

## Writing Clubs and Critique Groups: Good Thing or Bad

By Stephen Morrill

First some personal history: I started writing in 1982. First thing I did was look around my town (Tampa, Florida) for social support. Like, a writing club. Must be one, I reasoned. All cities have writing clubs.

Tampa didn't. But about the time I started looking, a fellow writer decided to start one. He called me — by 1983 I was already a regular in the local magazines so he could find my name — and he and I and two more magazine writers started the Tampa Writers Alliance. For a time I taught a nonfiction session each month and the club has been an ongoing concern ever since. I no longer attend meetings because:

- After thirty years, I pretty much know anything a beginner/amateur writing club would have to teach me and . . .
- It conflicts with my sailing club monthly meeting. I mean, that's not even a contest.

A few years later, in 1986, I joined the American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA). I had tried to join them earlier but they wouldn't let me in. ASJA has the toughest admittance standards of any national professional writing organization. It wasn't that I didn't have enough published credentials by 1985, it was that I hadn't been doing it long enough. So, like the little boy or girl whose playmates pull up the tree house ladder, I was frustrated. I didn't want to join the national associations that would have me; I wanted to be in the one that rejected me.

(OK, some of you recall Grouch Marx' comment, "I wouldn't join any club that would have me as a member?" I'm not Groucho. I have no shame.)

I did look at several other national societies. I looked at, attended a few meetings, but ultimately did not join SPJ. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has admittance standards too. At the time I had no problem joining them, though I don't know what their rules are today. It happened that the local chapter was all-TV all the time and we 'print pukers' were second class. SPJ also had absolute contempt for freelance journalists, an attitude they grew out of pretty quickly when a downturn in the economy, and drastic changes in the news business, turned half of them into freelancers.

But anyone can join the National Writers Union (NWU) and it's actually a union; UAW Local 1981 (Teamsters, believe it or not) is the only labor union that represents freelance writers. I joined them but quit after a year of being bombarded with demands that I do this for labor or that for labor or go out on strike for labor. I wanted advice and help in writing for magazines. Having some large truck drivers beating up my editor in a back alley didn't seem the way to go.

And here's a good list of writing societies in several countries:

<http://www.ebookcrossroads.com/writers-associations.html>

Pick an organization from that list and try it out. Try several.

I remained active in ASJA, which is a good fit for me and my nonfiction writing. Each of us should make that decision separately. In 1986, the golden doors swung wide and ASJA admitted me to their hallowed halls. I soon found a problem: There were no ASJA members nearby. So I started the Bay Area Professional Writing Guild (BAPWG) and that has been an ongoing concern ever since too.

What I learned from all this is that the general public has no clue what writers face in the pursuit of their hobby or work — but other writers do. And writing, as a job, really lacks in the social-contact department. An evening out with your fellow writers is something to look forward to all month. Some groups meet for breakfasts or lunches, some have formal evening events, some are large enough to do more.

I mentioned, in the headline, good or bad for you. While I am all in favor of writing clubs

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and attendance thereon, I also warn you to be true to yourself. When you hear advice, consider carefully if it's good advice for you in your circumstance. I have heard a lot of people say things that sounded just so...authoritative...that I thought it must be true. And it was, for some limited applications but not generally. When someone says, "All magazine editors want you to..." I think to myself, self, this guy don't know what he's talking about. But, then, I've been around a lot more editors than most people. I've been an editor for several magazines. And there is nothing that "all editors" want.

Fiction writers have it especially bad because one major reason for them to join writing clubs is to attend critique sessions where you read your work, a half-dozen people comment on it, and then you all read the next person's work, etc. Here the problem is that of the blind leading the blind. Any basketball or tennis player can tell you he or she never gets better playing against people who aren't better players. No one learns to swim in shallow water. Make up your own saying. What I have witnessed in these sessions is one person personally attacking an author instead of dispassionately critiquing the author's manuscript, or an author explaining that, "What I meant to write is..." to the critique group. None of that works. Ad hominem attacks don't make the manuscript better. And if you meant to write something then you should have written it. In my experience there are several sorts of critique groups in writing clubs:

**The Good:** A group with an experienced (in writing and in running such groups) moderator. That person is a ruthless dictator who sets the rules, enforces them, and sees to it that each member gets the most possible out of each and every critique session, be it of the member's own work or someone else's.

**The Bad:** A group with someone who thinks he or she is experienced but who really isn't. That person is a ruthless dictator who sets the rules, enforces them, and sees to it that his or her ego is stroked by the adoring members. The members get nothing from this.

**More Bad:** A groups where everyone loves your writing. They also love their own writing and the writing of every other person who joins up. Lots of love; little practical advice. This

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appeals to some writers because some writers think a critique should tell them how wonderful they are. If you wish to improve, walk away; you're not going to learn anything useful here. If all you want is to have your ego stroked, Send your work to Grandma Harriett. Harriett loves you.

The Ugly: A group where critiques turn into personal attacks upon one another, where people who have no clue about writing are advising other people who have no clue and where the moderator — if there even is one — has no clue how to run a meeting.

It helps to also be part of a critique group that specializes in your genre. You write mysteries? Try to talk to other mystery writers. Romance writers' advice may not be much use to you. (Realizing, of course, that most writing follows some common rules that are cross-genre.) If possible, look for similar writing to yours.

OK, you ask. So how to I join a writing club? In general, ask your local librarian—most writers groups seem to congregate in public libraries one can only wonder why. Or do an internet search on your home town and "writing club". And if you do not find one, start one. It's easy and you will soon have a new group of friends who actually understand your writing problems and joys.

**Stephen Morrill bio:** Stephen Morrill spent ten years as a forum moderator for the AOL writing club, then started several writing clubs, then started WritersCollege.com (<http://www.writerscollege.com>) an online writing school. He's seen all the above types of clubs and critique sessions — and has the scars to prove it.