

2009 OSFEST WRITING WORKSHOP
Sunday, July 19th
9:00 am to noon

IMPORTANT NOTE: This workshop requires a significant time commitment, both before and during the convention. Don't sign up if you can't put in the hours.

The Basics

1. Workshop participants must be preregistered for OSFest, and must be at least 15 years of age. No one other than participants may attend the workshop. Send your significant other to the dealers' room; get a sitter for the kids.
2. All works of speculative fiction are welcome, be it SF, fantasy, horror, or some combination/variation thereof.
3. Your story must be original fiction. Fanfic and derivative works can be fun, but they really have no place in a workshop for writers aspiring to professional publication.
4. Maximum length: 7500 words, firm. If your story is 7600 words, either cut it or write something else. If the manuscript you submit exceeds the word limit, it will be returned to you. We only have so much time, and we have to draw the line somewhere.
5. Short stories are preferred, as novel excerpts are harder to evaluate, especially in a one-day workshop. Novel excerpts are not prohibited, but you will get more out of the workshop if you submit a short story. If you choose to have an excerpt work shopped, try to make it a piece that stands reasonably well on its own.
6. All manuscripts should be professionally formatted. (Yes, really. If you find the requirement of following simple instructions too burdensome, this workshop is not for you.) If you are unfamiliar with professional format, go to: <http://www.shunn.net/format/story.html>. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar *count*.

Deadlines and Contact Information

The workshop will be held on **Sunday, July 19th**, from 9:00 a.m. to noon.

To sign up for the workshop, email your manuscript to Matthew Rotundo at msrotundo@yahoo.com, with "OSFest Writing Workshop" in the subject line. Attach your manuscript to the email as either a Word or RTF document. In the body of your email, include the following information:

Your name
Your telephone number
Your email address

The last day to sign up for the workshop is **June 19th, 2009**.

Manuscripts for critique will be emailed to you no later than **June 31st, 2009**. If you do not receive your batch of stories by that time, first check your spam filters. If that doesn't help, send an email to msrotundo@yahoo.com.

Dates and times are subject to change. Any updates will be communicated via email.

The Workshop Process

We will use the standard Milford model for the workshop. For those unfamiliar with the process, here's how it works:

Prior to the session, each participant will prepare written critiques of each story in the group (except his/her own, of course). You may write your critique on the back of the manuscript or on a separate sheet of paper. You may also make line edits and notes in the body of the manuscript. Remember to put your name on the critique.

Each critique should be both honest and specific, and should in some way address, as applicable, the issues and questions listed in the "Guidelines for Critical Reading" section below. One or two scribbled lines that you jotted down just before walking into the session do *not* count as a critique. If that sounds like too much work, this workshop is not for you.

During the session, each participant gives his/her comments on the story under discussion. These comments should highlight the points raised in the written critique. The author of the story remains *silent* during this process, unless asked a direct question by a critiquer. After all critiques are given, the author may take some time to respond to the comments made. Your response time is best used to ask readers for clarification on certain points. It is *not* a good time to tell everyone in the group that they're just too stupid to understand your brilliance. If you don't have any questions about the critiques, simply thank everyone for their input and be done.

Once we're finished with a story, all written comments are handed to the author, and we move on to the next story.

Guidelines for Critical Reading

Critical reading requires a more analytical mindset than reading for pleasure. It is recommended that you read each story in the group twice—once to see the "big picture," and once to focus on the fine detail.

Here are some suggested elements to focus on when reading:

Characters—Is the protagonist sympathetic? Does he/she have a clear goal? Does he/she take an active role in the story? Is the antagonist a match for him/her? Do the characters speak and behave in believable ways? Are they well described, using the most significant details? Are they memorable, or are they placeholders? Do you care about what happens to them? Why or why not?

Plot—Does the story make sense? Does it have a clear direction? Are there any plot holes? Does the story flow smoothly and naturally, or does it seem to drag in spots? Are there any unnecessary scenes? Is the conflict strong? Are the stakes high enough? Does the action rise, peaking at the climax? Is the story's resolution surprising but inevitable?

Setting—Are the settings described sufficiently, or do they suffer from White Room Syndrome? Are the settings distinctive? Do they suit the story? Has the author involved all the senses, not just sight and sound?

Theme—Is the story "about" anything? If not, should it be? Does the story adequately illustrate/support the theme? Does the theme overwhelm the story, i.e. does it seem preachy? How did the story make you feel at the end? What did you take away from it?

Language—Does the author demonstrate a mastery of basic grammar, punctuation, and spelling? Does the prose style suit the story, or does it interfere with your enjoyment of it? Do certain turns of phrase seem awkward, confusing, or out of place?

This list is by no means exhaustive. The point is to identify the story's strengths and weaknesses.

Dos and Don'ts

DO give your honest assessment of each story. If a particular story didn't work for you, you should say so. However . . .

DO give specific feedback. It's not enough to say, "This didn't work for me." You need to tell the author specifically *what* didn't work, and why. If you have suggested fixes for these problems, present them, too.

DO confine your remarks to what's on the page. Critiques are to focus solely on the work at hand, and not at all on the author of the work. By the same token, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs, physical or mental handicaps/challenges, or any other external factors do not make one whit of difference when it comes to the evaluation of your story.

Do NOT go into a critique session expecting everyone to tell you how brilliant you are. Your mother is not participating in this workshop. Even if your work is good, there is always something that can be improved upon.

Do NOT take critiques personally. It's natural to feel at least a little defensive, but you'll just have to get past that. Remember, it's about your story, not you.

Do NOT blame your readers. If, for example, several readers say they "didn't get" your story, don't spend your response time pointing out how everyone missed something vitally important that was spelled out on page 2, paragraph 7. If readers aren't getting what you intended from a story, the fault is likely yours, not theirs.

Do NOT mistake savage put-downs of other people's work as a sign of your own cleverness. It isn't. Be honest, be specific. Not sarcastic, not condescending, not insulting, not mean. Be honest, be specific. That's all.

Do NOT mistake honest, specific feedback of your work as a savage put-down.

Do NOT feel like you have to address/accommodate every single suggestion from your readers. You can't please everyone. Accept all feedback graciously, and then decide for yourself how much of it to use when revising. It's your story, after all.