

## EVERYONE'S A CRITIC: What to Expect When You Are Conferencing

by Hope Vestergaard

### **Paid manuscript reviews**

Try to listen and absorb what the editor has to say. Ask specific questions such as: What is this manuscript's biggest strength? Where does it need the most work? Do you have suggestions of writers whose work I might study? If your reviewer has no written comments for you, take notes **after** the conversation.

Reviewers generally have a full schedule. If you are ready for your appointed time and the reviewer appears engaged, knock lightly or make eye contact to signal your arrival. When your own fifteen minutes (or however long) are up, thank the reviewer for his or her time. (If you run out of things to discuss, ask questions about what kinds of manuscripts the publisher is seeking or upcoming projects they are excited about.)

Dutton Senior Editor **Mark McVeigh** adds his two cents: Remember that the editor is expressing their opinion. As this is only one person's opinion, there's no need to sway them to your side, make them understand why you did what you did or what you think you accomplished with this piece. In other words, don't talk about the work unless they ask. Use the time to pick their brains. You can use or ignore their advice later, but if you use the time to explain yourself you will have wasted your money. Talk about your writing with friends or writing group buddies.

Know—**KNOW**—that you will not sell your manuscript to the person who critiques it. They might ask to see it after revisions, but they won't buy it at the conference. Don't waste even one drop of energy thinking this way. Focus on the things you can accomplish, like getting an insider's POV on your manuscript.

### **Peer critiques**

Give every person and every comment the benefit of the doubt. Some people are more tactful or experienced critiquers than others, but the responses of "green" writers shouldn't be dismissed out of hand, nor should comments of published critiquers automatically be given full weight. Some specific pointers:

**Don't waste time** explaining your work or apologizing for it before people read. You are looking for feedback from fresh eyes. If you strongly disagree with someone's response, don't argue. Review their comments later when you're not feeling so hot under the collar. If you don't understand a comment, ask for clarification: paraphrase their statements, or ask for specific examples.

**Time management:** if you don't have a designated crit leader, elect someone to be the timekeeper. Figure out how much time you have per person and have the timekeeper remind the person being critiqued when time is short so he or she can get answers to pressing questions. If one person's comments tend to go on too long, the timekeeper may need to mark time for comments, too.

**Find something positive about every manuscript.** Is the story fresh? Does it have rich language? Is it an interesting subject? Critique groups at conferences are supposed to be encouraging experiences, but don't gush. Purely positive comments won't give the writer anything to work on. Try to make a critique sandwich: layer suggestions for improvement between opening and closing positive remarks.

## What to Look for When You Are Critiquing

There are two basic kinds of criticism: Big Picture and Little Picture.

**Big Picture** issues have to do with the elemental premise of a story and/or its execution. This kind of evaluation involves:

- **Characters:** Are they convincing? Compelling? Three-dimensional? Distinct from one another?
- **Plot:** Does the story have a clean narrative arc? Is the plot organic, or contrived?
- **Structure:** Does the format you chose for your story (age group, length, verse vs. prose, etc.) serve the story, or is the story constricted by the structure?
- **Freshness:** Is the author's treatment of the subject original and engaging?
- **Theme:** Do the characters, plot and structure contribute to a theme? Is it heavy-handed or subtle?
- **Marketability:** If the group focuses on publication, you have to consider the audience for each piece. Are there ways to make the story's appeal more universal? Or more specialized, if necessary?

**Little Picture** concerns are appropriate for a story with good bones, one that has already passed a big picture examination. It's counterproductive to zero in on the small picture while major story elements aren't fully developed. "Little" should not imply unimportant, however. These details and elements of a story can make it soar to the top of the slushpile—or crash before it even gets out of the hangar. Important points to ponder:

- **Mechanics:** Punctuation; manuscript format; spelling; grammar; word count. Presentation matters!
- **Literary devices:** Are your metaphors as fresh as they can be? If your story is in verse, does it have good meter? If your story involves repetition, is it used appropriately? If you anthropomorphize, does it serve the story?
- **Character development:** Whose story is this? Does the main character propel the plot forward, or is s/he a passive victim of circumstance?
- **Point of view:** Is the physical point of view (first person, third person limited, third person omniscient, etc.) the most effective narrative voice for this particular story?
- **Voice:** Is the narrative voice fresh? Distinct? Consistent? Appropriate?
- **Authenticity:** It's all in the details. Are historical elements accurate? Are the characters culturally authentic (in word and deed)?
- **Marketability:** what other works have been done in the same vein? What markets would be a good fit for this particular story?

*Parts of this article originally appeared in the 2005 Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market (Writer's Digest Books). Hope Vestergaard is the author of eight picture books and Weaving the Literacy Web: Creating Curriculum Based on Books Children Love (Redleaf, 2005). For more articles on the writing life, visit: [www.hopevestergaard.com](http://www.hopevestergaard.com)*