

The Writer's Workshop

What is the process?

The writer reads their work aloud. The facilitator opens the floor for critique. The discussion is slightly structured, and looks, most often, like this:

We open our discussion with a consideration of what elements are strong in the poem. We point out specific strengths in the poem and in the writer's craft, and encourage the writer to build on those strengths. We might mention what sticks with us, what surprises us, or what phrases or images linger in our memory. We might consider what it is that makes particular language memorable.

We spend the bulk of the workshop discussing where the piece needs work, identifying things that are obscured, underdeveloped, or difficult to parse. We'll discuss language that seems extraneous, flat, clichéd, or overly poetic in its diction.

What does the writer do while the workshop discusses her/his work?

While the class workshops the poem, the writer is silent, *taking detailed notes of what people are saying*, writing down both the positive and critical remarks people make. The writer does not talk: she/he is committed to allowing the conversation to flow, intent on writing down all verbal feedback offered. If the writer is confused about a comment, has a question, or would like to hear more about some specific thing someone has said, they make a note of that, but cannot stop the discussion. After workshop, the writer is briefly allowed to ask any questions.

What are the elements of a successful workshop?

ENGAGEMENT: The quality of a workshop depends on the quality of the reading you do. Respect your fellow writers by engaging in their work. Follow the golden rule: It's unfair to ask others to read your work carefully and offer suggestions if you neglect theirs.

OPEN-MINDEDNESS. AND IF NOT OPEN-MINDEDNESS, RESPECT: During the course of this class you will be asked to read work that may make you uncomfortable. Work might contain strong language or subject matter, and/or ideas and situations that challenge your own values and experiences. It's important to respect other people's work, even if you disagree with the view or voice. Focus on the issue of craft, and make an honest effort to respect the writer's prerogative. If you find this isn't possible for you, I'd advise you to withdraw from the class.

ENTHUSIASM: We're all learning to become better writers. The more you can engage enthusiastically with the reading in this course, the more you'll get out of it. The more you read, the better you write. And, just as importantly, the more you read the better you *read*.

How to Comment: Some suggestions

Interpretatively: How does this piece work? How is it built? What is its core idea or emotion? How do you interpret it? Or, how does it meaningfully resist interpretation?

Responsively: What most strikes you about it? What questions does it raise for you? What is your emotional reaction?

Judgmentally: What about it is most effective? What suggestions do you have for improving it? What suggestions do you have for further exploring its possibilities in revision?

Note: As implied above, workshop is non-fault-finding in spirit. Also, it is not your job to try turn the piece into something you would write, but rather, to read it generously and openly and meet it at its own level.