

CPL Adult Fiction Workshop Etiquette

(With thanks to Rafael Frumkin)

Do:

- Offer feedback geared toward specific *craft choices* (i.e. what can be done in terms of story mechanics like dialogue, scene, plot, character, syntax, etc. to make the story more effective for you as a reader)
- Meet the story *on its terms*. Ask the author questions about what they want to accomplish in their story, then tailor your advice to the author’s specific goals and needs. We’re trying to help each other achieve our respective visions, not impose our own ideas or preferences on each others’ work.
- Read like a writer. You are a writer helping another writer ply their craft, not someone on Goodreads airing grievances about characters that didn’t suit their tastes or objecting to the use of profanity in the narrative. Even if another writer’s genre/plot/writing style is not your personal preference, you can read it with an eye to providing practical feedback.
- Be respectful of the author and each other. Even when you can tell that a story needs a lot of work, there are all kinds of gentle and supportive ways to share that information with another writer—ways that will give them useful perspective and a direction forward instead of making them feel torn down.
- Use “I” language (“I was confused by the lack of dialogue tags”) as opposed to “you” language (“You didn’t use enough dialogue tags”) when giving feedback whenever possible. This helps avoid pointing fingers at the author, figuratively or literally, while giving feedback. It also allows for your critique to be centered in your reactions as a reader, which are always valid, rather than what you think the author is doing “wrong,” which is *not* always valid.

Don’t:

- Offer *ad hominem* and/or judgmental-sounding feedback. Giving feedback on a piece of writing is neither an opportunity to attack the author as a person nor an opportunity to level judgments about the writer’s themes, ideas, or writing ability. Remember, you’re all in this together as authors, so be mindful of that and be respectful of each other!
- Use workshop as an occasion to purge personal demons. Workshop is a time to focus on the fiction piece at hand and how to help the author develop it, *not* to share grievances or extensive personal experiences triggered by the piece.
- Make jokes at the author/each other’s expense. This one’s pretty self-explanatory!