

19. Working together

Joining a writers' group is the best way for new writers to get feedback on their work. Often it's the only way – editors and publishers seldom have the time to comment on rejected manuscripts, and the writer is left wondering whether the work is bad, or simply not suitable for that particular market.

These days there are two types of writers' groups – on-line and face-to-face – and each has different advantages. The strength of on-line groups is that the work is presented as it would be on the printed page, and the audience's response is therefore unaffected by a reader's vocal nuances, which can add to the text. What you see is what you get. The great advantage of face-to-face groups is that the author who is reading his or her own work can soon tell when the audience loses interest – this is one of the quickest ways of identifying weaknesses in your work. The best idea is to join both types of group and get the best of both worlds.

The support you will get from a writers' groups is mutual – as well as getting feedback on your own work, you will have to give feedback to others. Most writers hate criticism – no matter how well-intentioned, they often take it personally – so you must be careful about the sort of criticism and how you give it.

Constructive criticism is essential to the development of any writer. To give constructive criticism you need to be able to identify something in the text that doesn't work for you and then to say why it doesn't work. You may find that a writer has assumed that her/his reader knows more about a character than actually appears in the text, for example, or that he/she has spent too little time on an incident that is central to the storyline. If that's the case, then it is absolutely essential that they be made aware of it. Similarly, they need to be told if there is something in their writing that particularly impresses you but, again, you need to be able to identify what is good about it. You may even be able to suggest ways of improving the piece, but the worst service you can ever do to a fellow writer is just to say that you like something they've written without going on to say why. No matter how well-meant, it will always sound as if you are damning her/him with faint praise.