

Good after everyone!

Today we are going to talk about critique partners, contests and hoarding your time in a good way.

Critique Partners

As you are deciding how to divvy out your precious time, you may or may not have been, or are on the hunt for a critique partner. One of the things I see often is, in my experience, people get critique partners before they are ready, or they don't have any luck with them, and then can't figure out how to end the partnership. They end up wasting hours doing critiques that really aren't helping them or the other person because they are no longer invested in doing it. Critique partners are often selected because they are a trusted friend to begin with. I am not saying to not choose a friend, but I am saying if you can't amicably end a critique partnership with a friend as easily as you could with someone you met through a chapter meet up or critique partner loop, or that you hired, then you might want to reconsider joining them in the first place.

First, as you are looking at your work, make sure you are actually ready for a critique partner. I know it is hard to wait. I had a false start with a critique partner years ago. She was kind enough (though I didn't think so at the time) to be honest and tell me my work wasn't up to par yet and to try her later when I was ready. I admit I didn't contact her when my work was ready for a CP, but after a few years I really appreciated that she didn't waste either of our time. Many writers I have met tried to find a critique partner far earlier than they actually needed one.

Some questions to ask yourself are: Have you finished the first draft (or two or three) of your manuscript? Is it polished at least enough that your critique partner can read through it and understand it? Does your critique partner know anything about your genre? Will you have to spend a lot of time explaining things to them that are genre specific? Will you end up ignoring half of the feedback they took the time to give you because it really doesn't apply to your work? Is your work final enough that if your critique partner takes the time to do good solid critiques you won't end up making major changes in the story (thereby wasting their time and yours, at least more than you would

for a finished manuscript)? Can you produce on a schedule, even if it is only little bits at a time?

Don't get a critique partner because you think you need one (as opposed to knowing you are ready) or the illusive "everyone" says you should have one. I am not saying critique partners aren't important, they absolutely are, I am saying to make sure you are really ready and that your chosen critique partner is ready also. If you are going to get a critique partner you need to make sure you have time to do solid critiques of your partner's work as well. If you are looking for a critique partner you need to plan to put in as much time on their work as you expect them to put in on yours. They will expect that and glossing over their work because you don't take the time to do a thorough job is not OK either. So make sure you have the time and are ready to make the commitment. It is a business arrangement just like any other. Also, make sure you have the skills needed by your critique partner to do good constructive critiques. Make sure you are professionally mature enough to give the best critique possible as to the standards of the person's chosen genre, not just try to make the work what you would like to read or make it sound like your work instead of theirs. Being professionally mature enough to know the difference between good work and what you like to read is a huge indicator if you are ready to be a CP.

Critique partners often become friends, if they are not already, if things are working well. Be cautious to keep your conversations as business like as possible or you will end up spending time chatting and socializing that you should be working or doing something else at home. I know how mean and unappealing that may sound. But until you are comfortable in a partnership where you know you can manage a little bit of chat with a lot of work getting done you have to be careful. You also have to be able to be honest with one another.

I have a critique partner and we have social calls and discussions, and business calls and discussions and we don't mix the two. We talk business about three calls for every one social call. Granted the business calls are about an hour and the monthly social calls can run up to two, and that is fine for us. I even occasionally tell her straight out when I email or text to set up a call, that I want to chat and catch up but I have to get to this or

that point in my work before I can socialize. She understands and that is how we go about it. Neither of us gets hurt feelings if the other can't chat socially at any given time. Make sure your critique partner is OK with you not having time to chat socially if need be. Make sure you two have a plan for deadlines and a format for complex discussions (some of our discussions really require screen sharing and line by line adjustments).

Quick side note, I have an excellent software for screen sharing that allows up to forty minutes at a time for free if anyone needs a secure, ad free program that allows screen sharing and remote access. Email me off loop and I will give you links if you want them. For ten dollars a month, you can have unlimited, secure (as in not free and unsecure) access and you can record the sessions.

Have a contract (written is actually a good idea). Not a binding, suitable to stand up in court sort of contract, but a list of rules you both agree on from the beginning. Once you start critiquing be absolutely clear about what you are looking for from each other.

There are several great articles that have sample lists of questions to send you partner to cut down on vague comments and tangents. Here is an excellent one from K.M.

Weiland. <http://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/questions-for-critique-partners/> All of this will save you time and effort.

Marilynn Byerly has some useful things to say as well in her blog post on the matter. Again, you will see the theme of not wasting each other's time crop up again and again. <http://www.marilynnbyerly.com/page9l.html>

Critiquing is an art unto itself, so if you think you are ready to get a critique partner remember you are asking someone else to trust you with their work. This is an excellent post on what that entails. <http://www.ladieswhocritique.com/critique-tips/how-to-give-a-great-critique/>

So you have thought it over and you know you really and truly are ready and want a critique partner. Where does one go about finding a partner that isn't a pre-existing pal? This post is a bit old but one of my favorites.

<https://romancewritersonthejourney.wordpress.com/2010/06/21/how-to-find-critique-partners/>

My critique partner sought me out after I gave her the best critique she had ever gotten (her words) as a contest judge for a contest she entered. She had the coordinator contact me and ask if I would be interested in being her critique partner. I said I wrote historicals and her work was YA, but if she was up for swapping a chapter a week for general quality and making sure all the story threads tied themselves in neat little bows by the end of the story and I was game. As it happens, so was she. We don't critique the genre specifics of our work. We look for blocking (character's physical placement from scene to scene), choreography (making sure characters don't have three hands, etc.), visual attribute consistency (clothing, eye color, hair color, etc.), and identifying confusing passages. Our scope is narrow and I have another partner that looks for genre specific stuff, but our arrangement serves us both and we get a unique perspective without spending a ton of time trying to find middle ground on understanding our individual markets.

This site has some excellent material as well. This post has always been a favorite of mine. It has to do with time spent critiquing because it is a great take on the commitment that comes with being a critique partner. I judge contests often and a few years ago I started reading articles on how to give good critiques. I wanted to give professionally mature and helpful critiques. Also, after some fairly horrible ones that I received for my work, I knew I didn't ever want to give a bad critique, hence the critiquing research. <http://www.writingforward.com/writing-tips/tips-for-critiquing-other-writers-work>

Before you enter into a partnership to be someone's critique partner, talk to that person on what your exit strategy will be if either of you decide the pairing isn't working. If you have a way in place from the beginning to have an amiable split if need be then you may find you don't have as much tension if things start to go sideways and you can both move on and still be professional if not remain friends.

You should always be able to be honest with your partner if you have time constraints. This past spring I had to tell my partner I needed a four week break. I kiddo's school was getting out and we had tons of school projects due, we had dance recitals, vet appointments for the dog, and all sorts of things. I wrote her a respectful email and said

I knew I would not be able to provide her a quality product and she happily agreed and we took a break.

If you have a critique partner your relationship should never feel like a burden. It should feel like the commitment it is or like a business service rendered, but not an out and out burden. If yours feels that way but you want to keep it, talk to your partner and maybe ask if you can ramp down your weekly swap or go about it differently than you have been (maybe down to a chapter a week or every two instead of two chapters a week). Doing something non-standard (for the two of you) may take you both longer to get to the end, but if you can get there with your sanity and friendship (if there is one) intact then slowing down or changing formats is likely the right thing to do.

Also consider that you may want to go straight to a paid editor. There are times when critique partners have plagiarized work. I would be remiss if I didn't mention it can happen. If you don't know the person you are asking make sure to check them out thoroughly. If you met them online and they say they are in a writing group, email the president of that group, research the group thoroughly, and ask them if that author is reputable. If the answer is no or the group won't say for liability reasons, ask if they know if the person is published or represented at least. If they are, at least you know they can be found if your work pops up under their name. From my experience, this isn't common, but it has happened so a little bit of due diligence if you don't already know the person won't go amiss.

Another reason you may want to go straight to an editor is if your stuff is too different from your partners work, you can't find a partner you like or trust, or you may find that your critique partner's critiques just make your work sound like their work. I use my critique partner for one of the genres I write but one of the other genres I write in is very niche. For that one, I prefer to go straight to an editor. I polish my work as much as humanly possible, then pay for editing. I don't want to go back and forth with someone who may or may not know more than me on the genre, or who may have opinions not related to the actual writing. I get a little grouchy about that and want to just pay someone who is qualified to check the mechanics and technical aspects and get it over

with. I would rather only rewrite my work once, instead of once for my critique partner, once for my editor, and again for my proofer.

I have an editor that is familiar with my genre and does not write books herself. It took me a long time to find an editor that only edits. My experience with editors had been that they were all writers in their own right, and I ended up feeling like they were just making my work sound like their work with most of the changes. There were valid edits in there, of course, but if I am paying for editing, I expect the product to be as clean and unbiased as possible with as much of my voice and intent still intact as possible. Having a single CP or multiple CPs or just going straight to an editor are all perfectly fine as long as the work gets polished and professionally edited at some point. Decide what is important to you before you go on a critique partner or editor hunt and then you may find the task itself much easier and certainly quicker to go about.

Contests

Most of us will have met that author who enters every contest that comes across the loop and wins more often than not. I am not that author. I am not going to tell you to enter or not enter contests. I am going to tell you to do so intelligently and with a plan. We have already talked about a business plan, or a writing plan, if you prefer to call it that. When you consider entering a contest it can be really tempting because it is just \$20 or \$30 and you get a critique out of it right? And who knows, you might win.

First, always remember ALL contests are being put on for a reason. Either the chapter needs to make revenue, they want to increase their visibility or they are trying to do good things for their members by getting their work in front of high level editors or agents. All of those are great reasons, BUT make sure you get something out of it, even if you lose. If a contest is not with RWA make sure you know what exactly their goals are and exactly what happens to your work once you submit it.

When I first started entering the occasional contest years ago I entered a blurb contest with a company that did branding because I wanted to try to win a free consult (because I certainly couldn't have afforded one, it was a really good company). The actual contest was to make up a blurb for a cover of theirs and they would do a cover for the next book that author put out. In hind sight, even if I had won, I was nowhere near ready to use

that prize. However, I spent hours painstakingly working my blurb. I could see the blurbs the other authors were submitting due to the contest format (they posted the entries online as they came in) and mine really *was* better than most.

The day come for them to announce finalists, reading the other blurbs I didn't think I would win but I expected to final. Some of the entries has spelling and punctuation errors in them for goodness sake. I was number seven out of nine entries. I was so ticked off. I was ready to close the book on this whole author bit, it was so unfair and clearly no one read the actual blurbs. Come to find out, had I been a bit more savvy and professionally mature I would have known that the contest (NOT an RWA contest) was going to select the author with the most circulation and largest backlist. They really weren't being sneaky about it either. I didn't understand the terms and conditions of the contest. First, I hadn't read them. Second, when I did read them they didn't really make sense until a more seasoned author explained what they were "really" saying to me.

They ran that particular contest to try to get a contract with a big name author so that when they awarded their prize it would get the most reach on social media and in the market place. Brilliantly done on their part, but I had no clue why I didn't even make the top five. Later, I did know and I felt foolish. I didn't have enough reach for them to consider me a useful winner. Not all contests have ulterior motives but many do. I am not even saying don't enter them. Sometimes you can win book cover shoots, branding consults, free formatting or any number of nifty things. I am saying know what you are getting into, make sure it is something you actually need, and that the time and money you spend entering justifies the prize or has value in itself if you don't win.

As to RWA organizational contests, I have been a judge for eight different contests for multiple years and have been part of the administration team for three, again, for multiple years to varying degrees. What you need to know is there is very little standardization among judges, chapters, or the contests themselves. Of all those contests, only two bothered to train their judges at all. The only qualification for most judges is that they email in to volunteer. If you are looking for a critique you are flipping a coin in most cases as to quality. I have seen judge's comments so bad and completely out of touch with the work that they had to be thrown out by the contest coordinator

(with sponsoring board approval of course). On the other hand, I have seen people score an awesome critique from a NYT bestselling author even though they didn't know it. The former unfortunately was more common than the later. Bottom line, there are no guarantees to the quality of the critiques you are going to get so weigh them accordingly against the time and money you spend entering.

The average judge, in the contests I worked with, took on anywhere from three to fifteen contest entries ranging from seven to fifty pages. Some judges returned theirs on a schedule and got them in a bit at a time. It was far more common to have several turn in all the entries they volunteered to do in the last few days before the judging deadline. I am not saying that means they were poor. I am telling you that the quality and thoroughness of the judging may be inconsistent as people bow out at the last minute or things come up and entries may get shifted last minute to people who weren't expecting them.

As you consider whether or not to spend the time and money to enter contests really think about what you might get from it. What happens if you win? Are you simply looking for the ability to say you finished or won a contest? Is the critique what you are after, contest fees are cheaper than most professional editing fees, but the quality of the critique is random at best? Are you looking for an actual win and getting your work in front of an editor or agent? If that is the case then make sure you would actually want to work with that final round judge or the publisher they represent. When you are searching for contests you might want to go backwards, and instead of looking for contests all over the place, single out the editors or agents you might want to work with and see which contests they are judging (if any).

How might one go about that in a way that doesn't take hours and hours of time? You research the publishers that handle your genre, word count, level of heat, etc. Once you have a short list (two to five) Look at their directories or "staff" page on their website, it will tell you who, at that company, is the acquiring editor for your specific genre and possibly subgenre. Go find them on twitter, Facebook, and any other social media platforms they are on and friend, like, or whatever them. The running rule currently is Facebook is for readers and Twitter is for writers. I see lots of business transactions

happening on Twitter if you follow the people you are actually wanting to work with. If those editors/agents are judging a contest or going to a conference those are the places it will show up. You can also go to your favorite search engine and search their name. Any public events they are attending and places they are pitching will normally pop up as well.

You can also watch your chapter loop feeds. If you see a contest announcement on your chapter feed don't go through and read the whole thing every time. Instead of taking the time to read all the details on a contest go straight to the final round judges list. If one of your desired publishers are on there keep reading, *if not, MOVE ON*. Don't tempt yourself with a low entry fee, or knowing you already have that much of your entry done, then waste your time reading the whole announcement because the contest, even if you won, would not do that much for you.

If the editors are on your list then check what the contest is asking for, that will tell you the time involved in submitting for it. Then there is the cost. If you have gotten that far with all green lights then by all means, read the announcement word for word and check it out. For me, if I read the announcements as written, then I spend all sorts of time talking myself out of entering (especially if I have a good first chapter or whatever they are asking for mostly ready to go). Avoid the temptation if you can.

The exception to this is when contests put out low entry calls. If you see a low entry call on a loop and it fits your genre and you might be OK with the final round judge reconsider that contest if you aren't planning to enter. The smaller the pool, the better your chances of winning, and no one ever asks how many entries were in your group if you win the contest, they only care that you won. It won't go on your cover that it was a small group if it were only you and a handful of others, it will only say "award winning". However, you only need one of those to use the phrase on your covers. Most contests will have a minimum number of entries per category to make sure there are enough entries to ensure quality finalists, but it never hurts to play the odds a bit in a common sense sort of way.

Enter contests as often as you like, just make sure that win or lose, you are actually getting something out of it that makes it worth the time to research, register, format,

pay, submit, possibly edit and resubmit, and then maybe get nothing. Going in with your eyes wide open can help you make sure your precious time is well spent and you don't get upset if it ends up being a waste of time.

When I sit down and do my annual volunteer plan in the fall, a loose contest plan is normally next on my list to make sure I don't over commit. Depending on how susceptible you are to distraction in this form you may wish to do the same. For me the two overlap because I have to be careful not to add too many "small" helping things or judging commitments to my annual slog.

Freebies

The more you know, the more your peers may ask you. Some of you will be facing this already, for the rest of you, as you become more successful you may need to think about this. I know quite a bit after so many years on boards, committees, etc. I get asked all manner of questions, to the tune of fifteen to fifty a day, from people who know me or claim to know me. I eventually got to the point where I was spending one to two hours a day answering emails on how to do this or that or find this or that. I really like to help people, and I knew myself well enough to know that if they ask, I would likely help, even if it meant torpedoing my own schedule. I had to find a way to get myself out of that routine, because I was losing tons of time in this arena.

When I stood up my LLC to separate my personal assets from my business assets, I decided to stand myself up as a company, not just an author. I selected a "media" company because I wanted to put out there that I did consulting. I built a free website in the company name that sold consulting services by the hour via online consultation. Since then, surprisingly, I have sold hours worth of consults it has netted me enough to pay my webhosting fees. In truth, I sold them at a discount to the prices listed on the site, but within a few days of me saying I was answering questions as a fee based business, and I handing out my link to that website, the free loaders and people just needing this one little thing dried up. I got all that time back.

I also dealt with some snotty attitudes since I wasn't willing to give out my time for free anymore. To the tune of some writers I considered friends telling me I had no business opening a consulting company and that I was a fraud. I wasn't a fraud, I wasn't even

really trying to drum up business, but those were hard things to hear from people I thought cared about me. They didn't. That bothered me at first until I realized those people didn't care about me to begin with. Let that sink in. People who really care about you won't try to get you to research something they are too lazy to research for themselves. I was saving lazy people time. People who didn't actually care about my time at all, it's not networking if you can't ever get anything in return or if you are simply someone else's tool.

Starting up the company, even though it wasn't all that much actual work (but it was a few hundred bucks in fees to the state) did a few things for me. It gave me the added credibility that I was able to consult for money (even if it was only a tiny bit of money at first, because really it wasn't about the money, I actually only took the amount the person typically offered, I didn't post prices on the site) and it also meant ***I was no longer someone whose time wasn't as valuable as everyone else felt theirs was.*** If people thought they needed to pay for an hour and a half long explanation on how to do this simple little thing then they would often go figure it out themselves. To cut down on all the favor seekers (as in do me a favor, not liking them sort of favor) and free loaders, depending on what they want, you may need to monetize (meaning start charging for your help or services), or give the impression of monetizing in some way.

One unexpected perk of doing that was that other professionals started contacting me wanting to trade services because I was in demand enough to actually start a business based in part on my consulting services. I was very clear with the people who contacted me that I was new to consulting and exactly how much "consulting" experience I had. They often didn't care, it was all about what I could do for them and that they were willing to swap something useful for it. Like legitimate, expensive editing for website overhauls, a thorough review of a concept for a WIP in exchange for my expertise on dueling and pistols of the era I write in, or someone showing me exactly what to do for a reader event in exchange for me walking them through how pitching actually works so they knew what to expect. You may not know it but you probably have intellectual stock you can swap for what you actually need, don't underrate yourself.

A few more examples were, I had people contact me to trade editing for head shots (I dabble in portrait photography and graphics work). I have a deal going with a formatter that I will clean up her website for her and she will show me how to format my book for whichever distributor I want to try. All of this saves me time and money in the long run because I don't have to hunt for those people or figure out how to do those things. I made it all happen with a free website I set up in about thirty minutes after I did my required business paperwork. Now I am a few years into running my company and there aren't any disclaimers anymore on me not having much experience. The company has grown in it's own right and become "legit" and successful as I share how to do various things. As long as I keep learning the company keeps expanding. Every time I look back to those first few months, I am still surprised how many people wanted to enter into professional bargains once I stopped giving my advice away for free. Don't sell yourself short, as the old saying goes, no one will pay for milk the cow is willing to give away for free.

I am not saying this is the best way for everyone to go, or that anyone *needs* to do anything like this approach-wise but make sure you aren't giving anything away that you might be able to barter for assistance or services. If you are looking at saving time you would spend figuring things out for yourself consider trading services, hiring parts of things out or at least make sure if you are helping someone out consistently that you are getting *something* in return, even if it is something as simple as likes and shares on your social media (anyone can do that).

Closing

Today we have talked about a few things most writers deal with eventually. I hope you walk away from this lesson not feeling like I have told you to or not to do anything in particular, but hopefully you understand that I have tried to show you that with your specific time constraints, goals and motivations as your guiding factor you might be able to make some good changes. Also, don't ever underestimate your worth or undersell yourself, that is super hard for most new authors to wrap their head around, so be aware.

Have a wonderful weekend!

Warm Regards,

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