

# The Care and Nurturing of the Critique Relationship

## Types of Critique Partners

**Partners** - You're in it together start to finish. Equal status, both read and offer feedback for each other on all aspects of the manuscript/writing/career. This often includes plotting, characterization and story, as well as line edits, cheerleading and whipcracking.

**Mentorship** - A mentor is often further along in their writing career (or in one particular area) and is able to offer guidance and suggestions that help you along the way. This can apply to the manuscript, but can also be career oriented as well.

**Proofreader** - Offers line edits, pacing suggestions. Story specific, just looking at, as our friend Sheila puts it, the trees rather than the forest. Punctuation, grammar, stylistic suggestions are often the proofreader's specialty.

**Cheerleader** - Atta girls (or boys) and pats on the back. The cheerleader reads your work and sends it back with a lot of smiley faces and happy comments. This is a GREAT person to help build your confidence and keep you motivated. They might not offer as much in terms of writing feedback to change/improve/rework your manuscript, but they are worth their weight in gold to your ego.

**Whipcracker** - This person might never read your actual work, but they are that nagging force that pushes you to make your page count, to write and hit deadlines. They might be a timer partner online, a Book-In-A-Week leader or a group motivator.

**Reader** - This person might not be a writer, but loves to read. They'll read for content (harkening back to Sheila's term - they read for the forest and don't even see the trees), let you know if your story keeps them engaged, interested and satisfied.

## Critique Sources

**Your local RWA Writing Chapter:** That it's a writing chapter means people here are likely serious about their writing. If they are attending meetings, they are likely learning their craft and working to improve their skills. Many chapters have a critique group or matching program, which you can benefit from checking out. Even if they don't, you can still find a CP on your own. Because the chapter meets in person, you have a chance to gauge personalities, communication styles, etc to see if you think you'll be

comfortable working together. The downside is the CP relationship possibly not working - or falling apart down the road. It can be awkward at best, antagonistic at worst.

**Your Online RWA Writing Chapter:** Again, writing chapter, so there are more than likely serious writers here. Most online chapters do have critique programs, as well as mentorship programs to avail yourself to. Individuals are harder to read online, and as we all know, email can be tricky for reading nuances. But watching interaction online does give you some indication of personality & communication styles. The downside is, again, email. It's hard to read between the lines sometimes, and like some contests judging, the sense of distance because you're not facing each other sometimes lends itself to harsh or blunt wording.

**Writers Groups:** These can be in person or online - usually groups that form for purpose other than critique, they become support groups, so to speak. A tight, close group can become a fabulous source of readily available critiques, often for the asking. For instance, Beth and I belong to a group comprised of about 20 writers. We don't all critique for each other, but at one point or another we have all read each others work. Like any group, smaller groups can form, and the downside can be jealousies or competitiveness (I'm reaching on this one since we haven't experienced it <G>)

**Online Sources, ie: eHarlequin, CataRomance, etc:** I hooked up with my first CP through a group such as this. There was a thread entitled "Find a CP" and like posting personal ads, you state what you are looking for and then vet the responses. It worked out great! That said, like any personal ad, there is a lot of wiggle room for success. CP relationships can also be formed through simple interaction. You find yourself posting to the same thread, have a lot in common and decide to give it a shot. Often this venue gives you a common thread to work with. The drawbacks are similar to online writing chapters, because most of the critiques would be via email.

**Bookstores & Libraries:** Often not romance specific, many bookstores and libraries sponsor writers groups that meet and share critiques. Good writing is good writing, regardless of genre, so there can be solid feedback to be had. The drawback is if you need critiques or feedback specific to your genre and market.

**Friends, Friends of Friends, Fans & Readers:** This is a great group to tap into for 'reads'. Not for writing feedback, plotting, line edits, etc -but for story reactions. The drawbacks are possibly too effusive responses that stroke the ego (nice) but don't give you anything to work with, or someone who doesn't really understand the craft or industry telling you how to tell your story.

## **Critiquing Checklist**

(Critiques can include one or more of these areas, depending on what you ask for)

- Grammar and line edits (words missing, out of place, repetitive usage. Punctuation, run on sentences, etc.)
- Plot - is it consistent, is it believable? Is there a strong hook that will carry the reader into the story, enough conflict to keep the reader moving through the middle and a satisfying ending?
- Characterization - are the characters consistent? Are they "real"? Are you showing who they are, or telling? Are they sympathetic, and if not, are they written in such a way that the reader can care about their story?
- Internal Conflict and External Conflict - clear, consistent. Is the conflict shown in the character's dialogue and actions? Are there other places these could be built up? Is it consistent with the plot and does it stay consistent with the characters?
- Showing Vs Telling - Is the writing strong? Does it show the characters reasons and emotions rather than telling? Does it draw the reader in? Are there places where it's over told and should be pared down?
- Setting - does the reader get a clear sense of time and place? Is the setting well-drawn but not intrusive and does it support the story?
- Pacing- is there enough info to paint a clear picture but not so much to slow the story?
- Does the voice sparkle - like contests... that infamous, do you want to read more question? Is the work consistent with the author's voice?
- Misc other things to look for: research details, language usage, specifics to the genre/line.

## **Terrific Relationships**

Terrific Critique Partners:

Might not always agree with your suggestions, but they do always listen and give them serious consideration.

Appreciate the time and effort you give their work.

Make an effort to understand your writing, the genre you're targeting and your career goals.

Understand your time is limited and give you plenty of notice if they need a critique back.

Drop everything to read for you when you get that coveted agent or editor request or if you're on a deadline.

You love discussing your stories with them because they always seem to know just what to say to encourage you.

Are honest, even when they know you might not want to hear what they have to say.

Only want what's best for your story, and for you.

Are encouraging and supportive.

Suggest changes.

Attempt to see your point of view.

Not only accept, but are appreciative of constructive criticism.

Put as much time and effort into the relationship as you do. Go through your work several times to make sure it's the best it can be and makes tons of comments - both positive and constructive.

### **Keeping the Magic Alive**

If you're lucky enough to be in a Terrific CP relationship, don't take it for granted! Like any good relationship, the CP relationship needs upkeep to stay strong.

Be appreciative. Let your wonderful CP know you appreciate her. You don't need elaborate gifts here, a simple, sincere Thank You does wonders. Although, if you felt the urge, you could send her a box of Sees Chocolate <g>

### **Things to keep in mind:**

Terrific CP relationships are Made, not Born. You need to work to keep a positive, growing relationship.

Sometimes it takes time to find that special someone. But if you keep looking, chances are you will find your writing match.

### **Toxic Relationships**

Toxic Critique Partners:

Become defensive or angry when you suggest changes. They insist you don't know what you're talking about, don't understand the sub-genre they're writing, accuse you of being jealous of their work.

Never or rarely implement your suggestions.

Are demanding, insisting you read their work right away, take advantage of you and your time.

Get jealous if you read for someone else or make them wait for a critique.

Don't appreciate you or your suggestions.

Cause your stomach to cramp with dread when you critique for them because you know they are going to become combative.

Rip your story apart but tell insist they're just being honest and you need to toughen your skin.

Tell you to change things rather than make suggestions. Insist they know what will and won't sell.

Only want pats on the backs. Expect all the critiques they get back to be positive -- glowing even. Any constructive criticism is met with anger, pouting or both.

Want you to read for them but don't want to spend the time to read for you. When they do (grudgingly) agree to a critique, they let you know you're putting them out, are slow to get it back to you and make little or no comments on the critique itself.

### **Breaking up is hard to do**

If your CP shows one or more of the signs listed above, run (don't walk) away from the relationship. Easier said than done, huh? Here are a few suggestions to help make the break easier.

If you like your CP as a friend, but not as a Critique Partner. Tread carefully. Of course, you could always be sneaky ie: stop asking them to crit for you, be super busy whenever they ask you to read something of theirs...but this is your friend. If you're close enough, be honest and tell them that the CP thing isn't working out for you, that you value their friendship and in order to keep that friendship, you don't think you should read for each other anymore. Yes, there might be some hurt feelings but in the long run, if they're a true friend, they'll appreciate your honesty and see that you're right. Hey, maybe they even feel the same way but were scared to discuss their concerns with you.

If you like your CP as a business acquaintance (someone you can chat with at your local chapter meeting or a conference, someone with great networking ties) simply letting the relationship fade won't be difficult. Again, just don't ask them for a critique and if you're asked to do one, explain you don't have time currently or that you're taking a break from critiques and let it go.

If you don't particularly like your CP at all, break things off. Now. Be honest, but that doesn't mean you have to be cruel. Explain that you don't

think you're helping each other and it would be best for both of you to go your separate ways.

**Things to keep in mind:**

You're not obligated to stay in a group or with a CP that makes you uncomfortable. You owe it to yourself and your writing to step away from situations that make you feel inferior or miserable.

The writing community is small. Don't badmouth people, even if you were unhappy with the CP situation. At the very least, your words will come back to haunt you, at the worst, they'll cause pain to someone else.

If you find yourself leaving CP after group after CP, stop and consider that maybe it's not them... maybe it's you. Do you need to rethink your acceptance of critiques? Could you have done something different? Is there a common thread to each situation you've left?

**Speaker Bios:**

**Tawny Weber** is usually found dreaming up stories in her California home, surrounded by dogs, cats and kids. When she's not writing hot, spicy stories for Harlequin Blaze, she's shopping for the perfect pair of boots or drooling over Johnny Depp pictures (when her husband isn't looking, of course). Tawny's most recent Blazes: COMING ON STRONG and GOING DOWN HARD were out April/May of 2009. In September '09 she launches Dressed To Thrill, a fun, four-author costume shop continuity with her release of FEELS LIKE THE FIRST TIME. You can visit her on the web at [www.tawnyweber.com](http://www.tawnyweber.com)

Superromance author **Beth Andrews** is living her dream, writing romance for Harlequin while looking after her real-life hero and their three children. She has been honored by her kids as The Meanest Mom in the World-as if there's something wrong with counting down the remaining days of summer vacation until school starts again. Before her Critique Partner became overwhelmingly demanding and took over her spare time, Beth used to enjoy making some of the many recipes she collects, redecorating her home and stringing beads together. To learn more about Beth and her recent Superromance releases, A NOT-SO-PERFECT PAST and HIS SECRET AGENDA, check out her website: [www.bethandrews.net](http://www.bethandrews.net)