



Critiquing the Critique Guidelines

- I. Focus of a good critique is always positive.
 - A. This does not always mean complimentary.
 - B. The use of the majority of comments will make you a better writer and/or your manuscript will be better.
 - C. There is a difference between subjective and objective.
 1. “That sucks” is a subjective comment.
 2. “Confusing passage” is an objective comment.
 - D. Always carefully weigh overall negative comments.

- II. Analyze your critiquer. (This is especially important if you submit your manuscript to someone outside regular meetings.)
 - A. When (s)he critiques others, are his/her comments generally aimed at making the book or writing better?
 - B. Is she familiar with the markets and story ideas in your category?
 - C. Is she knowledgeable?
 1. Do not confuse formal education with “the smarts.”
 2. Do not assume someone with a degree is any brighter than someone who had to cheat to get through third grade.
 3. Is she well-read, and does her taste run to similar literature?
 - D. Published or unpublished?
 1. You will be sending the book to editors who are published and unpublished, so all opinions are welcomed.
 - a. You should be able to get something of value from everyone.
 - E. Know the strong points of the critiquer.
 1. I write a factual synopsis. I’m not going to be great help on a poetic one.
 2. I’m good at spotting misspellings and word usage. I’m not going to be great help on POV (point-of-view).
 3. I’m good at seeing if a plot is logical, but I’m lousy on story structure.

- III. What can you hope to find out from the critique?
 - A. Are the characters likable and interesting?
 - B. Is the plot clear?
 - C. Are the flow and pacing consistent?
 - D. Are grammar and word-usage competent, if not perfect?
 - E. Are there any glaring abuses of syntax or taste?
 - F. Is the manuscript marketable?
 - G. Is the research thorough enough?

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- IV. To change or not to change?
- A. It is your manuscript and your decision.
 - 1. The purpose of the critique is to give you the best chance to sell. Change what you feel will help the sale.
 - 2. Some comments may not apply in your category. Be aware of the differences in each category.
 - 3. If you are dead-set on *not* making a change, be aware that it may mean the manuscript is unsalable. If you can live with that, then stay with your gut feelings.
- V. Miscellaneous
- A. Comments are made on what we see. You will not be in an editor's office to explain what you meant.
 - B. If two or three people have the same opinion, it probably is the correct viewpoint.
 - C. Don't get hung up on one chapter. Don't stop and do the laundry until inspiration strikes—just write another chapter.
 - D. Present to the group what you would present to an editor.
 - 1. It's a good habit to always use the proper manuscript style.
 - E. You're a professional—use the right tools.
 - 1. Have a good dictionary, thesaurus, and grammar book.
 - 2. Use the bloody things.

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RWA Chicago-North Manuscript Rules

Revised December, 2006

1. A manuscript is defined as a work-in-progress, intended for publication, by a paid member of the Chicago-North chapter of RWA.
2. A member must attend six meetings as a member of the chapter before reading or critiquing orally. The exception to this rule is that any new or visiting PAN member may speak during a critique.
3. The manuscript should be typed and double-spaced with twenty-five lines per page and margins appropriate for submission to an editor (one-inch on all sides). Courier New 12-point is the preferred font. Papers should be clipped, not stapled. The manuscript should be between fifteen and twenty pages, or one chapter. If longer or shorter, the manuscript chairperson should be notified so (s)he may know how best to schedule the meeting's readers. A prologue does not need to be counted as a separate chapter if it is very brief and combined with Chapter One (and does not exceed twenty pages). NOTE: An alternative to bringing in a longer chapter is to bring a specific scene(s) you are having trouble with. (See Rule 23.)
4. The reader may request a "brainstorming session" for more free-flowing input on challenging plot or character issues. These are not recommended for beginning readers.
5. The reading fee is \$1 for up to twenty pages. An additional \$1 per page is charged for any manuscript that exceeds twenty pages. The fee should be paid to the manuscript chairperson on the night of the reading or placed in the attached "reading fee envelope" in the manuscript binder.
6. A member may get on the reading list by signing up on the manuscript roster (made available by the manuscript chairperson at the meetings) or by contacting the manuscript chairperson. Sign-up is first-come, first-served, and the following priorities will apply when necessary – and when the manuscript chairperson is notified in advance (for priority readers): A)published authors with an editor-imposed deadline B)any manuscript requested by an editor C)a contest entry on deadline D)holdover manuscripts E)manuscript scheduled on the reading list F)a re-read (as per the rules outlined in #8).
7. Each member is encouraged to read before the group at least once every two years. Readers may not to read more than once a quarter unless space is available. Additional times may be given at the discretion of the manuscript chairperson.
8. A scene or chapter should go before the group only once unless the revised pages for re-read have been *significantly rewritten* as per the following criteria:
 - A. "Significantly rewritten" is defined as major changes to plot and/or characters. Changes that primarily consist of grammar, punctuation, spelling, mechanics, POV, etc., are not eligible to for a re-read. "Significantly rewritten" is determined by the author, but the author is *strongly* recommended to get the opinion of a board member or published member to discuss whether the criteria has been met.
 - B. At least six months have passed since the reading of the original work. During that time, the author *must* have attended at least 6 critique meetings. (If in doubt this should be verified through attendance records with the secretary.)

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- C. The person signing up to re-read does so as the lowest priority. (S)He may only sign the manuscript book on the waiting list section and indicate that the critique will be a re-read. If no one fills the reader slot with an original read (by the meeting prior to the read), then the manuscript chair will put the re-reader on the schedule and contact him/her so (s)he may prepare accordingly.
- NOTE: Another option available to those interested in re-reads is “Second Chance.” Post to the group on the Loop asking for a few volunteers who attended the first read to review the pages online and email new comments. This can take the place of a meeting re-read.
9. There will be a \$5 penalty for cancellation within a week of a reader’s scheduled reading. The manuscript chairperson can waive the penalty if *the person canceling can locate a substitute reader* from the list. The fee can be waived at the manuscript chair’s discretion in an emergency.
 10. If there is a backlog of readers, the manuscript chairperson can recommend a special meeting and ask for an immediate vote. The manuscript chairperson can also designate “First Reader Night” at his/her discretion.
 11. Readers should bring a minimum of twenty copies of the original manuscript to the meeting. The group is large. The more copies you bring, the easier it is for individual members to write detailed comments.
 12. The reader should be prepared to tell the group the target market for the manuscript and any specific issues (s)he needs guidance on.
 13. There will only be two readers per meeting and the time available for critiquing will be split between them. On a program night, only one reader will be scheduled.
 14. First-time readers read first.
 15. It is strongly recommended that members review “Critiquing the Critique,” which is contained in the new member packet, before critiquing a member’s manuscript or reading their own manuscript to the group.
 16. A critiquer must limit him/herself to two specific points the first time around. All first-time comments should be heard before additional comments are allowed. The exception is comments that are “to that point” of the current discussion. The manuscript chairperson arbitrates.
 17. A reader is encouraged to tape his/her critique. If (s)he wishes to use the chapter recorder, (s)he should notify the secretary and bring his/her own blank tape.
 18. A member can expect the group critique to cover both strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript. See the critique guide sheet to get an idea of the type of things that will be covered in the critique. Note that although grammar, spelling, etc., are important and may be mentioned in the critique, it is the responsibility of the writer to present the manuscript in good form. It is a better use of our oral critique time to focus on the larger areas of characterization, plot, and narrative skills. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation corrections may be written on the manuscript. *The reader should not use oral critique time to defend his/her manuscript but may ask for clarification and request the advice of the group with regard to potential solutions to the problems mentioned.* Each member offering a critique should make an attempt to give his/her best evaluation and advice, but both parties must remember that in the long run, it will be up to the reader to decide which advice to accept and which changes to make.

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19. Each reader is entitled to the full attention of the group. Please do not review the written comments on your manuscript or hold “sidebar” conversations when someone else is reading or critiquing.
20. The manuscript chairperson should call or e-mail first-time readers after the critique to be sure all phases of the critique went well.
21. Once a year the manuscript chairperson should review the rules with the membership.
22. A new set of rules incorporating any changes should be drafted and made available to the members. Changes should be presented to the membership for comment one month before a vote is taken on the changes. Changes should be highlighted in the newsletter. After a change is voted in, it will take effect the month following the vote. Updated instructions for manuscript preparation, sign-up procedures, and critiquing rules should be included in the new member packets.
23. Authors who would like to bring in a second, third (or later) chapter (i.e. pages 21-40) are encouraged to bring a half- to one-page sheet detailing what transpires in each scene in the first chapter(s)/first twenty pages/earlier pages. This sheet should not be read aloud but rather be available for the critiquer's reference. (Copies of the earlier part of the work can also be posted in the files section of the Loop in the weeks prior to the critique meeting. Doing so will allow any member a chance to familiarize him/herself with those pages and give a fuller read/more well-rounded critique of the later pages.)
24. Critiquing will take place during a silent OR oral read. The author of the manuscript being critiqued is aware that there are benefits and drawbacks to both, but whether to have a silent or oral read is ultimately his/her choice. During a silent read a specific time should be set for critiquing to begin (i.e. after twenty minutes) for critiquers to pace themselves. For an oral read, the author may choose another member to read his/her manuscript if (s)he so desires.

Please remember that courtesy and professionalism are crucial in all aspects of the critiquing process.

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PANELISTS:

Simone Elkeles, named 2008 Author of the Year by the Illinois Association of Teachers of English, is the author of award-winning teen romance novels. *How to Ruin a Summer Vacation* placed #3 on the Teens' Top Ten list and *Leaving Paradise* was a RITA® finalist in 2008. She produced a rap video book trailer for her 2009 release *Perfect Chemistry* and has two more books coming out in 2009/2010. Visit her at www.simoneelkeles.com.

Blythe Gifford is the author of *Innocence Unveiled* (June 2008), *The Harlot's Daughter* (October 2007), and *The Knave and The Maiden* (2004), a Golden Heart finalist manuscript. *In the Master's Bed*, Harlequin Historical, September 2009, is her next medieval romance about a bastard born on the wrong side of the royal blanket. She is a past president and past manuscript chair of Chicago North Chapter and a frequent conference speaker. (www.blythegifford.com)

Ann Bleakley writes historical romance novels in between research trips abroad. She is the cofounder of Share The Love, a non-profit that promotes literacy by donating gently used romance novels to organizations devoted to helping women in crisis. Her website is: www.annbleakley.com

And joining us via the wonders of technology from Silicon Valley Romance Writers:

Anne Lum has been a member of RWA and SVRWA since 2004. When not serving on the SVRWA board, coordinating the GOTCHA! contest, and writing reviews for Writers Unlimited- Anne writes contemporary romance. Anne has won a Harlequin writing round robin contest and her chapter has been published as part of a free eBook, *Stolen by the Sheikh*. Anne also won first place in the contemporary category of Utah RWA's 2008 Heart of the West contest.

Annamaria Smitherman lives, writes, and attends PTA meetings in Palo Alto, California -- not necessarily in that order. Chapter Critiques have changed her life in that she can no longer blame her husband, children, or the cat with the Prozac prescription; Her Chapter Sisters insist that she write!