

On Workshops

Since much of our time will be spent in writing workshops, I'd like to share some thoughts with you about what writing workshops can do for us as writers—what we can get from them and how we can participate in ways that inspire each other to go back to our writing with fresh insight and enthusiasm for revision.

Let's start by identifying what we *don't* want in workshops. For me, it's really intimidating (and not actually very valuable) to be presented with a cluster of critics intent on proclaiming my work excellent or mediocre or bad. Yet I've found this is the model many of us first think of—based, perhaps, on all the teachers' comments we've gotten over the years. Since the aim of a workshop is not to grade or critique a piece of writing but to give a writer support and insight as he or she moves forward in the writing process, this seems a poor approach. General statements—whether positive or negative or somewhere in between—don't provide us with much to think about when we return to the writing itself.

So, what kinds of responses are useful? From my experience as a teacher and a writer, the best thing we can do, as readers, is to be as attentive as possible. Listen hard. Then convey as clearly and honestly as possible what happened while you listened. After all, in the last instance, all you can ever really tell a writer is what it was like for one particular reader (you) reading one particular text at one particular time.

You can say what especially pleased *you*, or what you found insightful—not what's "good" in the abstract. You can tell the writer how you perceived the intent of the piece, and how and where you felt the writing most clearly met that intent. Let him or her know what caught your attention, where you felt something happening or "cooking" as Peter Elbow, the "father" of freewriting, says. You can map out your progress as a reader—where your interest sparked and where it lagged. You can identify a mood that the writing conveyed to you or an idea or some vivid association that came to mind. All these responses help a writer know his or her work better—from your point of view.

Then, while it's always good to start with what you found interesting or provocative or well-expressed in a piece of writing, it's also helpful to point out places where you sensed a gap or inconsistency, or were left hanging somehow, or were confused or unconvinced. Here you might suggest a way, if you were the writer, that you would approach the task of revising—though I wouldn't force this if something doesn't come strongly to mind.

The best workshops generally occur when everyone has read the work carefully and written responses ahead of time. So we'll aim for this. My advice for readers is to **read through once without any writing implement in hand**—to read as openly as possible and to guard against commenting before you've read the whole. Then you can go back through more carefully a second time. Though, even here, while making notations can be helpful, I suggest refraining from drowning the text in marginal

commentary which can discourage any writer. Save the bulk of your response for a **letter addressed to the writer and signed.**

For that letter—while no set of questions can work equally well for all forms of writing, and each piece of writing suggests its own—here are some general questions we often come back to:

- What do you think is the intention of the writer?
- What is the central story or argument as you read it?
- How would you identify the underlying question or tension that charges the writing and gives it momentum or suspense?
- Where does the writing come alive—for you? What are the most striking images you remember?
- Where are the moments the writing opened up into meaning while you read?
- What quality of voice and mind—say, humorous or cynical, passionate or precise—do you see at work?
- What unresolved questions, gaps, slack elements or writer’s tics do you perceive as muting the writing’s strengths?
- What might be an approach to revising these?

Then, what do we want to happen in the workshop itself? Here the key is to engage in *conversation* which focuses on the writing at hand. Later, the writer will have plenty of time to read all the readers’ comments carefully, but the great benefit of a workshop is to hear the back-and-forth *between* readers, in which new ideas are opened up. So it’s important to enter the discussion having thought carefully about the work and yet, at the same time, to also be prepared to consider other people’s ideas and perspectives and engage with them. If we all do this, the conversation is bound to be lively and touch on ground none of us reached in our individual written responses.

As for the writer? **Come prepared to read aloud an excerpt from your writing.** This gives workshop members a good sense of the voice and spirit in which the piece was written. Then, listen hard and don’t be defensive. In the last instance, of course, you will be the one to decide whether or not to use the responses you hear to guide your revising, but hearing them is always interesting and valuable. If there is something you feel compelled to say at the beginning, make it brief—and don’t apologize! Perhaps you want to identify a particular question or section you’re concerned about. Perhaps you want to clarify what kind of response you want or don’t want. But, frankly, it is usually more revealing to let your readers start out without any guidance from you at all. Sometimes what you thought was a problem doesn’t snag them up in the least, or what you thought was important passed them by; it’s worth hearing this. So I recommend leaving the conversational slate entirely clean for your readers to fill. And during the discussion itself, **I highly recommend that the writer stay silent.** If a question or criticism comes up (“What does she mean here?”), try not to jump in; instead, let other people respond. Simply sit back and listen, unless the readers decide they really want you to answer

something. We will leave a little time at the end for you to raise your concerns, explain yourself if need be, or ask a question or two of your own.

Good workshops give a writer fresh insight into his or her own work, from a range of perspectives and from the interplay of those perspectives. So it is an act of generosity to read other people's work carefully and contribute to the discussion, keeping in mind that the objective is to inspire the writer to go back, with new energy, to the writing itself.

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