

The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly, or How to Choose a Writers' Group

By Holly Lisle

I know I'm not in the majority when I recommend that you get involved with a writers' group. Dean Koontz apparently loathes them, Harlan Ellison despises them, and I've read advice from dozens of other pros whose work I love and whose opinions I value who say writers' groups will do everything from steal your soul to cause your writing to break out in pox.

Nonetheless, I strongly recommend that you get involved with a good writers' group when you're getting started. I credit what I learned from my early groups (plus enormous amounts of hard work and persistence) with leading me to publication.

The Unknown Writers' Group and Schrodinger's Petshop (Essentially Bizarre, But Cats Like Us) pushed me to succeed.

But I was lucky. I got in on the ground floor of each group, and each group was good. I heard horror stories of other writers' groups in the area (we acquired a lot of their fallout members) and discovered that not all groups are created equal.

In this column I'll assume that you have at least one writers' group in your area with an opening. (Many places do. If you don't, we'll fix that in a later column.) Print this list off, take it to a meeting or two with you, and keep your eyes and ears open. Here's what you look for.

Good, Bad, or Ugly?

Rule #1

- **Does the group have a clearly defined goal, preferably in writing?**

This can be something as simple as “We want to see something new from each writer at each meeting,” or as elaborate as a mission statement. However, if the members of the group haven’t taken the time to define their purpose, they probably don’t know where they’re going. And neither will you.

Rule #1 Example

“Purposes and Goals:

Schrodinger’s Petshop, established in May of 1988, grew out of a core of aspiring science fiction and fantasy writers who wanted to write better and sell our work, and who weren’t able to find a writers’ group or program that met our needs and interests. We’ve met on a regular basis since, constantly growing and changing to meet the needs of our admittedly esoteric membership.

Our main goal is to help each other get published. We do this by presenting and participating in workshops on our varied areas of expertise, by reading and critiquing each other’s work, and by encouraging each other to submit finished works. We also provide networking, contacts with professionals in the field, and a chance to meet other local talents with similar interests.”

(This is a quote from the Schrodinger’s Petshop Handbook, which I wrote in 1988. It was the keystone to our keeping our group good. If you’d like to read the complete rules, here’s the text.)

Rule #2

- Does the group have any interest in the type of writing you want to do?

This may seem irrelevant to you—you may be thinking “We’re all writers, right? They’ll be glad to help me.” Unfortunately it isn’t true. The worst horror stories I got were from writers who wanted to write SF or romances and attended meetings at the other large local group in the area. They found themselves and their work attacked as substandard, unworthy, and stupid—in spite of the fact that many of them did very good work. They were not, you see, considered sufficiently “literary” to be worth anybody’s time.

Rule #2 Example

“Writer Requirements:

We are open to members of all levels of experience, and of all ages and interests. We have members who are experienced in novel-writing, in short-fiction writing, in non-fiction, and in poetry. However, we are strongly biased in favor of science fiction, fantasy, and horror (speculative fiction) subject matter. We are not a general-interest writers’ group. If you want to write mainstream or non-fiction or works in other genres, but have no interest in speculative fiction, we are not the group for you.

While we have a great deal of fun at our meetings, we are not geared toward socializing. We are a working writers’ group, and our main premise is that writers write. If you join, be prepared to read what you are working on, to take criticism, and also to give it. We’ll help you achieve your goal of getting your stories into print—your goal is one we share.

Welcome to Schrodinger’s Petshop.”

Rule #3

- **Does the membership arrive and get to work, or does everyone just stand around and talk about writing?**

Pretty early in the meeting, everyone should start moving toward the chairs. Manuscript pages ought to start appearing in hands, and pens and notepads ought to come out. You should see people beginning to discuss the writing they have in front of them, in whatever critique format they use.

The group should not spend more than half an hour hanging out and gossiping.

Rule #4

- **Are there any rules for people who are criticizing each others work to follow?**

This is so important. One nasty writer with a mean streak can destroy a talented beginner, and use his critique time as a way to grind the “competetion” into powder. This is stupid, it sucks, and it’s pointless.

There is a better way. Critiques should deal only with the work, should be constructive, and should be short. If one person takes more than ten minutes to discuss a piece of work, that’s a good sign that the meetings are poorly controlled.

Rule #4 Example

“Schrodinger’s Rules of Critiquing:

1) Critique the writing, never the writer. Never say, “You are...” or “You should...” Instead say, “The writing is...” or “The story should...”

2) Find what is right in each piece as well as what is wrong.

3) Don’t say, “This is how I would write it;” how you would

write it isn't the point.

4) Remember that subject matter is personal. You don't have to like a story to give it a fair critique.

5) Remember what your biases are and critique around them.

6) Remember that real people wrote this stuff, and real people have real feelings."

Things you may not say while critiquing.

"That's awful."

"That's stupid."

"You couldn't write your way out of a paper bag."

Rule #5

- **Are there any rules for people whose work is being criticized to follow?**

Again, this is essential. People get very defensive when others are telling them what they did wrong, and their first impulse seems to be to argue. The critique-ee needs to have rules to follow, too, and the first of these needs to be "Shut up and listen." If people have taken the time to read or listen to what you wrote, take the time to hear what they have to say about it.

Rule #5 Example

"Schrodinger's Rules of Being Critiqued:

1) Listen. The person who is speaking has taken the time to listen to your work, and wants to help you find ways to make it better.

2) Wait until everyone has finished critiquing before making comments.

3) *Explain only if necessary. Don't rebut.*

4) *Take notes.*

5) *Realize that everything can be improved.*

6) *Be willing to make changes. Conversely, don't change anything you feel must remain in order to make the story yours.*

Things you may not say when being critiqued.

"You're wrong."

"You're an idiot."

"Your mother was a hamster and your father smelled of elderberries.""

Rule #6

- **Does the group have set guidelines for behavior, and a way to remove troublesome members?**

Shouldn't be necessary, should it? After all, everybody's an adult. Or at least literate. At least that's the theory.

In fact, however, a removal rule is necessary. You can get a great group together, and you can be having wonderful meetings, and someone will unsuspectingly bring the Writer From Hell with him to a meeting. This writer will ignore the rules, attack the other writers, try to hog the meeting, refuse to even consider changing a word of his precious story, and make life miserable for everyone.

The group **MUST** have a way, stated in advance, of getting rid of this nightmare.

Example #6

“Membership Guidelines:

Attending meetings is a privilege and not a right. Memberships can be revoked—for failure to follow critiquing rules, for failure to follow protocol in being critiqued, or by a general vote of the other members.”

Rule #7

▪ **Do the people who are there like each other?**

If the other folks at the meeting spend most of the meeting talking about what a bitch Dorothy is or how they suspect John is writing in English as a poorly-learned third language, or if they snap at each other, cut each other down, or are brutal with each other’s manuscripts, RUN AWAY! They will be no kinder to you and your work.

You’ll need a few meetings to get a feel for the group dynamics. You’ll usually find that the group falls into one of the following types:

1. **Circle of Friends**
2. **Master and Students/Slaves, or**
3. **Sharks and Dinner.**

Rule #7 Examples

▪ **Circle of Friends**

Usually a group of writers all working on about the same level. Either nobody has published yet, or a few have started making small sales, or everyone has started selling, or a bunch of pros got together to hang out on Saturday nights. Sometimes you can find a Circle of Friends open to people working at all levels, from beginner to pro, but this has to be a group that is very tightly run or it will end up being a Master and

Students group.

Schrodinger's Petshop managed to be an all-levels Circle of Friends for years (though the group did eventually disintegrate), but while it held together we were careful to enforce the handbook rules, we threw out anyone who broke them, and we had no group leader, by design.

We also actively recruited beginners. Most groups aren't like this.

In general, your best bet for a writing group will be a Circle of Friends on your level.

▪ **Master and Students**

Usually a group put together by one pro and open to beginners. This is generally designed as a teaching group, with the pro as the teacher, and this kind of group can be either good or terrible, depending on the pro.

If you have someone who loves to teach, who is genuinely interested in seeing the members get published, and whose work appeals to you enough that you think you could learn from him, then a Master and Students group will be okay.

If, however, your existence in the group is solely to provide ego-booster for the master, then you end up with a **Master and Slaves** dynamic, and you aren't likely to get much that will help you get published.

Listening to the master read a new chapter of his book every week on the theory that this will allow you to see a work in progress, while never getting to present your own work, is a sure sign that you are in the presence of a raving egotist. Say bye-bye.

- **Sharks and Dinner** Any tightly knit clique that tears apart those not in the Inner Circle.

In a Sharks and Dinner group, you'll notice all the signs of evil in the first meeting or two—people afraid to read their work to others, people speaking viciously of those not present, brutal critiques of works that are read, open hostility toward anything not written in the group's approved style or genre, people that come to one meeting and never return, and a general Fall of the House of Usher darkness.

NEVER join a Sharks and Dinner group. Remember, even if they let you be one of the Sharks... when they smell blood in the water, sharks will eat their own.

Rule #8

- **Does everybody bring work to each meeting, or do you hear from the same three people?**

In general, avoid all groups where you get to hear from only one or two writers, and everyone else sits around and talks about what they'll write someday.

Rule #9

- **Is anybody happy to see you?**

Do people make an effort to include you? Did anyone ask you your name? Did you like anyone there?

Furthermore, are you happy to be there? Do you look forward to going to meetings? When you get home, do you want to write, or do you want to smash your computer to pieces and investigate careers in ditch-digging?

If it isn't fun, if it doesn't add something positive to your life, don't waste your time.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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