

## WEST HARTFORD FICTIONWRITERS / GROUP OPERATIONS

### THE PURPOSES OF THE WEST HARTFORD FICTIONWRITERS GROUP ARE...

1. To provide a nurturing and supportive cocoon for the creative process, in which Group members can feel comfortable in developing their talents and honing their writing skills.
2. To give writers friendly and constructive feedback on the ideas, plots, characters, structures and other elements of stories that they submit for review.
3. To also give friendly and constructive feedback on any submissions which are story-related, such as concepts, outlines, synopses, or pieces of larger works such as novels.
4. To provide a formal monthly group meeting for reviewing submissions, and for encouraging the cross-pollination of ideas that comes to a group from getting a variety of different individual perspectives.

### ENTRY INTO THE GROUP...

1. The West Hartford Fictionwriters Group is sponsored by the West Hartford Public Library, and its monthly meetings are open to all members of the public. You do not have to be a resident of West Hartford, or even Connecticut. The Group encourages visitors and prospective members to attend meetings to see if they would like to join.
2. If after coming to a meeting you decide to join the Group, log onto [www.westhartfordlibrary.org/writers/](http://www.westhartfordlibrary.org/writers/), use the link [Click to join Fiction Writers](#), and follow the instructions. Library representative Joe Cadieux (cadieux @ westhartford. org) or his delegate will approve the addition of your name and email address to the groupmail list. You then will automatically receive meeting minutes, notices of upcoming meetings and planned events, and stories that are in the queue for review.
3. If you'd like to actively engage in the review process in meetings before you've been formally added to the groupmail list, just ask the meeting moderator for the upcoming meeting to email you copies of stories that come into the queue -- the writers welcome all comments.
4. Commit to the Group your willingness to put in the time and effort to review materials in the queue for each meeting. Typically 2 to 6 hours per month is required.
5. After you have reviewed and commented on a couple of submissions to get the sense of how the group works, you are welcome to submit your own work into the queue.

### THE STORY SUBMISSION PROCESS IS...

1. When you judge your story (or other work) is ready for review, submit it by attaching it to an email addressed to [whfictionwriters@yahoogroups.com](mailto:whfictionwriters@yahoogroups.com). The first story to come into the queue is the first to be reviewed, normally.
2. The moderator (for the upcoming meeting) tracks submissions into the queue and judges what can be reasonably accommodated in the meeting time available. Typically, three short stories can be reviewed at one meeting. Longer works generally require more time.

3. The moderator advises you and the rest of the Group by email as to what will be reviewed at the upcoming meeting.

#### THE WRITER'S RESPONSIBILITIES ARE...

1. Submit your best work. This doesn't mean that a draft needs to be perfect, but take the work as far as you can yourself so you can be comfortable submitting it to the review of others. Of course, if you're having real trouble with something, or want to verify that a character or a portion of a story works before going on, by all means submit that to the Group for feedback and help.
2. Put the title of your work, your name, and the word count at the top of the first page. Number each page. No specific paragraph or font or margin formatting is required, but a common manuscript practice is to indent the first line of paragraphs a half-inch, use either double-spacing or space-and-a-half for line separation, set the margins to 1-inch all around, and select a font common to most text processors (e.g., Times New Roman) in 12-point size.
3. Save your work in Rich Text Format (.rtf) and submit it to the queue in that format; this eliminates most of the compatibility issues between different kinds of computers and text processor software. (Word, Word Perfect, Mac, and OpenOffice text processors all have an rtf option in the *Save As* menu.) Alternatively, you may submit your work as an Adobe portable document file (pdf). Free software is available to convert most documents to pdf format (see [www.primopdf.com](http://www.primopdf.com)).
4. Submit your work to the queue two weeks in advance of the meeting date whenever possible; that helps the meeting moderator with planning. Apply a name to your electronic document in the form of Author\_Title\_Mo-Dy-Yr (e.g., TWilliams\_StreetcarNamedDesire\_4-18-56). This will avoid confusion and help Group members keep their files straight if an update or revision is submitted later.
5. In your transmittal email, if you have specific questions or hope to get specific things out of the review, state clearly what they are. This is useful in guiding Group members to provide more focused feedback. Typically there are 3 to 5 questions that you would most like answered; some examples are provided in Addendum 1.
6. As a courtesy to any visitors or prospective new members, bring an extra paper copy of your work to the meeting if possible. Looking at hard copy helps them understand the meeting and review process, even though they're not commenting.
7. Except as noted below, during the review you should observe the zipped-lip policy as much as possible, so that the process can stay within the timeframe allocated and be fair to the other writer(s) being reviewed. That is...
  - Generally, do not comment on or respond to any reviewer's comments, except that -- with the guidance of the moderator as to available time -- the writer may ask follow-up questions or clarifications of the reviewer.
  - Do not argue with a reviewer, or say "but that's not what I meant". Their opinion is on the work as written, as they perceive it, and should be valued for what it is. (Besides, other reviewers may fully understand what you meant.)

- Remember that comments from other perspectives have such great value because they point out shortcomings or writer's blind spots. This is the point in submitting work for review -- as Bart Simpson says "no one can see his own butt". So keep a thick skin -- comments may be critical, but they're almost always honest and rarely malicious.
  - At the end of all reviewers' comments, you may respond about any points you feel strongly should be clarified, but keep it brief. Respect the next writer's need for equal review time.
8. In email communications, be respectful of possible sensitivities. If there is some pressing personal issue that needs to be brought up with a reviewer or other member of the group, make sure it is sent to the writer's personal email, not via the yahoo group email.

### THE MEETING PROCESS IS...

1. The Group meets monthly, typically the second Thursday of the month, at the West Hartford Public Library Main Branch, in the meeting room downstairs, from 7:00 to 8:45 PM. Members of the public are welcome to attend, whether or not they are residents of West Hartford or even Connecticut. Each meeting is run by a moderator, a rotating duty for which members volunteer.
2. Introductions/Announcements (5 or fewer minutes). Brief introduction of attendees, comments on current events of interest, projects people are working on, Connecticut writing events, upcoming writing contests, and so forth.
3. Group Business/Open Discussion (10 or fewer minutes). Suggestions for Group activities or things that should be considered for meeting topics, discussion and resolution of Group problems, and so forth. Members who have learned something of value about writing method or technique are encouraged to share quick summaries with the Group. Brief presentations with useful handouts are encouraged during this portion of the meeting. Consult the meeting moderator if it seems likely that more time will be required. Material that requires thought or consideration -- rather than a simple short announcement -- should be distributed to members via the groupmail; this can be done at any time during the month to avoid taking up meeting time.
4. Reviews (typically 90 minutes, but the moderator may elect to have discussions/activities on other topics if the material in the queue isn't sufficient to take up the full time). Submissions are discussed in the order received in the queue, unless the writers and moderator agree to arrange it differently. The review process typically runs as follows...
  - The Moderator briefly reiterates the rules -- reviewers play nice, always constructive; authors listen and take it all in without response except to ask for clarification when a reviewer's comment isn't understood.
  - The Author states (very briefly) what the story is about, the theme, why they wrote it, what they want to get out of the review (i.e., if feedback on any specific aspect is desired).
  - Reviewers make their comments, going around the room in order, as guided by the moderator, in a loose open format where other reviewers can add their thoughts, or jump

in where they especially agree with a particular point made (consensus on a particular point usually tells the writer something important). The Moderator keeps people from talking all at once.

5. Wrap-Up (last 5 minutes). The moderator states the time and place of the next meeting, and solicits a volunteer to moderate it.

#### THE REVIEWER'S RESPONSIBILITIES ARE...

1. Give a story the same careful attention you would like your own material to get.
2. Focus on substance rather than form, since that provides the most value. Limit your comments to several major points, and be succinct. If you agree with another reviewer's comment just say so; that's very valuable information but it doesn't need to be restated. (However, when doing a markup of the copy you come across errors in format, syntax, grammar or spelling, note those on the paper copy -- it's helpful to the writer in polishing the work.)
3. Always begin with a positive comment. We are here to support each other.
4. If the writer has asked you to consider specific points, try to do that. These are the points foremost on the writer's mind and reviewers can help by giving them close attention. However, this should not be done to the exclusion of all else, because it might narrow the review too much. A list of useful points to consider for story evaluation is provided in Addendum 1.
5. If you feel strongly as a reviewer that there is a serious problem the writer should consider, take the time to email them directly (to their personal email, not via the yahoogroup email).
6. If you just haven't had time to do an adequate review, you may pass. But keep in mind that the level of effort you put into a review will likely be reciprocated when you submit your own story to the Group for review.
7. If you can't make a meeting but still want to comment, that's perfectly fine, and is encouraged; just send the writer an email with an electronic markup of their story (but to their personal email, not via the yahoogroup email).
8. Always, always bear in mind that creative works, particularly in their beginnings, are delicate things. They need to be nurtured and encouraged. There always are positive ways to couch your comments and critiques. Useful guidelines are provided in Addendum 2.
9. If you've done a markup, or have written comments, be sure to give them to the writer after the review session. It's very helpful, in revising a work at some future point, to know exactly what a reviewer said -- a writer's scribbled notes rarely capture it all.
10. Never offer a critical comment directed at the writer rather than the writing. In email communications, be respectful of possible sensitivities. If there is some pressing personal issue that you feel needs to be brought up, make sure it is sent to the writer's personal email, not via the yahoogroup email.
11. Respect that a submitted work is the writer's intellectual property, and do not distribute it outside the group without the writer's permission.

## THE MEETING MODERATOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES ARE...

1. Determine in advance of the meeting if any items of open discussion need some time allocated, and adjust the meeting agenda accordingly. Query each reviewee as to their preference for the type of review process they want. The Moderator for a meeting has full control over what stories get reviewed and what other business gets conducted, and in what sequence. Three short stories can generally be accommodated; a longer work might take up an entire session. The Moderator may suggest an outside-the-meeting review process conducted by volunteer members of the Group; members typically are quite generous in volunteering their time.
2. Make sure *prospective* member of the group (who haven't yet attended a few meetings and/or aren't yet on the groupmail list) get a copy of all stories in the queue sent to their individual email addresses.
3. If not enough submitted material is in the queue, solicit the Group for ideas -- such as presentations (by Group members or invited guests), writing exercises, or other skill-honing devices or opportunities for ongoing learning. Incorporate the ones you believe would be appropriate and fun into the meeting agenda. Gentle anarchy is a good guiding principle.
4. At the meeting, pass out an attendance sheet and do *Introductions* (as necessary) – ask any visitors or prospective new members their names and a few words about themselves and what brought them here, and then go around the table with names and brief bio's.
5. Ask for any *Announcements/Issues of Current Interest* – anybody with a useful item to report offers it – workshops, presentations, contests, etc. Limit discussion if it starts running too long.
6. Ask if there's any *Group Business* that needs to be conducted – anybody with a suggestion on running meetings or bringing in speakers or anything similar that ought to be bounced off the group for discussion does so.
7. Briefly reiterate the rules of review:
  - reviewers play nice, always constructive;
  - authors don't talk, just listen and take notes (unless they've elected to do it differently);
  - reviewers round robin comments, succinctly stated, just on key major points (what they really liked, what worked for them; what were the biggest problems or issues; what's the best thing they could offer the author to concentrate on improving or considering).
8. Ask the author to state (very briefly):
  - what the story is about (in a nutshell of preferably one or two sentences), or some kind of orienting background if it's a piece of a longer work or a novel;
  - what's the genre;
  - why they wrote it;
  - anything special they want to get out of the review (i.e., if feedback on any specific aspect is desired).
9. Keep the meeting on track. This includes keeping track of the review process and watching the clock to make sure that each writer gets their allocated review time. If a review starts to

run too long, ask reviewers to expedite their comments, then cut the review process off if it runs out of time. As a courtesy to Library (or other building) personnel who have to close up, the meeting should be concluded at 8:45 PM. Any reviews not completed may be carried over to the next meeting if necessary.

10. Cut down reviewer redundancy (politely) if necessary. Hearing the same point over again after it has been made once or twice slows down the process and is not particularly helpful to the writer. Reviewers can and should say simply that they agree with a previous reviewer on that point (unless there's another distinct angle to it, which of course they should share).
11. Wrap Up by stating the time and place of the next meeting, and solicit a volunteer to moderate it. Give the attendance sheet to the next meeting moderator, so that any new members not yet on the groupmail list can get materials put in the queue. The meeting must wrap up 15-minutes before Library closing time, so that Group members can return tables and chairs to their positions as-found prior to the meeting.

*Note: The Moderator is a rotating duty, and any member who has been through a review of their own submission is encouraged to moderate. It's healthy for group process.*

ADDENDUM 1 / SPECIFIC TYPICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT STORIES (adapted from Gotham Writers Workshop, with permission given for reproduction).

Characters – the people in the story

- Are the characters interesting? Sympathetic?
- Are the characters dimensional, or one-note?
- Are the characters well drawn? Are you able to “see” them?
- Is there enough character: action, dialogue, appearance, thought?
- Are the characters distinctive, different from each other?
- Does the protagonist have a strong desire?
- Does the protagonist grow or change?

Plot – the sequence of events

- Is the plot interesting? Dramatic? Is a good story being told?
- Is there enough conflict?
- Does enough “happen”?
- Is there a logical flow to the plot?
- Does the story move forward? Does the tension increase?
- Is there a strong enough climax?
- Are any parts of the plot unnecessary? Are any necessary parts missing?
- Is exposition limited, and provided effectively?

Description – the way things are described

- Are the descriptions effective?
- Is there too much or too little description?
- Do the descriptions utilize the senses? Are they specific?
- Are adjectives and adverbs overused? Are the nouns and verbs strong enough?
- How is the use of figurative language (metaphor, simile, etc.)?
- Are clichés being used or portrayed?

Dialogue – what the characters say

- Is there too much dialogue or not enough?
- Is there enough use of “scene”?
- Does the dialogue sound natural?
- Is the dialogue rambling?
- Is the use of “stage directions” – the staging of the dialogue scenes -- minimized?
- Does the dialogue reflect the characters?
- Is the dialogue too “on the nose” – where characters always say what they mean?

Setting – the place and time

- Is the story grounded enough in place? In time?
- Is there too much or too little setting description?
- Does the setting enhance the emotion or mood of the scene?

Pacing – the manipulation of time

- Are there sections that should be cut, or moved through more quickly?

- Are there sections that should be slowed down?
- Are there too many flashbacks?

Theme – the underlying meaning

- Does there seem to be a clear point to the story?
- Is the theme too heavy-handed?
- Is the theme dramatized by the plot?

ADDENDUM 2 / GUIDELINES ON HOW TO GIVE STORY NOTES WITHOUT DISCOURAGING THE WRITER (adapted from David S. Freeman, with permission given for reproduction).

1. Remember, you have just one function: to help. Are you truly helping or hurting (i.e., unleashing misplaced cynicism at the writer)? If you remember you're there to help, a lot of potential dangers to the writer will disappear.
2. Don't just point out problems; give solutions. And give good ones, or even brilliant ones. If you can't, become a stock broker or plumber. What are you doing giving story notes?
3. Even stories with problems take time to write. It's always good to say to the writer something like, "I see you put a lot of time into this..." before going on to other comments. Even if the story seems poorly written, it probably took the writer a lot of time and this should be acknowledged and appreciated.
4. To only find fault is to make the writer feel he or she can't do anything right. Therefore, balance your critiques with your praises. (And usually lead with the praises.)
5. Don't say "These changes won't require much work." Sometimes it's true. But just as often, you have no idea how much work might be required. Often, when the writer changes one thing in a story, he or she now has to go ahead and make changes all over the place to make that first change work.
6. When focusing on a problematic area of the story, deflect the comments (especially the negative ones), from the writer to the writing.
7. No matter how gentle you are, the writer WILL feel a little let down after your notes, because he or she almost always thinks (before showing you the story) that it's just about ready and will soon bring him or her fame and fortune.
8. NEVER forget it's much easier to give great story notes than to write a great story. Tell this to the writer if he or she is putting you up on a pedestal. Remind the writer that his or her job is harder. Mean it, and say it so they understand that in fact this is the truth.
9. Commend the writer for having the courage to pursue art; most people aren't nearly brave enough to do so.