



Can I get a manuscript evaluation for free?

By Kathryn Craft

For fiction writers in particular, a long period of time can stretch between your first efforts and any whiff of financial reward. For some, decades. Paying for evaluation and editing services can therefore be a difficult concept to swallow, so I want you to know that it is possible to obtain a free critique of your manuscript through several means. Each, however, is potentially flawed.

Give it to a trusted friend or family member.

This tends to go one of two ways. These people have been wondering when your book was going to be on the shelf at Borders for three years, ever since you began writing. They want you to be able to get on with your book tour and television appearances. If your friends and family are supportive, they won't stand in your way by giving you an honest critique. They'll say, it's great, honey.

Those with inherently critical families may trust the process a bit more. After all, compliments—especially politically correct ones—have always been in short supply. Your family will be more than willing to point out all of the flaws they can find in your work. But can your creative spirit sustain the damage? We all want to be loved, and we all want our work to be loved. Best not to confuse the two. As a professional critiquer, I want you to succeed because my reputation is staked on it, but I won't encourage premature submission to agents and editors—because my reputation is staked on it.

Join a critique group.

I highly recommend this in the early stages of your writing career, if you can swing it. You can learn much about writing from your peers. Especially, it would seem, about sentence construction and punctuation. Further depth of commentary is often thwarted by the group dynamic.

I've seen the situation many times: A writer submits his work to his group. At the next meeting, he nervously awaits critique, because he's written and rewritten so many times that he's no longer sure his words add up to anything comprehensible. While reading, his critique group members were secretly flummoxed as to what the heck the writer was trying to accomplish. Will they say that out loud, however, once the group meets? Rarely. What if this writer is brilliant, one reader might think, and I am simply too dumb to get it? That critiquer will hold back to see what the others say. When no one is willing to

admit their incomprehension, the session will default to an overview of sentence structure and word choice, when the root problems may be weak story architecture and vague intent. The writer walks away from the group relieved that the session went so well—but carrying a well-worded, perfectly meaningless story.

I have also witnessed a group dynamic akin to tossing a scrap of meat to hungry lions. Once one critiquer ventures to say something boldly critical, others in the group go into attack mode, trying to outdo one another with all that they found wrong. The situation escalates until the poor writer leaves feeling they have done nothing right. If you are compelled to undertake something as difficult and time-consuming as a writing project, there will be things you are doing right, and I'll be sure to point them out to you.

While I am on the topic, I see three other inherent dangers in critique groups. One is in accepting so many suggestions that your own style becomes diluted rather than enhanced and focused. Another problem is in the periodic nature of such meetings. A novel is best critiqued in its entirety, not a chapter or two per month. Such gaps put unreasonable demands upon the prose to remind the reader of what is going on and who the characters are. The result is often an overwritten piece with continuity issues that could not possibly be picked up by the monthly observer. The last and most important is that you cannot assess the quality of the commentary you are receiving. Did this person really pay attention, or read this at stoplights on the drive to the meeting? Does this other person have a firm enough grasp on storytelling techniques to be able to pinpoint the source of a problem? Another may hate all stories that end tragically, and may be unaware of this prejudice. In addition, some critique groups become quite close. Refer back to “give it to a trusted friend or family member,” above.

If you are a member of a critique group that exhibits none of these behaviors, and their insightful comments have moved you ever closer to your goal of publication, consider yourself blessed. You may not need my services. But then again, you are reading this...

Enroll in an MFA program.

When you pursue a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, you will have access to an advisor and a committee of additional readers who will critique your thesis project—a novel or a collection of stories or poems. Such degrees cost \$20,000 and up. Hardly free. Never mind.

Wait until a publishing house expresses interest and let the editor edit it.

The old-fashioned approach. Alas, few editors have the time to nurture writers anymore. The number of books per year an editor is responsible for putting into print these days is so great that they admit having to purchase books that are “print ready.” Editing and book development is happening in literary agencies—yet even there, a sloppy or ill-conceived manuscript will be identified and rejected. Why should an agent invest his time in your unlimited albeit sketchy potential when there are other manuscripts in his stack that already exhibit a professional polish?

Self-publish and avoid editorial tinkering altogether.

Please—I beg of you—do not embrace this statement! If you are considering print on demand or self-publishing, the only reliable editing you will get is from a third party. Even if your press promises editing services, they may mean “proofreading.” Its main concern is cranking out books (a comparison to a puppy mill is apt). I am not against these alternatives to traditional publishing. They provide a wise solution for some authors. But I urge you to engage an editorial service such as the one I provide before you go to press. With our national literacy on a frightening decline, we need books that challenge people to think. That broaden horizons and encourage compassion and create connection among us. Books that hook into our psyches and pull us along on an emotionally engaging, unforgettable ride—one that makes reading your book preferable to any number of entertaining and less demanding diversions.

So. Are cost-free manuscript and editing services available? Yes. But settling for a casually screened manuscript that you deem “good enough” may not move you toward your publication and career goals. The detailed process to which I devote my efforts will result in a thorough ultrasound portrait of your unborn manuscript. A manuscript evaluation will give you a more intimate knowledge of your child before it enters the harsh glare of the real world, and will offer an opportunity to identify its heart and strengthen its bones. A line edit, like fetal surgery, will address birth defects. Can I guarantee your manuscript will be perfect? Who’d want to! Our imperfections give us—and our work—character. And certainly children are born every day without ever having an ultrasound! Yet people choose to have these exams, despite their cost. Why not give the child of *your* creative effort its best chance of survival in the world?