

Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers: Structure and Values

last major revision: August 2020

Note: The rules have a summary version for anyone who may not have the time to read all of them in detail. If you can't find the time to read the whole document, just read the "Mission and Principles" section and the "Summary of Rules" section.

Contents

Why join a writing group?	1
Mission and Principles	2
Summary of Rules and Structure	3
Format of Meetings	4
How to Give Feedback	8
How to Receive Feedback	14

Note for New Members

Welcome to the *Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers*! Everyone is equally valued in our group, regardless of writing experience or how long you have been a part of the group. We always welcome any feedback on stories or the group in general from all members. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about anything, please feel free to share your thoughts either during a meeting, or by messaging the organizer or moderator through email, the Meetup page, or whatever medium suits you. We are all here to support each other, and we would like to do everything possible to make sure you feel welcomed and equally valued in our community!

Why join a writing group?

Before talking about the structure and values for the group, it's worth considering why we have a writing group in the first place. Especially since there are mixed opinions on the benefits of these groups.

Some possible benefits of writing groups are: valuable feedback, meeting interesting people, making connections with other writers, learning more about the craft, getting encouragement, getting ideas or inspiration, and seeing different techniques and styles of writing.

Some possible risks or downsides include: advice that shouldn't be followed, echo chambers that produce similar styles or that stifle individuality, and discouraging or negative comments.

The goal in setting up a writing group should be to realize all the benefits while avoiding the potential downsides. That's the purpose of the structure and values. The group succeeds, first, because there's a lot of great people there who are uniting for a common goal, and second, because there is a shared understanding of the values and structure of the group.

Mission and Principles

Group Mission:

We are a positive, supportive, and encouraging group for speculative fiction writers. We meet to share our writing, to get reader feedback in a friendly, collegial, and constructive atmosphere, and to support each other in our development as writers.

Core Principles:

Positivity. This includes being supportive and encouraging of other's work. We are here to support each other. This means giving constructive criticism, but it also means offering the kind of moral support that will help people grow as writers. (A good meeting is one in which everyone leaves wanting to write more).

Equality. The group is non-hierarchical. Everyone's voice is equally valued, regardless of experience, profession, prior accomplishments, or any other quality. The organiser is not there as an expert; their purpose is only maintaining structure.

Diversity. We value diversity in age, gender, sexual orientation, education, cultural background, religion, experience, ability, neurotype, and any other dimension that affects human experience. Diversity is valuable everywhere, but it is especially valuable in a community whose primary trade is writing about human experiences.

The One Rule:

Always use your best judgment to contribute in a positive, supportive, and encouraging way in order to create a friendly, collegial, and constructive atmosphere for our mutual development as writers, in alignment with the core principles of positivity, equality, and diversity.

Summary of Rules and Structure

When in doubt, follow *The One Rule*: Always use your best judgment to contribute to the group in a positive, supportive, and encouraging way, in order to create a safe, friendly, and constructive atmosphere for our mutual development as writers, in alignment with the principles of positivity, equality, and diversity.

Format of Meetings:

- 25 minutes per reader, including reading time and discussion
- Selections of work under 2000 words
- Reading is optional; giving feedback is optional

How to Give Feedback:

- Respond as a reader, not an editor; give your personal reactions
- Give big picture feedback (mark sentence level fixes on the document)
- Be constructive
- Voice disagreements, but don't settle them (there is no "right" reaction)
- Be encouraging
- Direct questions to the discussion group, not the writer
- Be specific and use examples from the text
- Subjective reactions are preferable to objective judgments
- Value positivity, diversity, and equality

How to Receive Feedback:

- Don't preface your work, except for necessary context the reader would have
- Listen silently during discussion, and don't defend your story or clarify things
- Don't feel obligated to change anything; use only what is valuable to you

Format of Meetings

Overall Meeting Structure

People who want to share their writing are given a 25 minute block of time. About 10 to 15 minutes of that is for reading the piece out loud (which should be under 2000 words), while the other people read along on printed copies. The remainder of the time in that 25 minute block is for discussion and feedback.

We try to get through 5 or 6 readings in a meeting. People read in the order in which they arrive. Those who still want to read after we've run out of time are put "on deck" to read first in the next meeting.

There are two 5-minute breaks around the hour or one 10-minute break at the approximate mid-point.

Steps for Reading

1. distribute copies so people can read along and make notes
2. do not introduce your piece, summarize it, or say when/why it was written, etc; let your reading speak for itself (a common exception for necessary context is if you are reading a later chapter in a book; the gist of the preceding chapters can be presented; generally, if there is information the reader of the piece would already have, it can be given as context). Read the piece aloud, or, if you're not comfortable doing so, ask for a volunteer reader.
3. feedback portion
 - a. writer is removed from the discussion while they listen to the reactions of the listeners; no one is expected to speak; giving reactions is optional
 - b. writer can request reactions for specific issues that didn't come up, or can prompt for particular feedback
4. return all printed copies

Modifications for Online Format

After the COVID-19 pandemic, we moved our meetings online. This has been a great way to maintain the Toronto SFF community. It also has the advantage of allowing members from a wider geographic area, including past members who have moved. Because of the advantages of virtual meetings, we'll probably continue to hold virtual meetings even after returning to our regular in-person meetings.

We meet using the Discord software, which can be downloaded either for your personal computer or as an app.

There are a few modifications to normal procedure for online meetings.

Instead of physical copies, the reader just leaves a link to their story as a Google Doc using the "share" button, making sure that the section that says "everyone with this link" is set to "can comment". This allows everyone else to leave comments on the story, but it leaves the original intact. (It's a good idea to have one version shared with the group, and a different copy from which to read, because it can be distracting to see people editing the document while you are trying to read.)

For in-person readings, we read in the order in which people arrive. For online meetings, we use a random order for everyone who wants to read. People who want to read should show up at least five minutes in advance so that we can determine the read order.

For virtual meetings, it is harder to deal with certain aspects of group communication, such as responding to body language or subtle cues that someone is about to speak. It's especially important then to be mindful about all participants in the group, in order to make sure that everyone feels welcomed and included, and their voice valued.

Using a "hand raise" emoji in chat is a good (optional) way to indicate to the group that you have something you would like to say during discussion. If you notice that someone has raised their hand in the chat area, please try to give them a chance to speak (some people are more shy or hesitant to jump straight into conversation, so it is good to have a way to empower them to add their voice to the discussion).

Forms and Length of Reading

Genres

It seems as though a Science Fiction and Fantasy writing group should have, somewhere, a definition for these two genres.

But I'm not so sure. Well, here is a working definition: if a writer thinks a work could plausibly be classified as science fiction or fantasy, then we'll treat it as such. We want a wide net. Members should not feel as though a work they've written isn't fantastic or outlandish or science-y enough to classify. They should, instead, be encouraged to share it.

The definitions of these genre categories are eternally in dispute. It's always fun to debate. But ultimately it's up to the publishers to decide what goes where. We shouldn't let any of that discussion place a limit on what we do within our group.

Longer Pieces

Our word limit for reading selections is 2000 words. Novels and stories longer than the word limit can be broken into segments and brought in for multiple meetings, one piece at a time. For "discovery writers" (who write without an outline and "discover" the story as they go), it is a good idea to finish the first draft of the novel before bringing pieces of it in, otherwise you risk being influenced too much by reader reactions. Outliners (who plan out their novel with an outline before writing it) could safely bring in chapters during the writing process.

Someone who rarely reads at the meetings can be afforded an extra ten to fifteen minutes to accommodate a larger piece. This is a special exception made for consistent members who have requested the additional time, but who do not ordinarily read.

Completed books can be exchanged for review outside of normal meetings. A novel exchange with another member is a good way to get feedback on a novel in its entirety.

Formats Other Than Prose Fiction

Besides short stories and novels, it's also okay to bring in plays, poetry, screenplays, and other forms. If it is made out of words, it's okay. Pictures are okay on occasion, too.

In all cases, regardless of the form, we are responding as readers. It's not necessary to be a poet to know how a poem makes you feel. It's not necessary to be a screenwriter to know if a story grips you. It's not necessary to be a visual artist to know what emotions are evoked in you by a painting. Etc.

For reading plays and screenplays, we typically assign speaking parts to different members of the group, and the narrator and screen-directions are read by the writer.

How to Give Feedback

You just finished listening to someone's story. How should you give your feedback?

Respond as Readers

We are responding as readers, not as editors. To respond as a reader means to discuss reactions such as what imagery stood out to you, what emotions you felt, whether you cared about the characters, where you thought the story was going, etc (in other words, things that any reader is qualified to talk about).

Big Picture Feedback

We are looking at “big picture” storytelling elements: whether we identified with the characters; whether we thought their motivation was clear; whether their actions made sense; whether we thought the world was plausible, or internally consistent; whether the story was compelling; whether the world, characters, or ideas were interesting or engaging.

We are not looking at sentence level fixes such as grammar, spelling, or individual word choice. Our discussion should be limited to the “big picture” items. However, sentence level suggestions can be noted on the physical copies. The writer can then review those later.

Constructive

Feedback should always be constructive and, on balance, positive and encouraging. You can and should identify what didn't work for you, but you should also be able to say what you liked.

You do not need to find something that didn't work in order to comment; you can talk just about the parts you liked, and why you liked them. This information benefits the writer, since they also need to know what parts are working. All feedback should be honest, but delivered in an encouraging, constructive, and respectful manner. We encourage talking not just about what you didn't like in a piece, but also what you genuinely liked.

Disagreements and Conflicting Opinions

It is not necessary to settle disagreements among reader reactions. Some people will think a particular part worked well, and others will think it failed. It is a good idea to voice disagreement (because it is useful to hear multiple different opinions), but there is nothing to be gained by trying to figure out whose reaction was "right"; all reader reactions are subjective and equally valid. It is up to the writer—now armed with the knowledge of these different reactions—to decide whether and how to edit the piece.

Encouragement

Our prime directive is supporting and encouraging each other. Ideally, this means telling readers, over the course of a constructive feedback session, everything that worked and didn't work, in a way that encourages them to develop the piece.

A successful meeting is one in which everyone leaves wanting to write more. This is not only a matter of providing constructive criticism; it is also a matter of positively supporting and motivating each other.

Questions to the writer

Try not to address questions to the writer of the piece, or otherwise prompt them to offer explanations. Don't ask them what they were thinking, how they developed the piece, what symbolism or themes they were going for, etc. Instead, offer your thoughts on these things in the form of a statement—what you felt the writer was going for—and then ask other listeners whether they agree, or what their thoughts were. The purpose of this whole discussion is to get reader reactions to the words on the page. The writer needs to see the effect their words are having. This process is undermined by having the writer offer explanations to the group. It biases reader reactions.

If you feel compelled to ask the author something like, "were you thinking X", just reword it as a question to the group: "did anyone else think X"? Almost any question or statement that could be directed towards the author can be worded as a question to the group instead.

If you are dying to ask questions of the writer, do so at the end of part B of the feedback session, if there is time. Even then, I wouldn't recommend it. The writer's urge to share their story is part of the motivation to keep them writing. We wouldn't want to inadvertently sap that motivation by satisfying the urge through discussion instead.

Particular and General Comments

General statements such as “I liked this” or vague comments like “the main character was good” are not the most helpful. Aim to indicate specifically what it was that you liked.

If you can pinpoint emotions, themes, or images that stood out in a good or bad way, it will benefit the writer. If you can identify story elements or plot points that stood out, it will benefit the writer. Be specific.

For the Naturally Talkative and Opinionated

Be mindful of how often you are speaking. If you are comfortable speaking in a group, or if you are the type of person who is used to having their voice heard, you may be inadvertently monopolising group time. Pay attention to people who may not be speaking up. Consider holding back and not jumping into the conversation right away, for the benefit of those who are more tentative in offering their opinions.

For the Shy

If you are a shy person, or aren't confident in your opinion, or if you are for any reason refraining from adding your voice to the discussion, please consider stepping out of your comfort zone. Your voice is adding to the value of the meeting, and it is appreciated.

If you are wondering about the validity of your opinion, or your level of experience: there is no question about the validity of your opinion; everyone's opinion is valid and valued, regardless of experience.

But don't feel pressured to speak. You don't have to!

Framing Opinions: Subjective and Objective

In general, all feedback you give should be in the form of a subjective opinion; the point is to provide your personal reactions to the piece, rather than making objective claims or general points about craft.

A statement in the form of "when you use technique X, readers tend to Y" is making a general claim about readers, and should be reworded to something like, "when you used technique X, my reaction was Y". We are all qualified to talk about our own subjective opinions; we are also all considered equal in the group, so none of us is qualified to talk on behalf of the general reader.

A statement in the form of "the prose was good" is making an objective claim about the quality of writing; it should instead be reworded to something like "I enjoyed the prose". (In either case that claim is very general, so not super-helpful, but it is nice to hear, so if you liked the prose you should tell the reader—just frame it as your reaction instead of an objective claim as to the quality of the prose; "I really liked the writing" is preferable to "this was well written").

Reactions Concerning Identity of Characters

Questioning an author's choices as it regards issues of identity, especially race and sexual orientation, is fraught. Be careful about how you approach these issues, and make sure you only raise the issue if you can do so in a way that is inclusive, respectful, and promotes an environment that values equality and diversity. Some questions are naturally problematic: as it concerns racial identity, asking a question like "why is this character black?" inappropriately presumes that white is default and black is other; likewise, asking a question like "why is this character gay?" implies an inappropriate heteronormative stance. Some people are white and some are black, some are gay and some are straight, and the same is true of our characters. Stories don't need to be about these aspects of a character's identity for the character to possess that identity, and authors don't need to justify the identities of their characters. Of course, identity is a vital aspect of our characters, so the effect on the reader of those authorial choices is important to consider, and so is the way that identity is handled in the story; but it is critical, in giving feedback on these issues, that comments be made in a way that is inclusive, respectful, and recognizes equality of all people.

Casual Chat and Jokes

It's great to be part of a community of friends and fellow writers, and to be able to chat casually and share jokes together. The important thing to keep in mind is to make sure that you aren't inadvertently excluding anyone or making them feel unwelcome. Everyone is equally a part of the group, so participants should make a deliberate effort to ensure that all members feel equally welcomed and equally valued.

People who have been members for a while will naturally more comfortable and relaxed in their conversation, which is a good thing. The problem comes when new members sense that they are outsiders and feel excluded. For long-time members, it is important to be aware of new and relatively-new participants, and to make an effort to include them and see from their point of view. It's easy to forget how intimidating it can be to join a new group—especially a large writing group with many members who have known each other for a long time.

Some types of jokes should be avoided, especially where they might plausibly make other members feel uncomfortable. Our goal is to make everyone feel safe and welcome in a community that values equality and diversity; any jokes should be compatible with that goal. If you're in doubt about whether a joke is appropriate, err on the side of not inadvertently making anyone uncomfortable. Creating a welcoming environment is not only a matter of having good intentions, since it is easy to inadvertently say something that would make someone feel uncomfortable (especially when it comes to jokes)—creating a positive, safe, and inclusive atmosphere takes a deliberate and conscious effort to be mindful of all the people and perspectives in the group.

Terminology

Writers have some jargon. They pick it up over time as they develop their craft.

This raises an issue with our group, because of conflicting values: specialised terminology can be exclusionary and, in the interest of equality, we don't want to discriminate against writers who don't know these terms; at the same time, these terms are meant to facilitate discussion and thinking about story and craft—that's why they exist.

So the conflict is between our goal to have equality between all members, and our goal to improve as writers.

Here is the way to handle it. Use special terminology only when it useful and productive for the current discussion; if what you are trying to say can be said just as easily in plain language, then say it that way. But, everyone should also be mindful of the differing knowledge bases of our members.

If someone uses jargon that you are unfamiliar with, please ask what it means. No one is expected to come equipped with any jargon, and we are all here to help each other.

How to Receive Feedback

So you've just finished reading your story out loud to the group. The customary ten seconds of awkward silence have passed. How should you receive your feedback?

Silent

Receive feedback silently. You don't want to bias reader reactions. Their feedback will be most valuable if you get their pure reactions to just the words as they are written. You need to know if the words on the page are working, without the aid of your spoken explanations. If you give any clues or suggestions or information verbally, you miss out on the chance to see unbiased reactions.

Avoid the urge to defend the piece. Someone may identify an issue that you have later addressed, for example. You may feel inclined to jump into the conversation to let them know that you have thought about the issue, and have resolved it in a later chapter. Resist that urge to explain or defend. Let your listeners discuss the piece.

Your goal is not to convince everyone the piece is solid, or that you've given it a lot of thought. Your goal is to get their pure, unbiased feedback, so that you can choose if and how to modify your piece in response.

You may feel the compulsion to share what happens next, or further details of your world. Resist that compulsion. It is part of the driving force that is pushing you to write that novel. Don't waste it by verbally sharing your world. The way you get to share your world and your story is by making sure you write it.

Notes

It's not a bad idea to make notes on what everyone is saying. This doesn't mean you have to use them. But you should consider at least writing it down. In addition to forming a helpful list of reader reactions, it also indicates to the group that you value the feedback you are getting.

Don't Feel Obligated to Change Anything

When it comes to incorporating feedback during your future edits, feel free to ignore everything. It is your piece, and you shouldn't be dissuaded from realising your vision. Maybe you only use half of what's said, maybe a quarter, maybe none at all. That's okay. Remain true to your vision. The reader reactions are there to help you write the story you want to write, not to steer you towards telling a different story.

Context

Generally speaking, don't give any context to a piece before reading. Don't summarize say what motivated you to write it, what you were aiming for, the theme or mood you hoped to evoke, whether you liked or didn't like how it turned out, etc. These sort of statements bias reader reaction, and you want pure, unbiased reader reactions to the words on the page.

One exception is for context that the reader would already have. For example, if you are reading a selection from the middle of a book, you can give a quick recap of the information from the preceding chapters—whatever it is that the reader would know at that point.

How to be an Organizer

The organizer's role is to facilitate discussion, to maintain structure, and to ensure adherence to the rules and values of the group.

In practical terms, this means little more than time-keeping, getting the readings started and finished when they should be, and occasionally interjecting with reminders about structure and values.

The organizer's level of experience is irrelevant, and their opinions on any given issue should not matter more than anyone else's. If anything, the organizer should be talking less than other members.

Structure and values are maintained primarily by membership, rather than the organizer. When we have a mutual understanding of the structure and rules, we can help each other maintain an environment that is positive, supportive, welcoming, encouraging, and constructive.

Occasionally, reminders about structure and values are called for, and while the organizer should take this responsibility, members are also welcome to give such a reminder if they think it is needed, so long as that reminder is offered in a positive and collegial way—we're all here to help and support each other.

Other Types of Meetings

In addition to our regular beta-feedback/critique meetings, we also hold a variety of other events. These include:

- **Writing Sprint Sessions.** Writing sprints are timed sessions of 25 minutes during which all participants write as much as they can. Writing sprint sessions are separated by breaks of casual conversation, somewhere from 5 to 10 minutes. We should aim for 5 or 6 sprints in a 3 hour writing sprint session.
- **One-Shot Anthology.** The one-shot anthology is an annual event where we all get together to write stories on a given theme, completing an entire anthology (writing and editing) in less than 24 hours.
- **Social Events.** We occasionally hold various social events, like movie screenings, game nights, dinners, and axe-throwing!
- **Launch Parties.** Sometimes we have launch parties to celebrate publications related to the group.
- **Workshops.** Occasionally we hold writing workshops on different topics.

In all cases, the goal and values are the same: we're getting together to create a positive, supportive, and encouraging community. Of course, the social events are not intended to develop writing skills, but they are still places where we can support each other.

In general, meetings should not have entry costs. The beta-feedback/critique sessions, the writing sprint sessions, and the workshops will always be free. Some events naturally have unavoidable associated costs, like events at restaurants, movie outings, or axe-throwing fees.