

## Skagit Valley Writers League Critique Guidelines

At some point, we all need feedback on our writing. This is especially true in fiction where we need to know if the story works before we send it out into the big, bad world. But critiquing is a two-way process. Many on-line sites insist that applicants review others' work before being allowed to post their own. Therefore, to get the most out of the process, we need to learn how to both give and take constructive criticism.

### GROUP POLICIES

Groups devise their own policies on how to divide up the time available, whether or not to provide copies, whether authors should remain quiet (except to answer direct questions) until everyone has commented, etc. Everyone, of course, should abide the agreed-on policies.

### AS A CRITiquer

#### **Be Positive**

Listen. Let the story pick you up and carry you. Do the characters come alive? Do you care about them? Does the story tension carry you? Can you visualize the setting? Is the purpose of the scene clear? Respond to positive elements before negative and be specific. Comments, such as "I like it," "That's impressive," are only helpful as introductions to more specific comments. Listen for and respond to these larger elements of storytelling (listed on the next page) before doing line by line critiques of technical aspects (grammar, punctuation, and word choices).

#### **Be Honest**

If the work is not a genre you usually write (or read), say so. It helps the writer understand where the critique is coming from. But do be honest about how you feel about the work and where it fails you. There are times when an author will read only to share his or her work, but a critique group isn't one of those times. Assume the author wants real criticism, but be sure to respond to positive elements before going on to the things in need of improvement.

#### **Be Constructive.**

Say honestly where the story fails you, but do so constructively. It's just as easy to say "I need more specifics on..." as it is to say "It's too abstract." Asking for more specifics on a character will usually elicit details that bring a character to life. Questions like: "Where does this happen?" elicit details on setting. Starting comments with "you" are generally judgements; starting with "I" are subjective opinions. "I got confused here..." leads to questions about the text and is constructive. "You are confusing," is a judgment on the author and destructive. On story elements, tell the author what doesn't work for you, but not how to fix it unless the author asks for that kind of help. More specific corrections may be appropriate on technical elements but be careful to respect difference in style...

### AS AN AUTHOR

Be receptive, not defensive. You need to hear how the story comes across to others. Criticism tells you where you need to clarify, emphasize, elaborate to make your story mean what you intended. Give explanations when asked, but remember, those explanations aren't on the paper. Let the criticisms rest

until the next day, then take those you value (that make the story stronger in your eyes) and leave the rest.

## **ELEMENTS OF STORYTELLING** **(For authors and critiquers alike)**

The elements below are intended to help identify the source of story strengths and weaknesses. Don't feel you need to respond to all of them; speak to those that stand out.

### **Plot**

- How effective is the opening? Are you drawn in to the action or it a slow-burner.
- Is there sufficient conflict to keep you reading? A story without conflict isn't a story at all.
- Do you feel the central conflict of the story within the first page?
- If a short story, are the conflicts resolved adequately? For a novel all must be tied up by the end.
- Is the plot believable? This is subjective but a subject for discussion.
- Does each scene contribute to the plot? Move the story forward?
- Pace: Does tension of the story move you along at a comfortable pace? Race, leaving questions and confusions? Dray because of unnecessary info., tangents, or plan wordiness?

### **Character**

- Do the characters seem real? Strike familiar chords?
- Can you visualize what they look like?
- Does the dialogue match the characters? Add dimension? Sound like natural speech? Is there too much? Too little? Does the dialogue give background material that should be in narrative?
- Can you tell who is speaking or acting at any given time?

### **Point of View**

• In fiction, point of view may be first person (the protagonist's point of view), restricted third person (told in third person but from the protagonist's point of view), or omniscient (the author looking down on the scene and able to get into everyone's head). Does the point of view remain consistent? A first person narrator cannot know what's in other heads. If using restrictive third person, sections of a novel (less frequently a short story) may be from differing characters point of view, but sections must remain consistently with the chosen character.

### **Setting**

- Are settings adequately described? Believable? Can you see them?

### **Technical Matters**

- Format: correct use of paragraphs, spacing, etc. Readable font.
- Clarity and strength of language—weakened by overuse of adjectives and adverbs.
- Show versus tell. Action is stronger and more vivid than telling.
- Style conventions: Referencing and source acknowledgement in non-fiction, formatting dialogue, tagging, etc.
- Flow. Important in both fiction and non-fiction. Here's Wordsworth: "Authors must build good fences. If readers find a gate open they'll wander through."