

First Page Peer Critiquing

Twila Belk

In his new book *Writer to Writer: Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, veteran author Cecil Murphey says, “Over the years I’ve asked editors and agents how much of a manuscript they read before they make a decision. Most of them tell me that if the first paragraph is badly written, that’s enough and they reject it. Some agents allow them only a full page. They’re busy and they won’t belabor manuscripts they’ll reject anyway.” First paragraphs matter. First pages matter.

In a small group setting, we’ll read and discuss the first page of an article, chapter of a book, or any piece of writing from a few volunteers. This is a good opportunity for us to learn from others. As we review the work of our peers and listen to the feedback, we discover things to improve in our own project.

After the piece is read, we’ll discuss two things:

- 1) What did you like about it?
- 2) What is one thing you can suggest to improve it?

Here are a few things to think about:

- 1) Does the beginning grab you?
- 2) Does it start with a problem or conflict?
- 3) Is the ending given away too soon?
- 4) Does each paragraph connect with the one before and after? (Did the writer use good transitions?)
- 5) Does the sentence structure vary, or are all sentences similar? (For example: subject/verb, subject/verb, subject/verb)
- 6) What clichés did you notice?
- 7) How realistic is the dialog?

For those commenting:

- 1) Begin with something positive or encouraging.
- 2) With sensitivity and gentleness, offer suggestions for things you think need changed or improved.
- 3) Give both general and specific feedback. Be as constructive as you can.
- 4) Avoid restating things already mentioned.

For those receiving comments:

- 1) Everyone needs an editor, and every manuscript can be improved.
- 2) Comments are subjective, and you don’t have to agree. Listen without being defensive.
- 3) Ask for clarification, if needed.
- 4) Thank those who made suggestions.