endeavor. Is it really fair to air dirty laundry in public?

God bless the insecure writer. We all take our turn as a sacrifice on the altar of fragility from time to time. But Frank's sensitivity is a Venetian blind on the window of trust; the very source of a crit group's strength. Frank questions his partners' ability to be tactful before he hears a single word they say, and in doing so he piddles in the well of good faith. No one wants to drink from the well once Frank piddles in it.

Classless Cassie

You don't have to worry too much about getting Classless Cassie out of your critique group because Cassie will remove herself soon enough, usually right before or right after the first meeting. Once pages are exchanged Cassie realizes she's so *beyond* the horrible pages sent to her by the group that showing up to a second meeting is an exercise in futility. She's wasting her time critiquing such amateur efforts. She says to the group, "Wow. This isn't what I was expecting. I've read all your pages and just I don't think I'm a good fit for this group." Her timing could not be more obvious, meant to send a message.

If Classless Cassie bails out of your critique group, count your blessings.

Dear Prudence

Oh my goodness! You had the nerve to include adult language and racy scenes in the novel you wrote for adults. Why would you want to do something like that? Tsk, tsk. Prudence is very disappointed you are wasting your talent on smutty pursuits. She'll be the first to tell you "dirty words" are the first refuge of an uncreative mind. (Never mind Prudence uses a cliché to make a point about creativity.)

Prudence has made it her calling to ensure you self edit everything out of your writing you suspect Prudence might find objectionable.

In Jaroslav Hašeck's comic novel *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1922), Hašeck speaks directly to the Prudences of the world.

"Those who boggle at strong language are cowards, because it is real life which is shocking them, and weaklings like that are the very people who cause most harm to culture and character. They would like to see the nation grow up into a group of over-sensitive little people - masturbators of false culture of the type of St Aloysius, of whom it is said in the book of the monk Eustachius that when he heard a man breaking wind with deafening noise he immediately burst into tears and could only be consoled by prayers."

I admit I've been shocked on a few occasions by subject matter which made me squeamish and themes which flushed my ears red with embarrassment. But then I collected my adult sensibilities, doffed my "mechanics" hat, and said to myself, "Okay, Shawn. We're here to fix this vehicle. Where's the engine in this crazy thing? There it is. Grab a pencil and let's run some tests."

A good crit partner won't blindside their group with risqué pages or taboo topics. As a courtesy, it's good form to give your group a heads-up if your work contains any of the following:

- Graphic Sex
- Graphically depicted scenes of violence
- Rape scenes
- Children in peril (kidnapped, abused, etc.)
- Animal cruelty
- Extensive profanity

Your critique partners should always feel comfortable opting out of themes and depictions which rub their values the wrong way. It's a *good* thing when a critiquer respectfully bows out of your pages and you reward their honesty by accepting their hedge and critiquing their pages as fervently as ever. This is a much more tenable scenario than week after week of Dear Prudence's campaign to convince you that your chosen writing style is sucking you into an abyss of moral delinquency.

Jon Rablinders

"I don't read Sci-Fi."

"I don't read literary fiction."

"I don't read books with elves."

"I don't read what you like to write. I can only critique writing in my genre of choice."

If you have the good fortune to throw in with a critique group specializing in your genre area of interest, that's terrific! The very best critique groups are those with a narrow genre focus. Depending on the population of writers in your area, you may not be able to find a compatible critique group in your specific genre of interest.

Good writing is good writing. Any writer should be able to help other writers in a quest to write well, regardless of whether they are writing about gumshoes, dragons, or complicated family relationships. Sure, we have our individual tastes as readers, but this isn't a book about forming a circle of beta readers. This book is about critique groups. Your critique partners are mechanics. A mechanic may be partial to driving Peugeots, but he still should be able to help you objectively troubleshoot problems with your Volkswagen.

Noah Fence

Noah just tells it like it is. He means no harm. It's nothing personal. Your writing is just a steaming pile of monkey feces, that's all. Heck, in matters of libel, truth *is* an absolute defense. Noah doesn't mind when you are honest with him, and he assumes you'll appreciate when he's being honest with you.

We'll take a closer look at the time-honored nobility of a brutally honest critique in the next section, *Honesty (and Other Best Policies).*

Doctor Blackberry

Doc Blackberry is a superb writer, but as her crit partner you'll have to take that on faith. Doc Blackberry is a busy bee. She didn't have time to read your pages before the meeting last week or write anything new herself, but she made it to the meeting anyway. Not that it matters because her cell phone hasn't stopped ringing, but she's so sorry, she just has to take this call. Her husband was supposed to help with the kids, but she had to *Stop it!* Stop it! I told you to leave your sister alone. Well give it back to her, now. Why don't you and Justin go over to the kids' area and look at the giraffe? I'm so sorry, where were we? Oh, the kids. They had to come along and, oh darn it! Dr. Blackberry really needs to take *this* call too. Can she get you a biscotti from the barista while she's up? No? Okay, Love. Back in a snap.

Your crit partners can be present at the meeting without emotionally engaging in the process. The problems really start when other critters aren't sure if they should bother to email their pages to Doc Bee this week, or if they should even earmark the time to crit her pages, being as she only sends something every third meeting. It wouldn't be an issue except Dr. Blackberry still offers comments on pages she reads over someone else's shoulder while she sits at the table, an instant diagnosis for a patient whom she hasn't fully examined.

Reasonable people understand Dr. Blackberry has other priorities in her life competing with her writing and your critique time. But we hope she'll remember to *first do no harm*. If she can't put the hours into reading, writing, and sharing and thoughtful criticism, then she should stay home or at her office and save up her mobile phone minutes. First, do no harm. Foremost, respect the process.

Thag the Caveman

Thag hasn't checked his email in nine years, dating back to the day after his nephew set up the account for him. Thag isn't much on homework or writing notes because his printer still isn't hooked up correctly. He brings a string of one syllable grunted adjectives to the critique meeting. If he takes the time to scrawl a note on his

partners' writing, it's limited to such helpful insights as "Better," "Boring," or "Good."

Thag is all about learning the Craft of communication arts, he just isn't so interested in the *communication* part.

Thag is dead weight and resentment backlash waiting to happen. After a few meetings, Thag's crit partners have learned there is no profit in spending two hours working up a careful critique of Thag's pages, because Thag never seems to break a sweat in return. Thag starts getting back one word critiques on his work, and then an escalation of minimalism (oxymoron intended) ensues.

Inevitable Crit Partner Personalities

There are a host of crit partner personalities whom you can, at the very least, aspire not to be.

Some critiquing personalities aren't the poison pill of one of the **Characters You Don't Want to See in Your Critique Group**. There are some personalities who won't crash the dynamic of your group, but they are a pain in the rear. At the very least, try not to be one of the following inevitable archetypes.

The Churner

Bruce wrote the beginning to *The Great American Novel* during his Senior year of high school. His English teacher told him it was fantastic. She was right. It's good stuff.

Bruce brought his twenty pages to the first crit group meeting and his writing was well-received by everyone. A couple critters had some suggestions for how Bruce could start the story a little faster, so Bruce made the changes and brought the revised pages to the second meeting.

Everyone agreed the revised pages were even stronger.

Bruce changed the names of two major characters and resubmitted the same pages for the third meeting.

For meeting four, Bruce figured out a way to work some of his redacted material back into the narrative in a way that reads better than it did the first time.

Meeting eight is scheduled for next Thursday night, and Bruce's fellow critters have taken to opening their email with a cringing prayer, hoping Bruce hasn't resent those same first twenty pages under a new guise yet again. They've run out of adjectives to restate the same comments about the same pages they've been critting for the past five months.

Honing the first fifty pages of your manuscript is critical. That's the most important function of your critique group. The reasons for this are discussed later in this book. But at some point, you must also write a middle and end for your book.

Don't churn. *Write!* Fresh, less-than-perfect pages bring you closer to a publishable work than obsessing over the same tired pages week after week. You aren't fooling anyone. Write something new!

The Vocabulary-Challenged Learning Nihilist

The VCLN is my personal nemesis. The VCLN loves to circle "big words." "Big words" are code for any word the VCLN doesn't know, even if it's three letters long. The concept of opening a browser window to learn the definition of a new word has eluded the VCLN's consciousness thus far, and he isn't inclined to change any time soon. After all, if the VCLN doesn't know the definition of a word, this means *nobody* else knows it either. The VCLN treats unknown words as if they were misspellings because he regards both as unacceptable. You offend the VCLN when you dare to use vocabulary he doesn't know.

My personal remedy for the VCLN is to smile, nod, and push an empty sheet of paper across the table at him.

"Sure, no problem," I say. "I tell you what. If you could just write down a list of every word you know, I'll be happy to double-check and make sure I don't send you pages with any words which aren't already in your vocabulary."

The sub-nova density between a VCLN's ears isn't limited to vocabulary. Any concept, saying, or expression they don't know is *verboten*… sorry, I mean *forbidden*. I once used the term "shank's mare" in pages that went to twenty critters in four different critique groups. "Shank's mare" is a dusty anglophile term for travel by walking, especially when there's no other option available. Every single one of my twenty crit partners circled shank's mare and added a note to the effect of *"??? I don't understand this."*

Every. Single. Person.

Surprising? It's not surprising *shank's mare* was too obscure for a random sample of twenty intelligent people. Like I said, it's a dusty word. I found it absolutely *amazing* that not one of the twenty bothered to run the phrase through an Internet search engine. Don't know the meaning of a word or expression? That's why God made Google, Dear Reader.

I can't read a Cormac McCarthy western without my laptop booted and a search engine open. Cormac unapologetically uses words authentic to the nineteenth century with nary a scrap of context around them. Why would I merely skip over those words when I have the opportunity to learn something new? Do Cormac's "big words" get on your nerves? Feel free to write the Pulitzer Prize committee and express your frustration. In the mean time, try not to be so darned proud of the lexicon of things you *don't* know.

Of course, there is a flipside to the equation. There's a saturation point for "big words" when readers will tune out and drop out of your prose. Agents and editors are humans. They are foremost readers, not academics. Every human has their threshold for where they will stop reading something too dense. There's a balancing act between ignoring a VCLN and using a Thesaurus to find a skinnier, more accessible word. Use Thesauruses for good, not evil.

SHAWN'S LAW: *Le Mot Juste* won't do you much good if none of your readers speak French.

Just Here for the Coffee, Thanks

The best crit groups are the ones which make some mention of 100 percent devotion to the Craft in the first three sentences of their charter. Friendly critique groups are great, but you are enthusiasts with a *purpose*, and that purpose is bigger than the mere intent to meet on a regular schedule. Your purpose is to grow yourself and your partners' writing skill. Beware a critique group tilting more towards a social event than a workshop.

If you ever find yourself inclined to tell one of your fellow critiquers, "Dude, you're taking this writing thing way too seriously," do everyone a favor and stay home. You are the one who isn't taking your Craft seriously enough.

It Was Cheaper than the Couch

There's nothing particularly wrong with using writing a substitute for therapy. Indeed, there's a little part in all of us which delights in reading about evil people being punished and the noble souls of the world triumphing over the unjust. The power to meet out karmic justice with the reflexive motions of our fingertips across a keyboard is a heady gift. It's fun! There will always be bits of our fictional villains rooted in mean bosses we've known and thoughtless ex lovers who broke our hearts. Nothing wrong with that. Our ability to observe, cull, and write the human condition is the very crux of what makes us writers.

And then there are writers who are less skilled with the whole "cull" part of that equation, folks who have trouble obfuscating the distance between their lives and their stories. As anonymous readers, we don't care so much about how good fiction is or is not rooted in an author's issues with his family and the world as he sees it. A good story is a good story, regardless of its origin. But as critiquers, we're put in an awkward position if you've made it obvious that any criticism of your plot or characters is going to be interpreted as a criticism of you as a person, your perspective on life, or things you did or didn't do.

SHAWN'S LAW: "But it really happened that way!" is *never* an acceptable defense of bad fiction. Bite your tongue if you have to, but never say those words aloud to your crit partners.

Things get sticky when your critique group has non-fiction essayists and memoirists in it. It takes a special sensitivity to politely tell a memoirist the plight of their protagonist is unbelievable, or you don't care about him. It's best when non-fiction writers form critique groups comprised of other non-fiction writers.

Where fiction writers are concerned, lighten up. The story stands or falls on its own merit and everything you hold true is fodder for change if it advances the story to the satisfaction of a majority of your readers.

Honesty, and Other Best Policies

There are two prevalent philosophies among writers who participate in critique groups:

ONE: *"My first responsibility to my fellow critique group members is to get them published, even if it means I must be brutally honest about shortcomings in their craft."*

TWO: *"My first responsibility to my fellow critique group members is to grow them as writers, even if that means I must tamper the edge on some of my more critical opinions."*

At first blush it would seem these two philosophies are diametric opposites, but they overlap at a point of concern for a fellow writer's development. Over time, writers can react to their rejection history frustrations by growing more mercenary in the assessment of their own work. Their skin thickens and, deep down, these writers know the best thing for them is to finally face their nit-picky shortcomings. They tell their partners they want everyone to be honest with them, sometimes even asking fellow critiquers to eschew positive feedback altogether and get right to the negative criticisms. They mean it. These pachyderm-skinned critiquers figure the best thing they can do for their fellow critique partners is to be

completely honest with everyone else as well. Sure, it may sting, but the sting means their critique partners are healing into stronger writers, and that's a good thing, right? Who can fault them for a little brutal honesty when their intentions are merely to help their critique partners get published?

Bookmark that thought for a moment.

The Line for Publishing Mountain

When my son was nine we took an impromptu road trip to Disney World. It marked the first time either of us set foot in Mouseville. Even though it was a mid-summer Wednesday, park attendance was beyond my wildest expectations. Thirty minutes after the park opened the lines for major attractions were already lengthy. We started our day in a long queue for the indoor roller coaster Space Mountain. After forty minutes of sweating in the Florida Sun, we finally made it inside the air-conditioned dome housing the roller coaster. There we discovered a modest room filled with the standard-issue theme park cattle-pen crowd-control railings. After the long wait to get inside the building, the revelation of a tiny new interior waiting room was no big deal, especially since it was air conditioned. *Just a little while longer*, I smiled to my son. Finally we came to the end of the line at the distal end of the room, stepped around the corner and found… another *bigger* room of zigzagging railing. I sighed. I muttered unhappy thoughts to myself. But I was already invested far enough in the process I knew I was going to stick it out for one more room. Then, as many of you already know, there was another room. And another. And another.

From any given point in the Space Mountain line, an individual really has no idea how incredibly long is the path to that joyous roller coaster experience at the other end. If they did, considerably fewer would ever bother to queue up. I promise you if I had known the number of hours I'd spend in line for a single ride, I would not have remained in that queue for more than two seconds, and I probably wouldn't be fondly remembering the exciting culmination of the roller coaster ride as I write about that day, a dozen years after the fact.

Okay, back to our bookmarked thought.

Blissful ignorance can be a good thing. If, as newbies, we had any real idea how far our skills were from being published, we'd never have written a darn thing. All we saw from our naïve perspective was we had to write *something*. So we wrote it. Then we found out we had a lot to learn about grammar. So we learned it. We finally turned the corner into a new room, and we found more lessons to learn about characterization, about pacing, about maintaining tension through the Great Swampy Middle… until we eventually wrote something worth reading! And **then** we turned the corner, and there were more cattle pen paths where we had to learn about agents and query letters, fickle market trends, and aspects of being a writer over which we have little or no control.

Which brings us back to our pachyderm-skinned, grizzled veteran of the publishing slog.

Writers who have been in line for Publishing Mountain for years are generally writers who are frustrated with the wait, and they will do *anything* to skip to the end. They will endure *whatever* brutal advice you can offer if it will just put their tukus on the seat of that blessed roller coaster of success one minute sooner. To their minds it's altruistic of them to be brutally honest with other writers. Brutal honesty, they reason, will speed their critique partners through the process. It will save their friends frustration waiting in lines and learning lessons they've already conquered.

Unfortunately, most of the time what these well-meaning writers succeed in doing is convincing newbies and middle-bees the long journey ahead of them just isn't worth it. It's too hard. Their newbie skills are too meager. They don't have the emotional fortitude for the journey once they see a map drawn to scale. If you over-water a newbie with honesty, they probably won't thrive. They may wilt and stop writing altogether.

To this end, I propose a secret double standard for your personal critique philosophy. Writers who are flirting with ready-for-prime-time skills are easy to spot. You can tell when you read their work. You can tell when you talk Craft with them. Brutal honesty doesn't faze them. You can see real gratitude in their eyes as you tell them how much you hated a character, or why a particular plot arc bored

you to tears. And the newbies? They may talk Craft with the best of writers, but you'll spot a beginning writer at their very first paragraph. These writers are going to need some clandestine consideration. If they spew brutal criticisms of your work at you, that's fine. If you are an experienced writer, you'll know which bits of their wisdom to apply, and when to nod wistfully and remember when you made the same mistakes in your literary judgment.

Have enough tact not to say, "Geraldo, being as you are obviously a noob, I'm going to spare you the parts about how egregiously horrible 90 percent of your story is and skip to the nugget that didn't make me wretch." Don't *tell* your newbie partner you've put them on double-secret kid-glove probation. Just *do* it. Show some class. Punch up the positive parts and limit your criticism to one particular lesson or take-away you expect them to conquer before the next meeting. "Geraldo, you have some great internal character observations. But I noticed a bit of head-hopping. Have you heard the term *head-hopping* before? No? Well then allow me to explain what I mean…"

Let me be perfectly clear. I'm not suggesting you charter a Liar's Club. If you've ever been in a Liar's Club critique group, you know this dynamic is an absolute waste of time. Liar's Clubs are usually the product of writers who come together first as friends, and as a critique group second. All-female critique groups are prone to quickly devolve from polite criticism to Liar's Clubs when no one has the fortitude to offer any relevant criticism for fear they will be the Negative Nelly who offends. "Oh, I thought it was just marvelous! I loved it, loved it, loved it!"

Whatever.

Pumping sunshine up a friend's skirt isn't growing their writing craft any more than unloading both barrels of relentless point blank criticism into the chest of a clueless noob.

Have one honesty policy for the tender newbies, and another for the grizzled veterans, but never forget the honesty part.

Factoring Emotional Investment

The particular medium being critiqued has a lot to do with how tactful you need to be as a crit partner. One writer hasn't the same emotional investment in a thousand word flash fiction short story that another writer has in their 170K tome Space Opera (part one in a proposed seventeen book series). This isn't to say you should consider yourself green-lighted to tee into a piñata of short fiction with a Big Bertha one wood of vitriol. I'm merely making a plea to convince you to take a breath and consider how many hours of toil a fellow writer has invested in a project before you scribble the phrase *"white-hot kind of hate"* on someone else's opus.

When your fellow critters pull the tarp off their homemade vehicle in a big dramatic reveal, every once in a while you are going to see something so comically dysfunctional it is going to take every bit of tact you can muster not to laugh or scream.

Take a breath. Pick a single subsystem of their jalopy you think you can help them fix in one meeting. Dig deep inside yourself for patience and class. Mention to your partner that round wheels work better than square ones, and patiently explain why. Don't *tell* them what's wrong. Don't pass judgment. *Teach* them. Next meeting you can broach the part about the hinges on the doors opening inward instead of out. Space Mountain, remember? Do your part to grow your fellow writing partners and, after a couple months of extensive repair on their ill-thought prose vehicle, newbies will figure out they are better off starting over again with their newfound knowledge. Smart writers will abandon their first-draft heap, scrapping precious little of it for parts. If your newbie comes to that realization on their own as a result of your patience and guidance, pat yourself on the back and add some Crit Master chevrons to your sleeve. You just eased them around the first corner of the line for Publishing Mountain, revealing that it is just a *biiit* longer than they first realized.

Even more difficult is working within a group of memoirists or personal essayists. If you walk into a room of non-fiction writers with an M21A flamethrower strapped to your back, the essential trust dynamic will be short-lived. When you are tempted to say,

"This story just doesn't engage me," what your partner will hear is "you are boring. I don't care about your stupid life."

Tact, not dishonesty. Trust is everything. Trust is the fuel which keeps the bus running and gives writers the momentum they need to collectively grow a critique group. Even Noah Fence has a little wisp of Fragile Frances inside him if you drill deep enough into his soul.

SHAWN'S LAW: If you aren't sure if a written or spoken critique comment is appropriate, ask yourself the following question: "Will this criticism grow my partner as a writer, or will it merely make me feel absolved because I had the gumption to say what she needed to know."

Do your best, but trust me when I promise you that even though you vetted your comment using this litmus paper, you'll *still* be wrong every so often. It happens to everyone who partakes in crit groups long enough. Not only will you be shocked your tepid criticism made Gary cry, but you will also regret you didn't tell Danielle that her antagonist was absurdly ineffectual before she sent her story into a contest and finished dead last. It happens.

What's in Your Manifesto?

So far we've kicked around big, hot button topics like personality and honesty. I've gone so far as to call out certain personalities as poisonous and specific aspects of careless honesty as wrong.

Yes, wrong. I said *wrong*. That's a pretty strong word to use in reference to art. Can art be wrong? I don't know. I do know that artists can be competitive and destructive to other artists. I believe bullies are the lowest form of human life because they seek to drag others down in lieu of trying harder to rise above in a competitive world. Bullies, whether on a playground or in a critique group, work to dull their community into mediocrity because they think it's easier than focusing on their own pursuit of personal excellence.

This is my manifesto; the responsibility of artists to grow other artists, whether you are painting with acrylics or the written word. If you step on others in a futile attempt to advance your sense of self instead of lifting another up, don't look for my empathy when you take a karmic boomerang to the teeth..

What do *you* believe? What is important to you? If I asked you to stand up and teach a five minute class on one aspect of the Craft, what topic would you pick and what would you say?

You have your passions, whether they are big picture stuff like interpersonal chemistry or minutia as small as a fanatical pet-peeve on the use of the serial comma. You have your truths. Your truths are as good as mine.

The time has come to start codifying your belief system. Some of it will stand, and some of it will evolve. But it's *your* playbook. It's your blueprint for how you will make your art, your vehicle, your story. Once you have a blueprint (either accurate or ill-conceived) you can teach others as you learn from them. There's an apocryphal story about US military cryptography training in which the instructor supposedly writes the lessons on a blackboard with a piece of chalk in his right hand, while dragging an eraser across the board behind him with his left hand. For the duration the chalk is on the board, that is your truth. That's your manifesto; the truth in the space between what you are learning and unlearning.

Manifestos change.

Keep writing. Keep reading. Keep teaching. Keep learning. Keep updating your manifesto. One of my favorite writing quotes comes from comedian and writer Dennis Miller.

"Two wrongs may not make a right, but a thousand wrongs make a writer."

Keep being wrong until you fail at that, too.

Scheduling Critique Meetings

The number one reason critique groups fail is the personality mix of the members. The second reason critique groups fail is scheduling conflicts.

Where personality is concerned, you are limited by the population sample of writers interested in joining your group. All you can do is try to avoid the poisonous cast of characters and be patient with the inevitable pain-in-the-butt critters. The chemistry will gel into trust quickly, or it won't gel at all.

On the scheduling front, there are no magic answers. Only this bit of advice:

SHAWN'S LAW: At some point, *the bus must leave the station.* Do your best to negotiate bus stop locations and schedules which accommodate the greatest percentage of ridership for your critique group members. But, at the end of the day, the bus must leave the station.

Folks who can't catch the bus will get left behind. Unfortunate, but true. The momentum of a successful critique group is more important than the participation any individual member.

Should you discover you are the impediment, have the strength of character to step back and wave the bus on its way. If someone else is the impediment, be honest but firm. At some point, the bus must leave the station or no one will be served.

Critique Group Moderators

If you have the good fortune to grow your critique group beyond two or three people, it's not a bad idea to start thinking about electing (or drafting) a moderator. Your moderator is first among equals, someone who is available to phone calls, e-mail, and agrees to take responsibility for the meeting schedule and little, piddly administrative details which can get problematic as your group adds membership.

I suggest if you have the need and enthusiasm to appoint a moderator for the group, you also deputize them with a vote-and-a-half. Sooner or later the group will pull in two directions on an issue. If you have the foresight to install a moderator, then you should also have the trust to say, "You make the final call on this, Ms. Moderator." Then be prepared to live with their decision.

Be a good citizen of your critique group in whatever capacity you find yourself. Unfortunately, a functional, committed, long-term critique group is the exception, not the rule. Do your part to keep it going as long as you can, whether in a leadership role, or as a member. In a culture where everyone insists on driving, don't underestimate the importance of gracious passengership.

Cycles

Once your critique group has a membership, a charter (next chapter), a moderator, and a little momentum, creating project cycles is a great idea.

A cycle is a fixed period of time a crit group will meet before reevaluating their personal and collective goals. A cycle could be as short as every three months, or as long as a year, depending on how often your group meets.

Critique cycles help you pace your long-term writing project goals into manageable chunks. They also create logical stopping and starting points for members of your group to jump in and out of their commitment to the group. If real life complications intrude, maybe it's better for one of your crit partners to finish out the cycle, take a cycle off, and then join back up at the following cycle.

If you find yourself in a critique group with personality issues, cycle breaks are a terrific opportunity to finish out a project and then re-evaluate, reform, or mix the membership into different groups which may enjoy a better personality chemistry.

Your cycle starting and stopping points are an important part of your Critique Group Charter and Contract.

Contracts and Charters

Once you've gathered your population of Craft enthusiasts, your would-be team of prose mechanics, one of the most important things you can do is pencil out a charter of expectations for how your group will conduct itself. You should consider this even if you are gathering up as few as four people. Later in this book, we'll discuss management of large critique groups with several hundred writers. For large critique circles, a charter and critique contracts are absolutely mandatory.

You can't spring a charter you've written on three other strangers at the first meeting. At that point, you *will* get the "Dude, you are taking this critique thing *waaay* too seriously" speech. Develop some trust. Hold a few meetings. Get to know the personalities of your fellow critters. Then sit down with this checklist together and pick out the "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots" you all agree should be in your charter. Add your own ideas. The following is just a starting point for a dim sum platter from which you can pick and choose.

- I will attend every critique group meeting.
- I am expected to read all materials and be fully prepared to participate in knowledgeable discussion.
- I will graciously give and receive verbal critiques in addition to any exchange of notes and edits.
- I acknowledge I am part of a collective dedicated to improving not only my writing Craft, but the Craft of all others in my group.
- I will submit my pages electronically, via e-mail no less than ____ days prior to the next critique meeting.

Or…

- I will bring enough hard copy pages of my writing for every critiquer in my group, to be distributed at the end of every meeting for review at the following meeting.

- I will submit no more than ____ pages for critique at any single meeting.

- I will submit my writing in standard publishing format (double-spaced, 12 point font, with one inch margins around the page).

- I will never send pages to my critique partners unless I have edited them first, attempting to resolve all known spelling and grammar issues. My critique partners are not my personal administrator. It is not the job of my partners to care more about the presentation of my writing than I do.

- I will advise my partners of potentially objectionable materials at the time I distribute pages, and I will respect the right of a critique partner to opt out of reading materials which compromise their personal values.

- If a critique partner declines the critique of my pages for any reason, I will still objectively critique their pages.

- I will work on a specific writing project or series of projects. I will set goals and work toward advancing specific projects to fruition.

- I will seek to write something I can publish, and then I will follow through and submit it to publishing outlets.

- I will not submit the same pages to the critique group more than twice.

- I will keep my fellow critique group members informed of progress which occurs outside the critique group process.
- When I am at the critique group meeting, I will give the process my full attention.
- I will give my fellow critique group members more than I expect to receive in return.
- I will critique my partners with the *marketability* of their work in mind.
- I will have a thick skin and I will keep quiet while others are critiquing me.
- Our critique group has a standard meeting cycle of _____ months, during which we will meet once every _____ weeks. I commit to completing the cycle once I start, and I will give advance notice if I choose to opt out of the next cycle.

How to Give a Critique

We've kicked around the mechanics of getting a group of like-minded enthusiasts to exchange pages and meet for discussion. Now we get down to the nuts and bolts of how the critique part of the critique process works.

Assume you did not read this guide. Assume also you have four participants in your mythical critique group. Finally, assume none of you discuss the terms of how the critique will go down before you find yourselves at the same table at the same time. It comes as no surprise all four of you probably prepared your critiques in four completely different ways, built of four different visions of your expectations. Now go one step further and assume before you walk away from the table at the end of your first session, nobody broached the subject of how you'd standardize your critiques for the next meeting.

I can almost guarantee by Meeting Four, without ever discussing critique format, your critique process will standardize itself. Maybe

Donnie started out using a critique summary worksheet he found online. Maybe Janelle did twenty pages of line edits with notes in the margins. Maybe Carlos did zero writing or editing, but put a lot of thought into a series of verbal opinions which he delivered articulately. Maybe Eulinda wrote a one-page summary for everyone. Very quickly and with no collusion, all four members of the group will ape the successful parts of the various formats and meld them into a universal critique format. It's magic. By Meeting Four, everyone will deliver ten pages of line edits and an overall summary page that breaks the critique into categories almost identical to the ones on Donnie's evaluation sheet.

The essential elements of giving a critique are Reading, Editing, Writing, and Explaining.

Reading

Respect your critique group members by giving their pages your full attention. Turn the television off. Send the kids to bed a few minutes early. Turn down the radio. Give your mindset the unadulterated opportunity to immerse in your partners' pages. Start with the assumption the writing you are about to read is worthy of being published and will be an enjoyable reading experience. Try not to critique when you are in a crabby mood if there's a possibility it will make your comments unnecessarily curt or unempathetic.

Ideally, you should read all the way through the pages once before you ever pick up a pen to begin your edit. This gives you the chance to familiarize yourself with the tone and intent of the author. It may take five pages for you to understand you are being lead astray by an unreliable narrator. It may take you five pages to discover the negative and curmudgeonly protagonist is really a comical absurdist who exudes charm beneath his crusty, off-putting exterior. You don't want to slather on the red ink with a paint roller, only to find the problem was your snap judgments, not the writing itself. Give yourself up to the writing, always giving the writer the benefit of the doubt.

Read first. *Then* edit.

Editing

There is no right way to edit your critique partners. There is no definitive blueprint for a great crit. It comes down to a matter of scope. Some people are more concerned with getting and giving high-level commentary on the "big picture" elements of a story. Some people compulsively make grammar suggestions and line edits as they read.

Line Edits

During a line edit, a critter rereads pages with pen in hand, marking up grammar issues as they go, usually using standard proofreading marks. Some writers aren't comfortable enough with their grammar-Q to attempt a line edit. Some writers are so compulsive they can't stop themselves from line editing, nit-picking every obscure grammar nuance in their repertoire. This can lead to the heart stopping moment when a grammarian hands a writer back their pages and watches their partner nearly faint when all he sees is his beloved writing obscured by one huge roadmap of crimson hieroglyphics.

Some people choose to only line edit a fixed number of pages. Before writing their final summary, they go back and scan the line edits for reoccurring problems and present them to the author as non-judgmental learning opportunities in the summary notes.

"I noticed you use a lot of parenthesis to denote parenthetical asides. In writing you may want to consider swapping these out for parenthetical commas, which I think most people may regard as less intrusive than parenthesis brackets."

Grammar Fascists vs. Grammar Oblivions

Some people cannot stop themselves from line editing every single word. Precious few nit pickers are always dead-on correct with their picky edits. These people are Grammar Fascists. Ladies and Gentlemen, if you end up with a certifiable Grammar Fascist in your critique group, take a deep breath, look heavenward, and thank the deity of your choice for your incredible fortune. A skilled

Grammar Fascist is rare as hen's teeth. A skilled Grammar Fascist may or may not be a good writer of prose, but they are always a priceless resource.

The Grammar Fascist knows women are blondes, but men are blonds (and the hair color itself is always blond). The Grammar Fascist knows when to capitalize on the other side of an ellipsis. A Grammar Fascist knows orthodontists use *dental* moldings while architects use *dentil* molding. A Grammar Fascist knows your villain is on the *lam*, not on the *lamb*.

If there was a software program savvy enough to correct all your misspellings, misapplied homonyms, and grammar gaffes with the click of a button, software which was almost infallible and which you could trust implicitly, would you click the magic button on the toolbar? Of course you would! But to date no such software exists. Many writers bristle at having their grammar dismantled and reassembled by a Grammar Fascist. *Why?* Why in the world wouldn't you absolutely *treasure* the gift of one of these people in your writing group? Listen to them. Honestly evaluate their corrections and don't take their markups personally.

The Grammar Fascist's Yin is matched only by the Grammar Oblivion's Yang. The Grammar Oblivion says things like, "Oh, don't even bother marking the misspellings. That's not important to me. Just tell me what you think of the story."

This is the "Rusty Car Defense."

The Rusty Car Defense goes something like this: "It doesn't matter how many dents and rust spots are on my vehicle, as long as the engine is functional enough to get my passengers from Point A to Point B. So it follows that it doesn't matter how terrible the spelling and grammar in my story are if the characters and plot of my story are engaging."

Sure. You know what? Grammar Oblivions have a point. It *doesn't* matter how rusty your beater car is… as long as you aren't trying to sell it to someone else. Once you try to sell it, the cosmetic profile of your car matters. It matters a lot! If a Grammar Oblivion is writing for their own reading enjoyment, then it doesn't matter how many misspellings they leave or how many adverbs they abuse. But if a

Grammar Oblivion ever aspires to publishing (and every writer *should* aspire to publish) sooner or later they're going to need to find a buyer for their craptastic rustbucket. Good luck.

SHAWN'S LAW: There is no such thing as **right** or **wrong** grammar rules. That which people call "rules" are merely the dogma of several different camps of grammar cultists. At some point you need to join one of the more respected cults and devote yourself to consistency.

Very few people have a mastery of the entire catalog of grammar. Most writers know a little something about various aspects of grammar. Critiquing is an opportunity to learn from your fellow critique partners. Don't be a Grammar Oblivion. Learn. Grow. Improve yourself.

SHAWN'S LAW: There are two kinds of grammar edits. "Potatoes Po-*tah*-toes" edits, and "Slap to the Forehead" edits. When making grammar edits to someone else's prose, it's important to be mindful of the difference.

Potatoes Po-*tah*-toes Edits

Everyone has a different threshold for what strikes their internal readerbrain as an awkward construction. When line editing, it's common for a critter to change someone else's perfectly (grammatically) correct sentence to a construction which seems a little smoother and a bit less awkward. These are potatoes po-*tah*-toes edits. In other words, *"What you wrote is not wrong, but consider saying it* this *way instead."*

There's nothing problematic with making potatoes po-*tah*-toes edits, *per se*. But it helps your relationship with your fellow critters if you take the time to acknowledge many of your edits are a question of taste, especially if you hand back pages which are covered in red ink. There's a psychological reflex to all those scribbly lines which can make the author defensive. From elementary school we're conditioned to associate red pen with "WRONG!" Couch your

potatoes po-*tah*-toes edits in comments that reflect your understanding these edits are merely an opinion.

"This is fine, but how about…"

"My brain keeps tripping on this line. Maybe rewrite as follows…"

"Awkard as written. Possible rewrite as…"

Or maybe just, *"Potatoes."*

Slap-to-the-forehead Edits

Slap-to-the-forehead edits point out where an author is just plain *wrong*. Misspellings. Misapplied homonyms. Missing words. Periods used to punctuate a question. These are obvious mistakes the author should have caught before he sent out his pages for review, and once somebody else points them out, all the author can do is slap his palm against his forehead and cringe.

Circling and correcting slap-to-the-forehead mistakes is an act of kindness, pure and simple. Better your crit partners point out your "oops" before your story goes to an agent or magazine submissions editor. Professionals won't take the time to tell you they rejected you because your first page had three "its" which should have been "it's". They will trash your pages and stuff the dreaded "Dear Author" form letter in your SASE and you'll be none the wiser.

Never bristle at receiving slap-to-the-forehead edits and never hesitate to bring them to the attention of your critique partners. Even the most seasoned Grammar Fascist makes a bonehead mistake every now and again.

Keep in mind, however, no definitive book on grammar rules is accepted by everyone. Even if your eighth grade Composition teacher shook her finger and shouted with bravado that a writer should never end a sentence in a preposition, know there are tribes of educated grammarians out there who disagree. Don't mistake a potatoes po-*tah*-toes edit for a slap-to-the-forehead edit.

Comments

Aside from proofreading edits, it's even more important to share the points in a story where your readerbrain reacts to something you read. Do this by writing comments in the margins which let the author know what you are thinking at critical points.

This can be as simple as putting a plus sign (or two or three) in the margins next to great writing which pulls you into the story. If something made you laugh, a smiley face tells the author the joke worked (trust me, the author was insecure about whether or not the joke worked.) A well-deserved "Wow!" is always appreciated.

On the flipside, be judicious and highly specific with your negative comments. A minus sign next to bad writing doesn't tell the author anything constructive. Be specific.

"I think I'm supposed to be sad here, but I don't yet have a real empathy for this character. She seems more whiney than aggrieved."

"There's a lot of 'telling' here which would be better revealed if it were 'shown' through the use of dialog and action."

"This is a little too over the top for me. His reaction rings false."

"It seems like we're mired in a lot of character exposition for the first 14 pages. I'm looking for some kind of conflict by this point."

"Back on page six you said Jim was blond. Now he's a redhead?"

When an author revises, lots of smiley faces and plus signs help them know which passages should escape the Delete Key of Death.

SHAWN'S LAW: Critique what the author wrote, not what *you* wish the author had written.

Maybe you just don't connect with the writing you are charged with critiquing. Maybe you could easily rewrite it and improve the story in a way that would connect with more readers. Don't. Don't rewrite. Don't tell the author how to rewrite her story. Deal with the words on the page, not the ones *you* would have put on the page. Accept the characters as they are presented to you. Perhaps they weren't intended to be likeable.

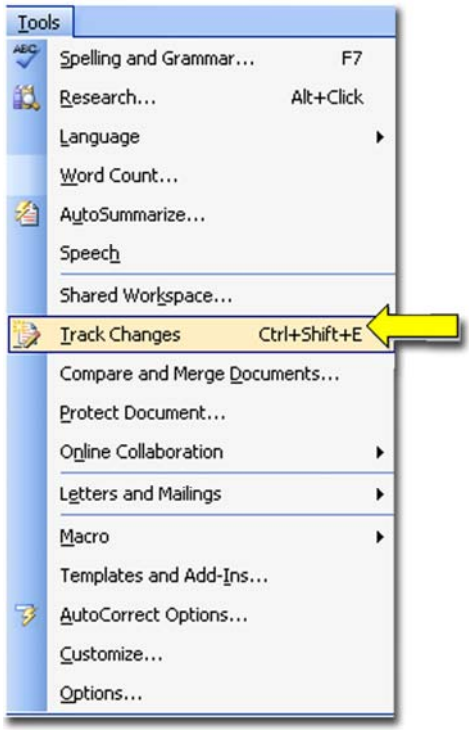
If a writer asks your opinion about what you'd change, by all means, say what you'd think. Share your knowledge, but wait to be asked.

Microsoft Word Track Changes Editing

Regardless of whether you are an Apple devotee or a PC purist, it's a simple truth ninety percent of all writers use Microsoft Word for their word processing chores. It is *the* standard application of the realm at the time of this writing.

Because the standard is so prevalent, many critters can exchange pages electronically without fear of compatibility issues. The first thing many reviewers do is print out the pages and uncap their red pen. There are writers who swear they can't edit properly without looking at hard copy pages.

Younger generations are more comfortable with the concept of working dynamically with electronic files. If you exchange files electronically and if you are a little more adventurous (or maybe if you are merely self-conscious about your chicken scratch handwriting), consider editing using the **Track Changes** function of Microsoft Word.



The Track Changes function evolves with every subsequent release of Microsoft Word, so your screens may look slightly different from the examples in this book.

Begin by going to the **Tools** section of your menu bar and select **Track Changes**.

Now, as you make grammar edits, those edits will appear as colored text highlighting. Some versions of Track Changes will

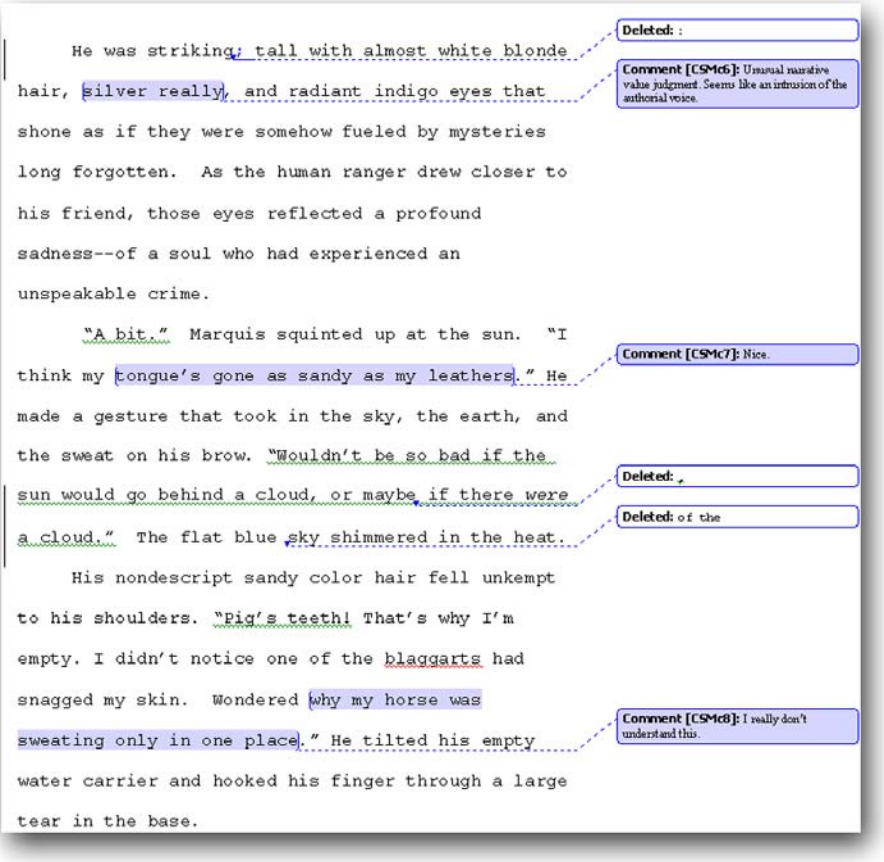
draw a line to a message in the margin explaining what was added or deleted.

Once you start the Track Changes process, you are presented with the Track Changes menu bar. Not to overcomplicate things, the only feature on the menu bar you need to know in your role as a critter is the handy **Comments** feature, which looks like a sticky note with a small burst pattern in the upper-left corner.

Highlight the text relevant to your comment and click the **Comment** button. A dotted line links your highlighted text to a box in the right margin where you can type as much or as little explanation as you wish.

Track Changes was designed to allow multiple people to make change suggestions and comments on the same document, which ostensibly would return to the document owner. The document owner could open the electronic copy of the document and use some of those other buttons in the Track Changes menu bar to accept or reject the change suggestions. This is a little beyond the scope of most critique groups. However, if you were going to print out a copy of the pages to mark up anyway, why not wait until after you have marked it up with Track Changes and your comments? The relation of the edited pages to their original page numbers will get a bit wacky, but the person you're critiquing will get back printed pages with tidy, logical edits and legible comments.

Using Track Changes is also a handy strategy if you aren't familiar with standard proofreader markings.



Writing (Summarizing)

After you've read the story, penciled in your line edits, and added helpful and relevant comments to the margins, it's time to write up a one or two page encapsulation of what worked and what did not. You don't want to waste precious face-to-face meeting time shuffling through the pages you edited and saying, "Uh, on page 31, you misspelled the word *olive*." Writers can process line edits when they get home. If you circled it, they'll fix it.

Your summary critique is a snapshot of reoccurring habits you noticed in the writer's pages, your overall impressions of the story, and observations on what worked and what didn't. Your summary critique is built out of the bullet points you'll use to give your verbal critique.

SHAWN'S LAW: If you wouldn't say a critique note verbally in a face-to-face meeting, it shouldn't be in your critique notes.

Following is the traditional list of questions, the answers to which form the framework for a basic summary critique. Not every section will be relevant to every story or every style of writing.

Grammar

What writing habits do you suggest the author work on?

Plot

Core conflict – Is the conflict which motivates the actions of the characters and propels the plot ahead clearly defined, compelling, and well developed?

Plotting – Is the plot is clear? Does it move at an appropriate pace, and have the reader looking toward what will happen next? Is it suspenseful?

Character

Characterization – Does the reader care about the characters enough to want to keep reading? Are the characters fully realized, multi-dimensional people?

Motivations - Is the motivation for what the characters do not only clear, but presented with enough depth to seem authentic and not contrived for the sake of forcing action?

Dialogue

Is the rhythm natural? Are the speech patterns realistic? Are individual characters distinguished by their own manner of speaking?

Setting

Is the setting clear and developed with enough texture and authenticity to add the to the story's overall effect?

Style

Is the writer's style fresh, literate, and clear enough to make the reader want to read more?

Theme

Are the plot and characters presented in a way that explores a larger and richer theme than just the sum of its parts? What does the plot say about similarities toward the bigger human condition?

Other End Notes

Without value judgments, state in less than 25 words the central idea of the story.

What single element of the story (imagery, character, dialogue, etc.) stayed with you after you finished reading the story? Which elements do you believe work well?

What elements of the story were confusing or unclear?

What elements of the story are not working well and need to be addressed? Make a list of specific recommendations.

Explaining (Verbal)

The face-to-face interaction with your critique partners is an essential and underappreciated part of the critique experience. There's a certain liberation to an online critique group where you never meet your digital partners. You're never there to see the look of crushing disappointment on their face when you give them the honest truth, the straight skinny. You don't have to deal with interpersonal politics.

You never completely connect the art to the artist, either. Face-to-face interaction is a rare opportunity to garner insight into the creative mind. There's a lot to be said for humanizing one tiny facet of a process that is fraught with impersonal exchanges.

You'll never talk to the agent who sends you form rejections. Heck, you may never have more than three phone call conversations with the agent who signs you and sells your book! You probably won't speak to the Editor who buys your book or the artist who designs the cover. You won't get the chance to talk to the bookseller who stocks your book and recommends it to their customers. Even if your book turns out to be a smash hit, you'll interact with very few people who actually read it.

So here you are, so very far removed from the reality of being published and so very far back in the queue for Publishing Mountain. How precious is the opportunity to talk face-to-face to people about your writing? How important is it to glean the insights of a trusted crit partner and return the favor by sharing your Craft knowledge with them?

There's a threshold of candor you'll only get in a face-to-face critique group; a level of camaraderie and support that comes when you watch someone's eyebrows react to criticism. The opportunity to ask questions of your critiquers and probe them for further explanations of their criticisms is invaluable.

Experimenting vs. Coloring between the Lines

Here's an exchange you'll hear in your critique group sooner or later:

JAMES: "Christine, I don't understand why you give your characters such wacky names. *Litebright Burgermeister? YoYo Mezzo-Soprano?* I don't get it."

CHRISTINE: "Oh, Thomas Pynchon does it that way."

JAMES: "Uhm, Christine, I've read Thomas Pynchon. I've studied Thomas Pynchon. I did my graduate thesis on Thomas Pynchon. Christine, you are no Thomas Pynchon."

[Insert sound of explosive conflagration here.]

You may have already found yourself in James's shoes. Maybe you identify with Christine instead. This is a dilemma. Who's right? Neither. James and Christine are both wrong.

James may stand a 99.999 percent chance of being correct, and that's good enough for him. But who is he to tell Christine she can't practice coloring outside the lines? Okay, so she's *not* Pynchon, but she made a decision to try something a bit edgier, and she may grow her craft to the point where one day she actually *is* the contemporary equal of Pynchon.

For her part, Christine needs to remember the Tom Pynchon who wrote *Against the Day* is not the same Tom Pynchon who wrote *V.*

V. was a departure from other contemporary literature of 1963, to be sure. But it wasn't as experimental as *Gravity's Rainbow* or other novels that followed.

David Foster Wallace's first novel, *Broom of the System* was much more traditional in its construction than *Infinite Jest*.

Before Picasso experimented with cubism, he painted traditional impressionistic portraits, not so different from the style of many other painters at the turn of the century.

SHAWN'S LAW: There are two sets of rules for writers: One set for those trying to get published the first time, and another set for those who have a proven track record of successful published work.

There's a different standard for the style of writing which will help a writer get through the line at Publishing Mountain that first time, and the license that a portfolio of published work gives an author to be more experimental.

James has a point. Christine needs to show the publishing establishment she knows how to color between the lines before she'll be accepted into the echelons of experimental writers. But James still hasn't the right to tell another artist how to make their art. It's not fair to tell Christine she's no Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon wasn't even Pynchon before a lot of practice and rejection and experimentation. Christine has the same absolute right to grow and experiment with the form and function of her craft.

For her part, Christine needs to understand "coloring between the lines" may be her ticket to publishing more creative and avant-garde prose down the road.

A version of this scenario often plays out when debating the minimum length of a novel. There's a consensus among agents that minimum length for an adult novel is somewhere between 70 and 80 thousand words. Some writers are quick to point out Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, or Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* as examples of classic novels with low word counts.

True. But none of these were first novels. Steinbeck's first novel was *Fool's Gold*, approximately 90,000 words. Vonnegut's first novel was *Player Piano*, over 100,000 words. Hemingway's first published novel, *The Sun Also Rises,* squeaked in at a still-respectable 69,000 words. It's the Bernoulli Effect. Get your plane wheels off the ground first, *then* the physics of your world opens up to barrel rolls, hammerhead stalls, and all the other exciting, fun stuff.

Another popular bone of contention pops up whenever somebody dares to write dialogue in a dialect. Apparently certain authors are approved to write in dialect, but newbies do not possess the Federal

Certification required to even attempt such a crazy thing. Go figure. Just another double standard where it's okay for published authors to "break the rules," but it's not okay for *you*. Instead of a myopia-induced headache from reading between the codified lines, keep it simple. Does it work? It doesn't matter if you are Chuck Palahniuk or Joe Wannabe. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't.

There are few avant-garde artists who didn't make their bones painting by the numbers first. Christine could be one of the rare few to succeed with a fresh approach to a stodgy medium. As long as she understands the risks, James isn't the one to tell her she can't make her art in non-traditional ways.

How to Take a Critique

So many words about how to give a critique and so few about how to receive one.

Here is what you need to know.

Step One: Shut up.

Step Two: Listen.

That's it. The writer being critiqued should not say a single word while receiving their verbal critiques. Nada. Spare the defensive rejoinder. Save your perfectly rational explanation of why you made the choices you made. Shut your pie hole. Smile. Nod. Zip your lip.

Once every critiquer has presented their verbal critique to the writer, then **and only then** the writer can move on to step three.

Step Three: Ask clarifying questions of his or her critiquers.

Permit me to repeat the last sentence with emphasis:

The writer can ***ask clarifying questions***.

That's all. The critiquers felt the way they felt about the writing based on the way you arranged the letters on the page. Critters can't be wrong about the way they feel about your writing.

SHAWN'S LAW: If there is a disconnect between your authorial intent and the way someone interpreted your words, that's **your** issue to resolve or ignore, not the reader's.

I'm not saying critters are always right. Far from it. You will hear many crazy comments from clueless critters. Take it to the bank. Some critters are careless readers and will miss points you clearly spelled out in the prose.

Fine. It happens.

Do not defend or explain your writing even if your critiquers missed the obvious.

Smile.

Nod.

Thank everyone for their critique.

Ask clarifying questions if you must.

Shut your pie hole

Take your edits and notes home and apply those which have merit and ignore the rest. It's *your* art.

During the writer's silent sit, it's not uncommon for the next critter to take issue with something the previous critter told the author. Your crit partners may debate your writing and your intentions among themselves. That's fine. As a matter of fact, it's rather amusing. It falls to you to (silently) determine which opinion you most respect, and which best represents your writing values.

SHAWN'S LAW: God gave you a middle finger for a reason. Keep a smile on your face and know when to ignore the idiots.

If you find yourself under a weekly assault by a habitual careless reader, you might have to tactfully use your clarifying question opportunities to make your point.

JULIBELL: "Sabrina, you said there isn't any physical description of the main character, right?"

SABRINA: "Right."

JULIBELL: "So on page three where I described her hair, her nose, and her lips, you think maybe I should expand on that part? And the part on page four where I describe every article of clothing she's wearing, where she bought it, and how much she paid for it, you think maybe that's still a bit understated? And the actual photograph I included on page five captioned, 'Protagonist looks just like this', maybe that should have been in color, you think?"

With any luck, you can make your point a little more tactfully than my example. Using your clarifying questions to draw attention to careless reading is a last resort. Try to let the idiocy slide.

Remember, as soon as you write off a particular critter as a total idiot, you are guaranteed to miss out on a great suggestion you didn't expect. Nobody is one hundred percent correct, and nobody is one hundred percent idiot, either.

Nutshell Summary

Here's the recap of what you should take away from all the previous suggestions:

- **Seek out motivated writers**. Motivation is contagious. There are many would-be writers who are all talk. These writers can't help you. Surround yourself with writers who actually write, and especially those who aspire to write better than they already do.
- **Seek out writers of your similar experience level who are interested in your writing genre.** This is difficult. It may require compromise on your part, or on the part of others. It may require you look for your kindred writing community online.

- **Appoint a moderator.** Once your group has more than three members, this is a small effort that can inoculate your group against problems down the road.
- **Create a charter.** Outline the minimum participation expectations of your critique group. Then convert that charter into a simple contract and have everyone sign it.
- **Establish a cycle.** A marathon is series of shorter races. Plan your writing goals both long and short term.
- **Give your critique partners your very best edits, summary, and verbal comments**. Be honest, nurturing, and sincere as you help grow the Craft of your fellow critique partners.
- **Take criticism gracefully.** Shut up. Listen. Take some advice the group offered and ignore the rest.
- **Celebrate.** Find ways to enjoy the success of your group by championing individual accomplishments. Share the ecstasy of a successful writing venture with all those who helped make it happen.

Tips for Writing (and Editing) Well

There are hundreds of books on your local bookseller's shelves written to teach you how to write well. This is not one of them. Rather, consider this a heads-up for some of the most common Craft mistakes you're going to encounter as you write and critique others.

The First 50 Pages

There are entire books devoted to this concept. Read them.

I offer the following synopsis: Fifty pages is the maximum number of pages that some agents allow you to send along with a query. Sometimes it's ten. Or twenty-five. Some agents only want five sample pages. It will never be more than fifty, unless you are prompted for a partial or a full.

Fifty.

You've got fifty pages to introduce compelling characters, an interesting conflict, and a capable antagonist.

The first fifty pages are what your critique group should be helping you perfect. The first fifty pages must sing like Excalibur after Arthur pulled it from the stone.

If a reader slogs past the first fifty pages, they will likely stay with you for your whole novel. **If.**

A mistake I have seen too many times is writers who endure the chainsaw of critique group criticism over their novel opening, don't deal with the dysfunction, and go on about their merry way getting better feedback on the middle and end of their novel. These writers think, "Okay, my novel is really good except for that rocky beginning."

Yeah. Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?

The beginning is *everything*. The first fifty pages are everything.

Your critique group is there to help you make the first fifty pages flawless.

Too Few/Too Many Pronouns

It's annoying when writers overuse character names.

"Darnell," said Bob, "Will you take Cathy shopping a prom dress and then run Cathy by the tailor so Cathy can have her dress altered?"

"Absolutely Bob," said Darnell. "I'll do that for you, Bob. I'll take Cathy anywhere Cathy needs to go, Bob."

Guh. Here we have an author with control issues. He's so afraid we'll get lost he anchors every character reference to a proper noun or character name. Still, this is preferable to his counterpart, the author who used proper names in the first paragraph on the first page and hasn't used anything other than **he** or **she** for twenty subsequent pages.

"But I don't want him to drive me," she said. "He's a terrible driver and he's impatient."

"But he's the only one who has time," he responded. "Your mom is working at the hospital and she won't be home until midnight."

She stamped her feet. "But I don't like him," she said.

"Would you rather wait for her?" He asked.

He sauntered into the room. "Is she ready?"

He shook his head. "She wants to wait for her."

"I don't like him," she pouted.

He nodded and said, "He means well."

He curled his nose in response and said, "She's not her favorite, no matter what she said to her when he was listening to him."

Auuuurgh! I'm so confused! Which *he* is *who?* Which *her* is mom? Given a choice between the overuse of proper names and a confusion

festival of too many pronouns anchored too far from their proper noun counterparts, I'd err on the side of the control freak author.

If you only have one male and one female character in a scene, you might get away with a pronoun meltdown. Once the third character enters, you are in a bit of trouble. A good rule of thumb is for every proper noun anchor, you can safely make a rope of three pronouns before anchoring back to a name again. Sometimes more, sometimes less

Remember, in the reader's brain **a pronoun always points back to the last gender-appropriate proper noun anchor**.

Darnell told Cathy that Bob lost his license and he would be the one to drive her.

In the previous sentence, the *he* in *he would be the one,* points to the last male proper noun, Bob. From the context of the sentence we see the author *really* intended the *he* point back to Darnell. Mental chaos ensues.

This is a sentence that either needs to be heavy on proper nouns or, better yet, broken into two sentences.

Darnell explained to Cathy that Bob lost his license after his big smash-up. Darnell made it clear he had to be the one to drive her to the tailor.

Yes, the reader will probably figure out the author's intent from the context of the rest of the sentence, but the author has still momentarily bumped the readerbrain out of the story flow while they figure it all out. This is bad.

Echoes

Echoes are insidiously hard to catch. They are sneaky and subtle. Echoes are when a specific "weighted word" appears more once and too close to another instance of itself.

You may not even notice a "weighted word" until it echoes. In the previous paragraph, I used the word "are" three times in close succession. You didn't notice. "Are" isn't a weighted word. Consider the following example in terms of which words seem to become too obtrusive after they repeat:

Clyde walked, slowly arcing his parabolic metal detector back and forth. The parabolic arc of his arm kept a steady rhythm. He stumbled forth, walking slowly in a rhythmic pace.

Parabolic. Arc. Rhythm. Forth. Slow. Walk. Had these words been used only once, nothing about them would have stood out, with the possible exception of "parabolic" which is a rather unusual and weighted word even before it echoes.

Here's the same paragraph with the echoes softened by using synonym words instead of repeats:

Clyde shuffled, slowly sweeping his parabolic metal detector back and forth. The scoop-shaped arc of his arm kept a steady rhythm. He stumbled forward at a determined place.

Thesaurus's have a bad reputation because we associate them with bad writers saying to themselves, "Hmm. How can I replace this perfectly good word with a fancy, obscure word which will make me look smart?" But the true advantage of a thesaurus comes into play when you reread a paragraph and realize you've used the word "gun" ten times. A thesaurus will help you minimize your echoes by converting some of those guns into pistols, Walther PPKs, and sidearms.

A writer's vocabulary is a critical part of their toolbox of skill. If you've ever done major repairs on a car, you know there are

specialty tools mechanics need to get certain jobs done. Likewise, it never hurts to have that exact word somewhere in the back of your head when you need it. If it isn't in your head, it's in a Thesaurus.

Tense Shifting

This is a biggie. You'll see a lot of tense shifting in the drafts of your crit partners, while there's a good chance you won't notice you've missed dozens of similar instances in your own writing. Assume we are reading a tale told in past tense. We're reading about things chronicled by a perhaps unknown storyteller. They happened before we ever picked up the book. The author wrote down a series of events which happened some time in the past. Then, BANG! The verbs yank us into present tense. We're no longer reading about action that already happened. We're finding out about it *as* it happens!

Davis slid into the space between the door and the wall. He tried to slow his breathing. His nerves got the better of him. His panicking, heaving chest rubs up against the hollow interior door. The killer stops in his tracks and turns to face the door. Davis held his breath. The killer stands listening. Davis starts to turn blue. He was dizzy. The killer turned and left the room.

Holy cow! That example of tense shifting is so outrageous it should come with a neck brace. Look at the verbs. Did this happen in the past? Or is it happening in the present?

Davis **slid** into the space between the door and the wall. He **tried** to slow his breathing. His nerves **got** the better of him. His panicked, heaving chest **rubs** up against the hollow interior door. The killer **stops** in his tracks and **turns** to face the door. Davis **held** his breath. The killer **stands** listening. Davis **starts** to turn blue. He **was** dizzy. The killer **turned** and **left** the room.

- past tense verbs
- present tense verbs

You must be consistent with your verb tense. Pick one! Sometimes an author gets so caught up in the writing experience they find themselves pulled into a scene and they begin recounting it in

present tense. It's a common mistake, but very jarring to the readerbrain.

This is the perfect example of thinking on a specific *frequency*. Writers have a notoriously difficult time spotting their own tense shifts. Writers tend to proofread using the same flawed inner voice they used when they wrote the mistakes in the first place.

It gets tricky is when you shift between past tense, and past perfect. What does this mean?

Okay, so your story is in past tense. It already happened. You, the author, are scribing out the history of a fictional event.

Trey and Evie drove the old Mercedes to the Ben & Jerry's on State Street.

Trey and Evie drove a car to get some ice cream. Done. Fine. Got it. The characters already went some place and did something charactery, Cool. But wait a minute! Back the heck up! There's more to the story:

Trey and Evie drove the old Mercedes to the Ben and Jerry's on State Street. They went less than a block when black, billowing smoke began wafting up from the seams of the front hood.

Oops! First you tell me a couple of girls drove a nice car and had some Chunky Monkey ice cream, but then you turn around and tell me there was some kind of mechanical malfunction on the way. Make up your mind!

Trey and Evie drove the old Mercedes to the Ben and Jerry's on State Street. They had gone less than a block when black billowing smoke began wafting up from the seams of the front hood. Trey's memory flashed back to Grandpa Richard's warning that if she didn't check the oil, sooner or later the engine would seize up on her.

Golly, if you examine the chronology of events, we're actually reading backwards. Any time you are already in past tense and then you have to derail the story to go back even *further* in time to make a point of clarification, you're probably using past perfect tense.

Your past tense verb was **drove**.

Your past perfect tense verb was **had gone**. Then you went back even further and your verbs became **did check**, and **would seize**.

A little later in this manifesto I'm going to try and convince you "had" is a troublesome, evil word. I'm going to teach you to purge the unnecessary "hads" "dids" and "woulds" from your writing. Whatever you do, don't purge the "hads" or other helping verbs used to create past perfect tense. There are good "hads" just like there are good kinds of cholesterol. Recognize the "hads" which purposely lift the readerbrain off the linear rollercoaster progression rails of an unfolding story in order to pick up events that happened at an even earlier time. These "hads" are past perfect (good) helping verbs.

Said-isms

Dialogue attribution tags can be a sore subject. There are several Style Tribes weighing in on this issue with a variety of thought on which attribution tags are acceptable and how frequently a writer can use them before overusing them.

"I can't believe it," Danny said.

"Incredible, just incredible," Tyrell said.

"She was so young," Danny said.

"I know," Tyrell said. "Too young for Lou Gehrig's Disease, that's for sure."

Said, said, said. Can you have too many saids? Some say yes. There are Style Tribes who think repeating the word *said* creates echoes in the readerbrain. Other Style Tribes believe *said* is an invisible word to the readerbrain, one which creates hardly any friction and isn't noticed when overused.

But there are some tenants of said-isms upon which all writers agree.

First, if your character voices are distinct enough, you don't need dialog attribution tags at all. All writers should aspire to this standard.

"Gum?" he asked her.

"Get bent."

"I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?"

"I'm trying to enjoy a quiet drink in this lousy hotel bar, you little troll. Leave me alone."

"My bad. A case of mistaken identity."

"Right. Sure. Who'd you think I was?"

"Human."

Second, avoid dialog tags and cutesy said-isms with too much baggage.

"I know what you're getting for your birthday," the boy chirped.

"Read it and weep," the prosecutor spat.

"I'll never forget you," she sang.

Ker-clunk! Nobody chirps or sings their words. Nobody chitters or winks out the English language. In lieu of cuteness, err on the said of plain ol' *said*. If you feel you absolutely *must* imply more intent, consider handcuffing or replacing dialog attribution with a short predicate action.

"I know what you're getting for your birthday!" The boy bounced on his heels.

"Read it and weep." The prosecutor wrinkled his brow.

"I'll never forget you," she said in a wistful, sing-song tone.

Finally, be extra vigilant to **almost** never slip adverbs into your dialog tags. These are a klaxon that screams to the world in no uncertain terms you are an amateur writer. Be suspicious of any words in a dialog tag which end in "—ly."

*"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," she shouted **angrily**.*

*"Can anything else go wrong today?" he asked **exasperatedly**.*

*"Wait right there while I slip into something a little more comfortable," she said **flirtatiously**.*

If you've written a properly expressive bit of dialogue, adverbs are unnecessary. Is there a chance your character would ever shout "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard" in a *kind and compassionate* way? See? Unnecessary. Let the characters convey all that adverbial baggage with the words they say. That gets you off the hook and you won't feel the compulsion to add the obvious to a dialog tag.

That said, don't be militant about adverbs. They have their place, and occasionally they will serve a function in dialog tags.

SHAWN'S LAW: You are allotted one adverb in a dialog tag for every 10,000 words of your story. Use them judiciously.

Head Hopping

If you're writing in first person, your narrator can't tell you what other people think and feel. If you are writing in third person, you can get inside the thoughts and emotions of only *one* character per chapter.

The first person narrator can tell you what they *think* someone is thinking. They can tell you what they *observe* someone else to express emotionally. But they can't definitely tell you what goes on in the minds of the other characters.

Following is an example of first person head-hopping:

The dispatcher sent my partner and me to a domestic disturbance call on the south side of town. Jerry hated domestic disturbances. He wished me dead every time I keyed our acknowledgement and call sign into the handset.

Maybe the narrator is right about what his partner thinks, but it's still unexplained head hopping. How does the narrator really know for sure what goes on in somebody else's thoughts? Consider the following example instead:

The dispatcher sent my partner and me to a domestic disturbance call on the south side of town. Jerry had told me time and time again how much he hated domestic disturbance calls. Every time I keyed an acknowledgement into the radio he gave me that look of his, the look which seemed to convey how much he wished me dead.

The same rules apply to third person. The authorial voice of a story can only get inside the thoughts of one character per chapter. Let's look at an example of a third person perspective with head hopping.

"Seven Tango," crackled the radio. "Seven Tango, acknowledge?"

Cliff reached for the radio mic clipped to his left shoulder, but Jerry grabbed his hand.

"Wait a sec," Jerry whispered, as if anyone on the other side of the radio could hear him without keying the handset. "Technically we're still 10-100."

"Seven Tango," said the dispatcher. "Neighbors report domestic disturbance at 354 Tartan Avenue. Acknowledge?"

Jerry shook his head. "Don't take it, Cliff. Let the Foxtrot rookies take this one."

Cliff looked at his partner, lit in the eerie phosphorescent glow of electronic gadgetry on the cruiser's dashboard. Cliff didn't want Jerry mad at him for the rest of the shift, but his sense of duty won out.

"Dispatch, Seven Tango copy. We're rolling, Code 2." Cliff let the elastic tether of the radio handset swing back against his chest hard enough to bruise through the Kevlar, as if that would have been punishment enough. But when he looked again at Jerry's sour expression, Cliff knew he was in for a long shift.

"You never listen," Jerry said, thinking angrily and bitterly about the problems he was working through in his own marriage.

See how jarring a head hop can be? Right up until the last sentence we inhabit Cliff's thoughts, Cliff's perspectives, and Cliff's emotions. Then *wham!* Suddenly we are inside Jerry's head. It's unsettling to our readerbrains. Purists maintain you should never shift

perspectives within a story. Some writers are fine with shifting at a chapter break, especially if the perspective shift is announced in the chapter title. Some writers think an extra carriage return is all the psychological break a reader needs to shift gears into a new character's head.

Authorial Intrusion & Breaking the Fourth Wall

In the theatrical world of plays and movies, there's an understood expectation of voyeurism whereby the audience watches characters move about a scene while those same characters pretend like they don't know we are watching them. It's as if those characters on stage or in the frame of the film are behind a glass wall. We can see them, but they can't see us. Whenever a character in a play or movie turns to talk to the audience, this is called *breaking the fourth wall*.

When characters in a story talk directly to the reader, they break the fourth wall. This doesn't apply to first person narration unless the narrator actually addresses the reader directly, usually saying something to the effect of "Dear Reader…" or "To those of you reading this…" or "You probably think I'm crazy, don't you?"

This is a legitimate plot device, but if you are going to break the fourth wall, you need to break it early, shatter it completely, and use the device throughout your story. If your characters only talk to the reader once or twice in a full-length novel, it will jar the readerbrain every time you do it.

Kurt Vonnegut, Tom Robbins, and Christopher Moore made a comfortable living writing stories from the perspective of an external storyteller, unfolding the tale to the reader with the same confident, intrusive tone of a Camp Counselor speaking to kids around a bonfire.

Again, this kind of storyteller construction requires you to go whole hog. You can't do it with trepidation. At minimum it will take three intercalary chapters where narrator addresses the reader directly.

Avoid the authorial intrusion of adding your unsolicited, unattributed opinion to an omniscient narrative voice.

Mac munched at his Fruity-Puffs slowly, missing no opportunity to noisily slurp milk from the spoon. He was annoying like that.

Zoinks! Thanks for your opinion, Mr. Author, but I don't care what you think. I'd rather hear from the characters. Have one of the characters sitting at Mac's table tell me about Mac's manners. Show me by the way they stare at Mac, or the words they say to him.

Passive Voice

Ah, the Queen Mother of writing mistakes: Passive voice. It's the hardest habit to overcome, and the most unkind cut of all. Even seasoned writers struggle with passive voice. It's everywhere. You'll find at least one example of passive voice in any bestseller you pick up off the rack at BookWorld.

It's *so* prevalent and *so* hard to eliminate because it's so darned hard to spot.

What is passive voice? In a nutshell, passive voice uses a squishy, inexact verb construction when a crisp, active alternative is available.

The twins were going to be in a lot of trouble if they couldn't figure out a way to be getting back on the team bus before Coach woke up.

In a crisp, tightly written, active sentence structure, a **subject** does an **action** to an **object** (or result.)

The twins were in a lot of trouble if they didn't come up with a plan to get back on the team bus before Coach woke up..

Any time you have a **was [verb]-ing**, **were [verb]-ing**, or a **be [verb]-ing** construction, you probably have passive voice.

PASSIVE: They **were** go**ing** to Churchill Downs.

ACTIVE: They went to Churchill Downs

PASSIVE: I will **be** driv**ing** to Mardis Gras.

ACTIVE: I will **drive** to Mardis Gras.

Activate Your Verbs

If I were to offer you a single piece of advice which could most quickly transform the quality of your writing, it would be to activate your verbs. I'd beg you to use the Search and Find function of your word processor to highlight every use of the words "was," "were," and "is."

Are there more than two on a page? Are there more than forty on a single page?

You may be guilty of cracker verbs, my friend.

"Clayton was a handsome man. He had dark hair. He was prone to wear it long. The women in his office were giddy with excitement when he removed his suit jacket. They could see he was cut with a chest to rival Michelangelo's David. Clayton was oblivious to the buzz of he sent rippling through the steno pool."

Cracker verbs. Was, was, was! *Phthth!* Pardon me while I get a glass of water to wash it down. Evaluate every "was." Some are necessary. Most aren't. Look for opportunities to activate your verbs.

"Clayton was a handsome man sporting dark hair and prone to wear it a scandalous touch longer than the other accountants at Margolis & Margolis. More scandalous still, his refusal to hide silky raven waves beneath a pork pie hat like the other family men. Oblivious to the excitement he sent rippling through the ladies in the steno pool, Clayton usually doffed the Seersucker jacket by midmorning, exposing a V-shaped torso tucked into a compact, belted circle at the top of his narrow slacks.

"Sakes alive," Marie whispered to Charise, busily thrumming the keyboard of her new electric Olivetti. "There's the reason Michelangelo never chiseled David a sport coat."

Tips II: Better Living through Technology

Every so often I'll get wistful for my old IBM Selectric typewriter. I think about the soothing mantra it hummed when I turned it on, the pulsing vibration that traveled down through the table and floor and back up through my chair. I think about the feeling of empowerment I experienced winding a crisp, empty sheet of paper into the platen and futzing with it until it was dead square on the roller. I can smell the greasy friction from the motor belt. I remember how when I misspelled a word, a red, squiggly line magically appeared on the paper, and all I had to do was click on it with my mouse to get a list of options for…. Oh, wait a minute.

Typewriters sucked, didn't they?

Correction tape, dull ribbons, picking the ink out of the keys with a safety pin after the letters filled up and typed solid O's which looked more like bullet points than letters…. On second thought, I don't miss my old typewriter at all.

Go ahead and take technology for granted, but don't forget you can use simple functions of your word processor to self edit much of squishy writing and common mistakes out of your story or novel.

Following is a checklist of things you can search for using the **Find** function (Ctrl+F in Microsoft Word) for self-editing purposes. As you and your fellow critters begin to identify your unique thumbprint of bad habits, you should make a custom list of words and phrases to search and destroy.

SHAWN'S LAW: Before any intensive electronic editing, always make a safety backup of your story in case things go terribly wrong.

Chronologicals

A chronological is a convention of verbal communication where the storyteller attempts to make sure the listener understands the order in which things happened.

Written prose represents a linear unfolding of events in the readerbrain, like a rollercoaster moving along a track. Unless you are jumping off one specific linear track of time to go back and pick up a plot point, you don't need chronologicals.

Here are some examples of pesky chronologicals followed by their more correct counterparts.

"After nervously unlocking the deadbolt, Carlie then eased the door open."

"Carlie unlocked the deadbolt with nervous fingers and eased the door open."

"Carlie looked into the darkness, then reached around the doorframe and flipped the switch for the living room lamp."

"Carlie looked into the darkness, reached around the doorframe, and flipped the switch for the living room lamp."

"When the lamp did not illuminate, Carlie reached in her purse for her gun while she began to whistle a calming Jem tune."

"The lamp did not illuminate. Carlie reached in her purse, pulled out her Sig, and whistled a Jem tune to calm her nerves."

Remember, **it's always *now* in the reader's brain** unless you tell them differently. Chronologicals clutter what the reader already knows. Run a **Find** on the following chronological indicators and delete as many of them as possible.

- `Immediately`
- `Before`
- `After`
- `While`
- `When`
- `Thereafter`
- `Then`
- `Finally`

Empty Words

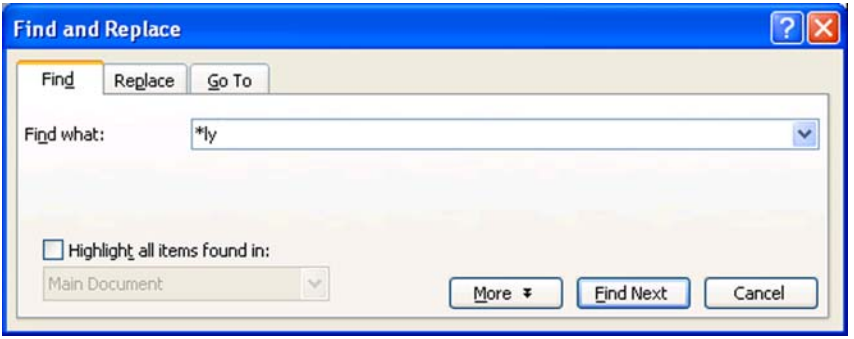
Run a **Find** on the empty words we use to start sentences when we speak. You should be able to delete all of these. Your characters are entitled to speak with more precision than their real life counterparts.

- `Basically`
- `Naturally`
- `Eventually`
- `Of course`

Kill Your Adverbs (KYA)

There are plenty of writing teachers and books who can explain to you why adverbs are a sign of bad writing. Eight out of every ten adverbs are unnecessary.

Use the wildcard character to run a search on every word which ends in "ly." Using the Microsoft Word **Find** dialog, the search string is "***ly**" Before starting, you need to click the **More** tab to expand your options and activate the checkbox for **Use wildcards**.



Every time the **Find** stops on an adverb, ask yourself the following questions:

- If I delete this word, does the sentence still make sense?

If the answer is yes, then your writing will probably be stronger without the adverb. Adverbs are clutter words. For every ten adverbs, keep only one or two.

- Is this adverb in a dialogue tag?

Kill all adverbs in dialogue tags with few exceptions.

Drat That

Run a **Find** on the word "that." *That* has the potential to be an empty, unnecessary clutter word. Ask yourself:

- Can I delete it completely without affecting the sentence?

*"It was the wedding **that** I always dreamed of."*

"It was the wedding I always dreamed of."

- Does it need to be a *which*? Ask yourself if the clause following the *that* restricts the scope of all of the subject noun (*that*), or merely a non-restrictive subset of the subject noun (*which*)? In the following example we ask ourselves: "Were all the tickets stolen?" No, just some of the tickets were stolen, making it a *which*.

*"The tickets **that** were stolen did not work."*

*"The tickets **which** were stolen did not work."*

- Is it a qualifier which would read more crisply if changed to "merely" or "so" instead?

*"She wasn't **that** pretty after all."*

*"She wasn't **so** pretty after all."*

Verity Boosters

Run a **Find** on a list of verity boosters, the words we use to create emotional weight or emphasis, but end up distracting the reader instead.

Some of the most common verity boosters are as follows:

- `really`
- `just`
- `honestly`
- `sincerely`

Most are unnecessary.

Evil Dr. Had

Had can be an evil word. It's a word I unnecessarily insert into my speaking too often, so it becomes a sticky, burr word in my writing, clinging to places it does not belong.

I use **Find** to evaluate every use of the word "had." It's a pain. A full length novel written in past tense has thousands of *hads*. It takes many hours to look each one over.

I look at every one and ask myself if there's a logical way to get it out of my writing.

Every "he had gone" becomes "he went"

Every "she had known" becomes "she knew."

Every time I stick *had* in as a helping verb where it is not needed, I look for the opportunity to pull it out.

Evaluate the writing carefully. This is *not* something that you should do with a **Find and Replace All** function. Read every instance to ensure a *had* is not part of a past perfect construction.

Perhaps your nemesis isn't *had*. Maybe it's *would* or *could* or *should*. Your critique partners will help you spot your cholesterol words. Once you recognize the problem, make finding and removing your problem words part of your regular writing process.

Passive Voice

Here's a trick to nab some of your passive voice constructions. It won't get them all, but it will get some of them.

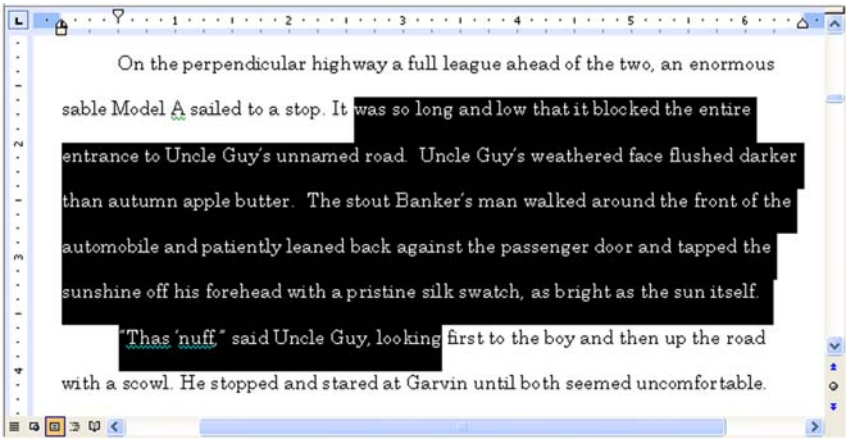
Open the **Find** dialog, select the **More** button to expand the menu choices, and activate the checkbox for **Use wildcards**

Run the following searches

- `had *ing (the space is important.)`
- `have *ing`
- `had *en`
- `was *ing`
- `were *ing"`
- `was *en`

You will get a *lot* of superfluous hits which are not passive voice, but here's the trick to blow through your false positives: If you see a short snippet of a line or half line, these may be examples of passive voice.

If you see massive swaths of paragraphs highlighted, it is a false positive. Click **Next** to advance through these. There will be many. With some practice you can do this quite rapidly.


On the perpendicular highway a full league ahead of the two, an enormous sable Model A sailed to a stop. It was so long and low that it blocked the entire entrance to Uncle Guy's unnamed road. Uncle Guy's weathered face flushed darker than autumn apple butter. The stout Banker's man walked around the front of the automobile and patiently leaned back against the passenger door and tapped the sunshine off his forehead with a pristine silk swatch, as bright as the sun itself.

"Thas 'nuff," said Uncle Guy, looking first to the boy and then up the road with a scowl. He stopped and stared at Garvin until both seemed uncomfortable.

This, by no means, will eliminate all your passives, but it may help.

While writing, try to think in terms of "**SUBJECT** does **SPECIFIC ACTION** to **THIS RESULT** or **OBJECT**."

PASSIVE: *"Since the painting was reminding Kurt of his college experience, it took him back to a happier day."*

ACTIVE: *"The painting reminded Kurt of the treasured time he spent at his college art fair.*

SUJECT: *Painting*

ACTION VERB: *Reminded*

OBJECT: *Kurt*

Delete Reflexive Pronouns Your Ownself

Run a **Find** on the following:

- `Himself`
- `Herself`
- `Yourself`
- `Myself`

These are all reflexive pronouns. They only apply if they point to a previous instance of the *him*, *her*, *you*, or *me* subject in the sentence.

I took myself out of the game.

He forced himself to apologize.

These examples are reflexive. Keep 'em. But if they aren't reflexive, delete 'em.

J*im, Diane, and myself all had to stay after school for detention.*

Wrongo. The proper pronoun would be "me" not "myself." There's no previous "me" in that sentence for *myself* to point back at.

Games Critters Play

Even if you've been in a critique group since Faulkner was in short pants, there may be uses for your critique group which you hadn't considered.

Crit the Query Letter

The best query letters aren't written after the novel is done. The best query letters are written when the novel is half done. Your query letter is not only an important part of selling an agent or editor on your story, but it also serves to clarify and indicate to the author whether or not his project is marketable.

If your query letter sums up your novel in a perfectly pithy way and the plot *still* doesn't sound very fresh or interesting, the revelation is something you need to know before you spend hundreds of additional hours finishing a story nobody wants to read.

Writing the first draft of a query letter midway through a long writing project helps focus the writer and helps get his mind around new ideas which may make the story more marketable.

Who better to help you with your all-important query letter than the critique group who worked with you for months to get your story in shape? Don't let such an important resource go to waste.

"Your Story Starts Here."

Grizzled critique group veterans know how common of an occurrence it is in the critique group process to find yourself trying to convince newbies to ditch their prologue.

Identify the hook or paragraph in critiqued pages where you first care enough about the characters or story to keep reading, even if you weren't obligated.

"Your story starts here."

The closer you can get that benchmark to the first sentence of your story, either by skilled craftsmanship or use of the delete key, the better.

If "Your story starts here" circa page 70, that's a wakeup call. Better your critique partners get this through to you than suffer the dreaded "Dear Author" form letter.

Designated Jerk

Think perhaps your crit group is tilting toward a Liar's Club dynamic? Is everybody so nice and positive about one another's writing there's no constructive dissent any more? Suggest to your critiquers you try a game of Designated Jerk.

Each meeting a single critter takes her turn being the designated jerk. The DJ always gives her critiques first. The DJ cannot say anything positive about the pages she has critiqued, at least not in the verbal part of the critique. That's not to say the DJ has license to be mean and rude, only that they cannot give positive verbal feedback.

This can be an amusing and non-threatening way to inject a bit of critical honesty in a group which trends toward dwelling on the nicey-nice to the exclusion of helpful criticism.

100 or 1000 Word Challenges (Writing Prompts)

Need to spice things up? Are you sick of reading the same five stories month after month?

Thousand word challenge stories can be a lot of fun.

Thousand word challenges are short stories you agree to write in addition to the regular pages you planned to submit. The stories cannot be a single word longer than one thousand (or one hundred). Prior to assigning the challenge, critters throw several slips of folded paper on the table each of which contain a word or short phrase. The moderator randomly draws three slips of paper and reads them aloud.

"Pyrotechnics, Mariachi Band, Sunburned Ocelot."

At the next meeting every critter must bring a story, less than a thousand words, which incorporates all three phrases drawn at random into the plot. Remember, this is *in addition* to the regular pages you plan to exchange. Challenges are meant to spur your creativity and break you out of ruts, but they should not get in the way of your project writing goals.

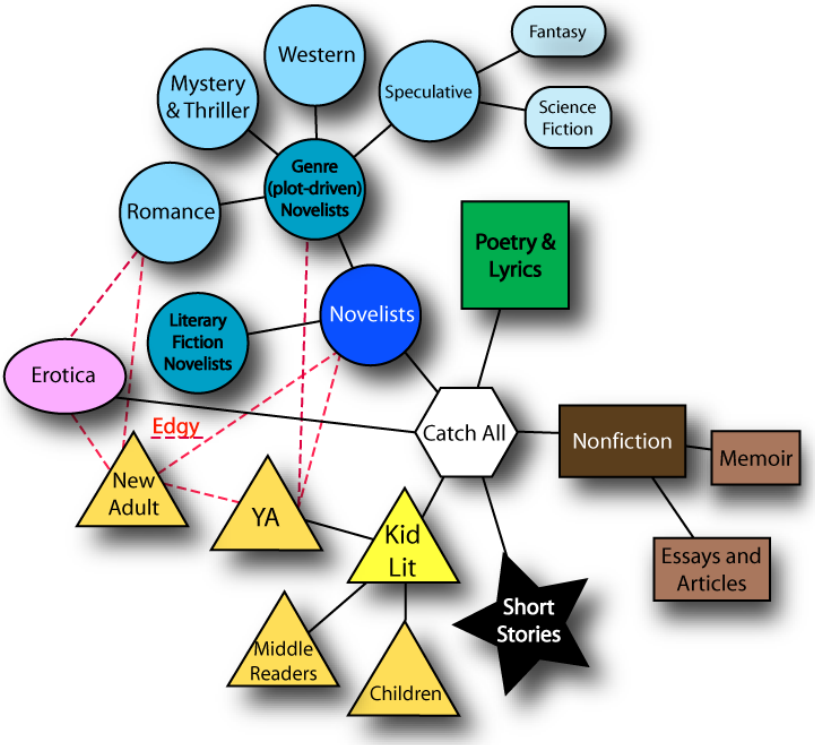
One hundred word challenges tend to be harder than thousand word challenges. It's very difficult to write a complete story with a beginning, middle and end in 100 words or less. There just isn't enough real estate to do much more than establish a character and take the character through the most Spartan of plot arcs. One hundred word challenges might center around a specific theme or character. You might draw slips of paper for a single word or concept to go in your 100 word stories, or you may open it up to any topic at all.

Mandatory writing challenges are a good way to get people in your group who haven't submitted pages in a while back in the grove.

Scalability: Large or Multiple Groups

All of the optional "good idea" aspects of a critique group (i.e. charters, contracts and facilitators) become mandatory when managing a large cluster of multiple critique groups.

In addition to the individual group moderators, you may need a special coordinator to sort folks into their respective genre groups, finalize charters and contracts, and manage the various personality dynamics.



If you have a large population of interested writers, you want to expand the genres as far out from the "Catch All" center as possible, but consider every single group needs a sustainable number of critiquers. When you deal with a large population of writers, you will have an inevitable attrition factor due to personality conflicts,

scheduling conflicts, and waning commitment levels. If you spread your group membership too thin in the interest of grouping people in similar genres, it will only collapse back on itself when groups begin folding inward. Remixing and recombining people and personalities after a critique cycle has begun sows the seeds of discontentment. If a group is too large the reading and editing workload of every critter gets higher and the time available to receive individual critiques gets smaller.

The optimal starting size for a critique group is seven people. In the event everyone stays with the group for the entire cycle, this isn't so many people that everyone has too many pages to process every two weeks or every month. In the more likely event one or two people drop out during the course of a cycle, the groups tend to get even more functional.

The Critique Group Coordinator must empower individual moderators and critique groups to manage themselves. There *will* be personality issues. These should be worked out within the critique groups. You can't successfully escalate the a personality conflict to a third party. If there is a personality conflict within a group, it must be addressed in-group. Alternatively, membership must always feel free to dissolve and reform their group to a suitable chemistry mix.

SHAWN'S LAW: The bigger the crit group, the more likely people are to behave.

A critique group of seven people has a completely different behavioral dynamic than a critique group of three people. Small groups are prone to infighting and power struggles while bigger groups tend to enjoy a calming peer pressure dynamic.

The Joy of Entropy

The natural state of a critique group is to be falling apart. Only a small percentage of critique groups gel for long periods of time. The half-life of a crit group is determined by the commitment of its members and the personality chemistry. If you like to play solitaire, if you get an OCD buzz from taking chaos and ordering back into neat, ordinal rows of red and black stripes, then you'll make a good critique group coordinator. You stack the blocks neatly, and every 30 minutes somebody comes along and knocks them askew. If you have

the patience to say "*Que Sera*," avoid taking it personally, and restack the blocks, you're the right person for the job.

Crit groups fail. All you can do is keep putting them back together and nurture the rare legacy crit group.

Legacy Groups

A legacy group is a critique group made up of people who don't understand their group is supposed to fail. The same membership stays together cycle after cycle. These are critters who like and respect each other. They play well with others and handle their own interpersonal politics in-group.

Here's what you need to know about legacy groups: Don't screw with legacy groups. Leave them alone. Respect them. Don't add or shift legacy group members without polling the membership. Give legacy groups the chance to recruit their own new members first before you begin cobbling together your potential population into new groups.

Legacy groups are rare and wonderful. They represent the best critique groups can be.

The Final Words

Writing is an art, not a science.

Grammar cults and Style Tribes will woo you. They will try to convert you to their way, because once everyone thinks about art the same way, *then* it will be a science. *Then* we can teach robots the formulas to write a book a day. In the meantime, the reading public will just have to make do with James Patterson.

Keep learning. Keep evolving. Seek out the writing values important to you. Write them. Rewrite them. Codify your writing manifesto. Delete it. Start over.

Just keep writing.