

## How to Prepare for Your One-On-One Critique: Insights from Editors and Authors

by Gayle Jacobson-Huset

*It's very scary to go into that room and sit one-on-one with someone who seems to have the power to make or break your dreams.* – Mary Rude, Author

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*The editor isn't out to crush your hopes and dreams; s/he just wants to help you strengthen your writing, which sometimes means dishing out criticism.* – Heather Delabre, Editor

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*Keep in mind that you're not there to soak up praise, but to learn how to be a better writer.* – Emily Rhoads Johnson, Author, and Critiquer

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*If I can finish my critique sessions without anyone bursting into tears, and having had some lively discussions about what various writers are trying to do and how they are managing to do it, I feel pleased.* – Harold Underdown, Editor

Whether you are new to the field of children's writing or you are already a published author, there are proven methods to prepare yourself for an individual critique session. This advice will help you make the most of those few precious minutes with an editor and/or critiquer.

First, become a member of a professional writing group such as the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators, (SCBWI), and attend one of its excellent conferences. SCBWI attracts top editors to its conferences. Manuscript critiques by a guest editor can usually be arranged

for a nominal fee. Editors' schedules fill up quickly, so submit your registration, manuscript, and critique fee as early as possible. Be aware that critiques are not always arranged on a first-come first-served basis. Sometimes a random drawing determines whose manuscript will be critiqued at a conference.

At the SCBWI Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota this fall, eight participants had the opportunity to submit their manuscript to Guest Editor Julie Romeis of Bloomsbury Children's Books for evaluation.

Several of these attendees had already had their manuscripts critiqued by members of their local writers' groups, who helped them revise and polish their work. Romeis agrees that critique groups can be very helpful. "One of the best reasons for joining a critique group in addition to improving your work is to learn how to accept and appreciate feedback without getting upset."

Once you have your manuscript in the best shape possible, gather your courage and submit it for a conference critique.

If you are lucky enough to know prior to the conference *who* will be critiquing your submission, search for that editor on the Internet. If possible, find out what books s/he has edited and become familiar with her/his preferences regarding content and style. Face-to-face critiques typically run from fifteen minutes to half an hour. It would be to your advantage to let that editor know you've done your homework beforehand by knowing about them, their

writing, and their professional preferences.

Laura Goering, whose work will appear in future issues of *Boys' Quest*, *Highlights* and *Hopscotch*, prepared for her one-on-one with Romeis at the Minnesota Conference by accessing the message board on her favorite children's writers web site and asking for advice.

"A number of people on the board already had critiques with Julie and were able to tell me specifically what to expect. Others gave me more general advice, including: have questions ready, be able to answer 'What have you been reading lately,' and have another manuscript on hand just in case. I also did a search on this board on Julie and found information on her likes, dislikes, and what she had edited." Goering added, "Julie was gracious and made many helpful suggestions. I really appreciated the fact that she took the time to do a line-by-line edit of my story."

Jean Patrick - author and Regional Advisor for the Dakotas Region of SCBWI - said that she researches which books or articles the editor has edited. "I then read everything I can find that the editor has worked on," Patrick explained, "paying close attention to style and interests. I then formulate a list of questions to bring with me to the critique. I also make a huge mental note to myself to *listen!* Sometimes it's hard not to put my own agenda first."

On the editor's side of the equation - Harold Underdown, editor, proprietor of The Purple Crayon web site (<http://www.underdown.org/>), and author of a popular guide to children's publishing - says that when he does critiques "I try to provide a printout of the main points I plan to cover. That way, the author will have something to take home to remind them of what we discussed and won't be

sitting there taking notes. The one-on-one discussion is the *most important part* of the critique as far as I am concerned. An author gets very distracted if they are busy scribbling notes and trying to listen at the same time." Underdown further explains, "Going in to the critique, I try to remember the point of the critique is not to showcase my erudition, but to help the writer move up the next step or two.

This can be difficult for editors, especially if we are meeting with a beginner. In our jobs, we generally only work with writers who are published or close to being published. Doing critiques at conferences, in fact, has helped me understand the earlier stages in a writer's development."

Mary Rude, author of the article *Faithful Mothers* that appeared in *Her Voice* magazine, was given a one-on-one critique at the last Writers Conference in Children's Literature in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She met with Heather Delabre, former editor at Carus Publishing (now with Quarasan). Delabre requested that her critiques be sent to the writers a week before the conference. "I prefer that the authors receive the full critiques ahead of time," she said, "so they'll have plenty of time to read through my comments, take notes, and formulate specific questions. This makes the 'face-time' during the conference far more productive - these authors already know what I think of the manuscript. I can respond to their questions and we can have a leisurely conversation about the manuscript."

Rude prepared for her one-on-one with Delabre by creating specific questions, such as: Did I try to cram too much information into this chapter? Do I have a strong sense of time and place? Do you care about the characters? "It was an unusual treat to get Heather's critique ahead of time," Rude said. "It gave me a

chance to react to it on my own, think of comments and questions that I had, and make the best use of my fifteen minutes with her.”

“As an author as well as an editor,” observed Delabre, “I know that it’s difficult for authors to receive criticism – no matter how constructive it is – about their work. Sometimes when an author is emotionally connected with a particular work, s/he responds emotionally to the critique. By sending the full critique far before the conference, the author has time to get as emotional as s/he’d like – cry, scream, call me a nasty person, etcetera. But then after that initial reaction, the author has time to refocus his/her energies and really contemplate the comments.”

Author Emily Rhoads Johnson, founder of and a frequent critiquer at the North Dakota conference, advises writers to “come to your critique with an open mind and a willingness to make changes. Editors really *do* want to help you strengthen your story and make it the best it can be. Becoming defensive and arguing that this or that must stay *exactly* as it is will keep you from opening yourself up to new possibilities.”

Romeis agrees. “I would ask only that the author come *relaxed* and with an *open mind*. If you listen and think carefully about the comments, you may just find you agree with them! Also remember that a critique can be a unique opportunity to spend some time with an editor, so feel free to ask questions. Take advantage of the moment to learn more about the publishing side of books.”

Some final tips from Delabre: “Know that no manuscript is perfect. No matter how good you think the manuscript might be, the editor is going to have critical comments on some part—and perhaps many parts—of it. This means you’ll need to go into the one-on-one

session with no ego and a huge desire to learn. Try your best to control any strong emotional response you might have to the critique. You want an editor to remember you for your strong writing skills, or your desire to learn, or your creative ideas, not as someone who throws temper tantrums. Come prepared with questions about your manuscript for the editor. If there’s a section you particularly struggled with or revised many times, ask the editor if it reads okay. If you’re uncertain about the direction the plot took, ask his/her advice on how to refocus *it*. If you feel the story is too long but can’t find any areas to cut, ask the editor to offer some suggestions. The point of the

one-on-one session is to get guidance from the editor, so don’t pass up the opportunity to do so.”

Underdown emphatically states what *should* be going through a writer’s mind when preparing for their one-on-one: “A critique is *not* an opportunity to meet an editor! It is an opportunity to get feedback from a professional--who might, after all, be a published writer rather than an editor. Writers should not go into a critique focused on the ‘meeting an editor’ aspect of it. They should focus on the ‘feedback from a professional’ aspect. If they don’t, they may miss out.”

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