

# SETTING UP A GROUP GUIDE



**ROMANCE**  
**WRITERS**  
*of Australia*

# INFORMATION FOR WRITERS' GROUPS

Romance Writers of Australia, Inc.

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## AIMS AND BENEFITS OF A GROUP

Writing is usually a solitary occupation. Romance Writers of Australia exists so we can support and encourage each other to achieve publication. There are obvious benefits in belonging to a group where the members are fellow romance writers, who have understanding and empathy for the genre.

Joining a support group can help motivate you to write. Members may read each other's work, for critique and feedback; share information and industry news; work together on improving their writing craft; share the highs and lows of the writer's profession and develop friendships.

## Group Classification

To qualify as an RWA Group, the group coordinator must be an RWA member in good standing, and at least 75% of group members must be members of RWA.

This does not prevent individual groups from stipulating that all members of their group shall be current members of RWA, or that more than 50% shall be RWA members.

It is important that RWA membership of the groups be as high as possible. Volunteers run the association, and membership growth makes it possible to continue to provide valuable support and services.

Any groups consisting of 75% or more RWA members is classed as a RWA-Affiliate group, and are eligible to apply for group grants, when the grants are made available. Any group consisting of less than 75% RWA members is classed as a RWA-Associate group, and are ineligible to apply for group grants when grants are made available.

## STEPS TO ESTABLISH A GROUP

### Contact RWA Group Liaison

The Group Liaison will try to match groups and interested RWA members and advertise for interested members in a particular area, via HeartsTalk magazine, or the RWA google groups.

Email: [groupliaison@gmail.com](mailto:groupliaison@gmail.com)

## Contact other writers.

You can start a group with only two interested people. You may find new members by:

- contacting the local paper and advising that you are starting a group - they may do a short article, which can raise interest
- putting up notices in places like libraries and bookshops, particularly any specialising in romance books
- visiting a local community college where a romance writing class may be held
- Reaching out via the RWA E-groups listed in the Resources section below.

## Find a suitable venue.

For Face-to-Face (F2F) groups, a suitable venue could be:

- Someone's house, perhaps alternating between members' houses.
- A community property - contact your local Council, or Community Centre, or the local library for free meeting rooms. Some groups feel more comfortable with a 'neutral' venue.
- A small function room, which can be hired at a modest cost. Small clubs such as bowling clubs often have suitable rooms.

For online groups, there are several services available. This list is not exhaustive, but you could:

- Create a Facebook group
- Create an IO Group
- Create a Google Group - RWA may be able to assist with this via GSuite
- Correspond via an email chain
- Share documents via a drop-box
- Have F2F meetups via Zoom or other video-conferencing options.

## Hold the first meeting:

Make the first meeting longer, taking time to introduce yourselves and discuss how you see the group working and what you want to gain. Questions to answer include:

How often do you want your group to meet? Some groups meet weekly, some fortnightly and the majority probably monthly.

Decide on the duration of the meetings - usually 2-3 hours.

Numbers - often 6-10 members is found to be most workable. When the number dwindles, add new members one at a time on a trial basis to ensure a mutual fit.

Discuss group structure and possible meeting format. Members can take in turns moderating the meeting or acting as timekeeper. Defining roles and some structure keeps the group focussed.

Give your group a name.

Circulate group names and addresses between members.

Each attendee should share any costs of the meeting room, coffee, etc. Payment in advance encourages commitment.

Register the group with the Group Liaison.

## **FORMAT FOR GROUP MEETINGS**

There is no right way to run a group, just many models that serve different writers' needs. Many group meetings are a mix of activities. For example:

### **Networking, supportive exchange of information.**

Many groups set aside 15 to 30 minutes at the start of the meeting for general conversation, news, market information, swapping books etc. The coordinator may do a round table on what everyone has been writing since the last meeting.

### **Discussion of craft questions and writing technique practice.**

Draw up a calendar of topics, and members can take turns to present workshops or lead discussions. Topics could include:

- Discuss books members have read recently.
- Workshop articles from HeartsTalk magazine.
- Practise transposing narrative into dialogue.
- Write a scene using as many of the senses as possible.
- Try the exercises in a 'How to' book on writing.
- Analyse a published novel and write a synopsis.
- Write a scene, working in a description of hero and heroine.
- Do the same, working description of the setting into a scene.
- Contrast different ways problems are handled in published books.
- Brainstorm plot ideas or character motivation as a group. This can free up thought process and idea associations, which increases creativity.

### **Critique of work.**

Groups need to establish a format for the critique process. For example:

- The number of pages to be critiqued. Ten pages per person per meeting is an average amount. It is important that each person should have the same amount of critique time devoted to his or her piece.
- Some members prefer to critique at meetings, keeping home time for writing, and because they believe reading aloud helps catch errors and establish the rhythm of writing, especially dialogue.
- Others find it easier to concentrate if they e-mail or post writing around to the other members of the group between meetings, and write comments on the work. Alternatively, take the work home and return it at the next meeting. Request that reviewers mark their comments onto each piece if they review it in advance of the meeting. It can be immensely helpful to the writer.
- Established groups may interview applicant's writing, to ensure a match with groups experience level and expectations. Others consider the new member's level of commitment more important.

- Some groups have a firm rule that no one may critique another's work unless their work is being critiqued as well. This provides a writing incentive and puts everyone on equal footing.

### **Set goals for the next meeting.**

The moderator might record at the end of the meeting what each member hopes to accomplish in their own writing before the next meeting. Goals are more likely to be achieved once spoken out loud and written down. Long term goals, for the year or more, help keep your writing on track and measure progress.

## **CRITIQUES**

Critiquing is cited often as the most valuable activity of a group, so it is worth considering the process in depth.

The numerous advantages of critique groups include:

- A critique is just one other person's opinion. The advantage of the group is gaining many opinions; if several agree, then it may well indicate a problem area in the writing.
- Objectivity about your own writing is difficult, maybe impossible. Without feedback, self-doubt may cloud your vision and you can get lost in endless rewrites and revisions.
- During a dry spell, a comment or suggestion from another member may inspire you and help you regain perspective.
- Exposing yourself to a variety of forms and styles will hone your analytical skills for editing your own work. Learning is usually accelerated when working with others.
- Aside from seeing the problems, it's also good to see what is working, how your work affects others and if your intentions are coming through. Your critique group are your test readers. You can see if they were involved and moved.

### **CRITIQUE METHOD:**

The type of critique depends on what the writer wants. Generally, it is not a line edit of punctuation, spelling and grammar, unless that is what the writer requests. (Often line editing is helpful when a work is nearly finished, to pick up things like awkward phrasing and repetitions, of words, phrases, actions, even sentence structures.)

Aspects of the work to comment on include:

- Characters - are they real, appealing, fully developed, consistent, convincing, well motivated?
- Conflict - is it strong, multi-layered, credible?
- Plot - Is it believable, surprising, intriguing, weak or clichéd, suspenseful, good opening and closing hooks? Events foreshadowed?
- Point of View - Is it consistent, clear, with smooth transitions?

- Style - Is it tightly written, sensual, emotive, evocative imagery? Active verbs used? Any author intrusion?
- Dialogue - Does it flow, sound natural, reflect character, serve several purposes in the story.
- Pacing - does it draw you in, hold your attention, drag in places, start at the wrong place? Over or under detailed?
- The romance - How well is it developing? Does it involve the reader? Is the sexual tension strong throughout?

Be positive and constructive. Start first with what is working well, and point out which bits worked best. This gives a positive direction. You are not trying to find what is wrong, but rather what is right, and how to do more of it.

Then move on to what can be improved. A critique that was all praise would be as useless as negativity. The more specific you can be, the more helpful it will be to the writer. Unless a writer wants a brainstorming session, focus comments on your initial reactions to the work. Offer suggestions for changes--but only go into detail if asked.

Finally, allow time for the writer to ask clarifying questions. Since the purpose of the group is to give the writer feedback on the work, most of the time is on the group's comments. Does the writer have any question or problem that the group could perhaps help with?

## **CRITIQUE GUIDELINES**

Writers have fragile egos. This person has trusted you with their work, and deserves honesty tempered with encouragement. Encouragement is the key to growth.

You are a critique partner -- not a teacher. You're responding to a piece, not correcting it. Ask questions about anything that may not make sense to you. By posing questions, you give the writer a fresh perspective on their own work.

The writer's individual voice is their most valuable asset. That voice is the spark of difference an editor seeks. Over prescriptive application of rules can squash the writer's individuality. Listen to the writer's voice -- don't suggest they try to write or sound more like you.

Subject matter is personal. You don't have to like a story to give it a fair critique. If members of the group are targeting different lines or genres, it often helps avoid a sameness of group voice developing.

Critiquing the work of others requires balance. Being too nice will not help your fellow writers develop their work; being too harsh can crush a writer's ego. Point out one thing you like (a phrase, a description, an idea) for each thing that bothered you.

Whenever possible, be specific when pointing out things that you didn't like. Don't just say "I didn't like this part" or "I'd cut that," tell the writer its specific strengths. Evaluate rather than criticise. Vague negative comments are useless and destructive.

Feel free to tell the writer the work is wonderful and that nothing needs changing.



## RECEIVING CRITIQUES

How you handle critiques you receive is just as important as how you give them to others. When receiving a critique, here are a few things to bear in mind:

Don't argue with someone's critique of your work. Listen to how your written words have been received.

Your writing is being critiqued, not you.

Explain only if necessary. Don't rebut.

Wait until everyone has finished critiquing before making comments.

Take notes. It's a good idea to write down all feedback, even if it sounds completely wrong. It may make sense later.

If you consider the criticism wrong, just say "Thank you", and move on. A critique is just an opinion.

If everyone in the group makes the same comment, consider the possibility they may be right.

Ask questions. Many people know when something is wrong with a manuscript, though they may not know what. They may tell you the most obvious problem, but often that is only a symptom of a deeper ailment. Asking deeper, more probing questions can help you find the real malady.

Consider the impact of the criticism. You must understand your vision of your book in order to understand when a suggestion threatens its integrity. Then you will be in a position to take from critiques only what you need, and change only the things that feel right.

When you receive a critique on a partial of the manuscript, weigh the value of the comments and/or suggestions in context of your vision of the entire novel. If you create as you go, without detailed planning, you may find critique on a manuscript in progress frustrating. A critique of the finished draft or work may be more useful.

Time spent on your critique could have been spent on your critiquer's own work. Even if you disagree with every word the critiquer says, recognize the critique for what it is - a gift.

## POTENTIAL DIFFICULTIES IN A GROUP AND SOLUTIONS

A vital creative group will inevitably develop tensions at some stage. Establishing clear mechanisms for resolving conflict is essential.

**Clearly establish the group's expectations of new members, either through written by-laws, or informally.**

For example:

Members must be working seriously on fiction, and be actively pursuing publication. If a member lacks a commitment to the group, they will not contribute, and may be competitive, destructive or defensive.

Members must be able to consistently attend the meetings or notify another member of absence. Group members need to trust each other's judgement. Those who attend regularly develop understanding of each other's work, their strengths and weaknesses. Others may not feel as comfortable with someone who attends meetings sporadically.

A group may not be able to provide everything that one member requires to assist their writing process. Sometimes a member may belong to two different groups, and get different things from each one.

### **Establish a protocol for dealing with breaches.**

For example:

Memberships can be revoked---for failure to follow critiquing guidelines, or by a general vote of the other members. One of the easiest ways to do this is to clearly establish a trial period for new members, to ensure a fit with the group.

Try a general email message before a meeting, describing problems experienced within the group, but without naming members. Suggest and discuss general solutions at the meeting to involve all members. Sometimes, what seems to be a major problem is a minor misunderstanding blown out of proportion.

Dealing with overbearing or disruptive personalities. If general discussion has not resolved problems, the leader or mediator should talk to the member as diplomatically as possible about the behaviour and its effect on the group. If this is difficult, then put the problems in writing from the whole group. If a group is working well for most members, don't let one difficult person cause it to fold. Any member of a group can contact the RWA Group Liaison if they feel the need of mediation or assistance to overcome difficulties.

Sometimes a group just isn't right for you or the stage you have reached with your writing. If you feel a group is being destructive to your writing, or preventing you from writing, then leave. No group is better than the wrong one. Contact the Group Liaison and see if there is another group in your area.

## **KEEP THE CREATIVE SPARK ALIVE**

A Routine can become a rut. Try some of the following to re-energise your group:

- Assign a writing exercise each meeting.
- Hold joint meetings with nearby groups.
- Invite visiting writers or specialist speakers.
- Organise an annual retreat, over a weekend. Subsidy may be available from State or Local Council grants.
- View a movie together, then read the script or discuss the story.
- Enter a contest and discuss approaches.
- Compile a collection of query letters, or rejection letters
- Have special awards or recognition when a writer passes a milestone
- Practice pitching your WIP, (work in progress), to each other.
- Attend conferences and workshops together.
- Review the group regularly. Take a half-hour every six months to discuss what's going well, what would improve your group, and members' concerns.
- Support each other to do 'Book in a Week' or 'Book in a Month' sessions of concentrated effort.
- Meet occasionally for a full day of work on individual projects.

## RESOURCES

The RWA HeartsTalk magazine is a wonderful resource that arrives in your letterbox each month, with market news, articles on writing craft, author interviews, competitions, local contacts and inspiration.

### Publishers

Most publishers now have a web presence.

### Internet

#### RWA

The RWA website at <http://www.romanceaustralia.com> has articles, interviews, up-to-date news on bulletin boards, contest information and many useful links to author, publisher, and general writing internet addresses.

Check the Links section on the RWA website for links to other writers' organisations and online colonies including Romantic Novelists Association (UK), RWAmerica, and Romance Writers of New Zealand.

#### RWA E-Groups

The RWA or RWA affiliated E-Groups are a great place to connect with other RWA members socially and could be a source of new members.

There are several Facebook communities:

- The RWA Facebook Community at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/RWACommunity>
- The RWA Wordcount Warriors at [https://www.facebook.com/groups/384123381970479/?multi\\_permaLinks=1238571586525650](https://www.facebook.com/groups/384123381970479/?multi_permaLinks=1238571586525650)
- The Historical loop - contact the RWA Group Liaison

There is also an IO Group for Paranormal authors - contact the RWA Group Liaison.

The RWA Aspiring category has a google e-mail loop for all RWA members for online exchange of news and information. You can join by contacting the moderator: Dannielle Line at [aspiring@romanceaustralia.com](mailto:aspiring@romanceaustralia.com). This google group holds regular events including:

- BIAWeek - for RWA members who want to join in the occasional online Book in a Week. This is usually run from the google group and moderated by a willing volunteer.
- Monthly Zoom - for RWA members who want to join in a live video call on the first Wednesday of the month to

- Q&A - where a guest author is invited into the group for a weekend to answer questions about their career and experiences.

## Writer Sites

Internet sites come and go. Here are a few to get you started (this list does not pretend to be exhaustive):

<http://www.rosecityromancewriters.com>

<http://www.writing-world.com>

<http://www.likesbooks.com>

[https://wordwenches.typepad.com/word\\_wenches/](https://wordwenches.typepad.com/word_wenches/)

## Books

A survey of RWA members produced a list of popular 'how to' books that members have used or continue to use. The list follows:

*Write Great Fiction: Plot & Structure: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot That Grips Readers From Start to Finish*

Bell, James Scott - Writers Digest Books, 2004

Detailed on plotting; advanced

*Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself Into Print*

Browne, Renni & King, Dave - HarperCollins, 2004

"Lots of good suggestions for those finishing touches. Provides insights to see my own writing afresh. Reading this was the first time I really understood 'show don't tell'."

*Writing Romantic Fiction*

Clair, Daphne & Donald, Robyn - A & C Black (London), 1999

"Sensible and practical tips and examples from their own books. Friendly and not at all daunting."

*The Secret of Successful Romance Writing*

Darcy, Emma - Arrow Books, 1995

50% of survey respondents said this had lots of good information. (May be difficult to obtain – check your library)

*How to Write a Damn Good Novel: A Step-by-Step No Nonsense Guide to Dramatic Storytelling*

Frey, James N - Papermac, 1988

"...characters, conflict and premise all clearly explained with excellent examples."

"...clear lessons on inner conflict, story premise, and what makes a dramatic story."

"...a must-read for any new writer."

*Writing Romance*

Grant, Vanessa - Self-Counsel Press, 2001 (2nd ed.)

"...probably one of the most practical and easiest how-tos I've read. Excellent for newbies and experienced writers alike."

"...character, conflict explained. Offers a good way to keep the story on track (use a premise). The '7 deadly mistakes' is a useful set of 'rules'."

*An Introduction to Romance Writing*

Jacobs, Anna - TPT Technical Publications, 1997

50% of respondents said this had lots of good information.

*On Writing: A Memoir*

King, Stephen - Hodder & Stoughton, 2000

"Succinct. I didn't need to read other books after this one – and he is a master of popular fiction."

"What better than to hear it from a best-seller! You don't have to write his genre to understand that all writers are the same. The best line - "If you think the muse fairy is going to come along and sprinkle dust on you – you have no right being here! Writing is hard work!... so true!"

"Helped with my first complete ms because it made me realise I could just write and see where the story took me. I didn't need to have the plot and characters completely developed to get started."

*Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*

Krentz, Jayne Ann (Editor) - University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992

"Great insight into what works in heroes and heroines."

*Writing the Breakout Novel Workbook*

Maass, Donald - Writer's Digest Books, 2004

"...the workbook is an invaluable tool to examine the craft of making fiction : planning, writing and editing."

"...liked Maass' presentation at the conference in Melbourne. The workbook is highly accessible and full of good hints (e.g. resist the urge to explain – RUE!)"

*Story*

McKee, Robert - Methuen, 1999

"Best textbook on story construction by far."

"Provides all the basic lessons e.g. 3-act story structure and how it works; what makes a scene work; encourages stronger turning points for a more dramatic story."

*Everything I Know About Writing*

Marsden, John - Mandarin, 1994

"Good basic how-to to improve writing. Great examples throughout."

*Novel Writing – 16 Steps to Success*

Marshall, Evan - A & C Black, London, 2004

"A very methodical approach, useful especially when structuring and (much later) editing."

*Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing: A Novelist Looks at His Craft*

Morrell, David - Writer's Digest Books, 2002

"Very well written, very readable, a raconteur-ish ride. Asks the reader to stop writing about what you know. If what you know is how to be a student in a class discussing books, go out and find out what it is you need to know."

"Useful 'cos it dispelled the 'write what you know' myth."

*Conflict, Action & Suspense (The Elements of Fiction Writing)*

Noble, William - Writers Digest Books, 1994

"Romance is all about conflict, and I just found this book clicked for me. Not specific for romance, but full of tips and tricks to set the stage, build suspense, hooks, chapter endings etc."

*The Art of Romance Writing*

Parv, Valerie - Allen & Unwin, 2004

80% of survey respondents said this was useful, particularly for category romance.

*The Writer's Journey*

Vogler, Christopher - Pan, 1999 (2nd ed.)

"Shows a great way of thinking about the structure of story using archetypes."

"Since reading this, the mythic structure forms part of planning every story I write. Thinking about a character's function in the story strengthens his/her role."

*Writing a Romance Novel for Dummies*

Wainger, Leslie - Wiley Publishing Inc, 2004

"Written by current executive editor for Harlequin/Silhouette. Traditional 'dummies' format with tips, warnings, remember (for important bits of information) and technical stuff. Simple to read, easy to pick up and put down."

"Heaps of tips and very practical do's and don'ts from a Harlequin editor. Everyone needs to read this one so they don't make all the silly mistakes that others have had to learn the hard way."

*First Draft in 30 Days*

Wiesner, Karen S - *Writer's Digest Books*, 2005

"Mapping out everything you need so you have a complete book: from idea germ, characterisation, settings, the whole lot – makes you think of things you wouldn't have known to think of."

## **SOME CRITIQUE GROUP EXPERIENCES**

### **Melissa James**

Australian author Melissa James, writing for Silhouette Intimate Moments, has found her writers groups invaluable.

Maybe I'd have been published without my Critique Partners, all four that I've had along the way. I don't know. All I know is, the journey would have been far lonelier and more insecure without their invaluable input and constant friendship to lighten the load. Same for my writers' group.

All of us had this unspoken accord that we'd tell each other what didn't make sense, what needed explanation or addition, what needed to be stronger or more subtle - or, (in my case), when words were repeated too often. No defensiveness or hard feelings - rather, mutual gratitude. We've plot-stormed ideas and talked through problems. We've all had absolute respect for each other's work and style, and are still friends now in the case of those who moved on.

None of us fiddle with the other's voice; we just say what doesn't make sense to us as readers, or give ideas for inclusion, or ask questions about the book in ways that make us think.

I think critique partners can work wonderfully, given the premise of mutual respect. It's not easy to find at times, but when you do, it's like gold.

## Anne Gracie

### *Critique groups -- a personal experience*

I love my critique group. It's small, but we're all good friends and we have a lot of fun at our fortnightly meetings. And over the last few years we have learned an awful lot from each other and as a group. We are now completely comfortable with each other, we know each other's strengths and weakness and we are committed to helping each other achieve the best we can.

Nowadays we don't pull our punches -- if something doesn't seem to be working we say so. And then we brainstorm possibilities of why it's not working and how the writer might be able to fix it. But most of what we do is encourage each other to keep going.

Writers are fragile. We are plagued by self doubt. A critique group must put the positive writing attitude of members first and foremost.

I've been in a group where a few people acted as experts. They criticised every mistake and shaky area ruthlessly and with confidence -- stressing that it was for our own good, and that they were helping us on the road to publication.

Only it didn't work that way. Within a few meetings, only a couple of us were still producing work for critique. The others had stopped. The criticism was too devastating. It destroyed their confidence.

I'm not saying that the criticism wasn't valid -- much of it was. However, it just wasn't sensitive to the fragile egos of new writers. With hindsight, I don't think they meant to be so negative and off-putting. I think they were so excited by their newfound knowledge that they just couldn't wait to show it off and share it. But in their enthusiasm, they nearly trampled our writing to death.

I also think the focus of their criticism was skewed. They concentrated on finding errors to correct and focused too much on technical aspects of the writing process and getting stuff 'perfect'.

Critiquing is not about fixing mistakes:

An editor will respond not to technical competence or otherwise, but to the content — the characters, the voice, the story. An editor knows that technical problems can be fixed, but creating lively and interesting characters is not so easy or straightforward.

Critiquing another's work is a difficult and delicate task. It is important to respect another's work and to respect their individual style and voice— it may be that which sells their work in the end.

It is very easy to get carried away with what you see as vital knowledge and try to force it on other people.



And urban myths proliferate about what is needed to get published. People quote such things as, 'you must have 50% dialogue,' or 'you must have a sex scene before chapter 6'. I think that's nonsense. The publishers keep saying they want fresh, lively stories and that there is no formula and they mean it. I think they will accept whatever works, as long as it is a good, emotional story.

It's important to write what you like reading. And therefore you must write to please yourself. Never forget whose story it is! Your critique partners make comments based on their knowledge and preferences, but in the end they are just readers — readers with writing skills and knowledge perhaps, but it is still your story.

You have to learn when to listen and when to follow your own instincts. You need to learn who to listen to and about what. Become aware of the various skills of your partners, learn who has an ear for dialogue, who can create strong characters, who has an eye for dodgy motivation and learn from them.

As well as focusing on the individual pieces we bring for critique, our group looks at the big picture — where does this fit in, how does it follow on from the previous scene(s), how is the story as a whole shaping up? We share ideas about what makes a good romance, what we think works and doesn't work. We thrash out motivation and plot problems and whether a character's response to a situation is the best response s/he could make.

Honesty is crucial. So is trust and it takes time to develop both. You need to know that your critique partners care about you and want you to succeed. My critique partners are pretty tough these days — but we've reached the point where we trust each other absolutely. It's taken a few years to get to that stage.

We're really supportive of each other, and have committed ourselves to each other's success, as well as our own. When one of us slacks off or becomes despondent, the others try to get her back on track. We're fairly tough on each other's writing now — but it's an encouraging sort of tough. And we always, always, always mention the positives.