

Workshop days have a number of ground rules, which we'll go over early in the semester. When taking in to account that we'll also be workshopping some of the exercises we write, you can see that more than half of our class time will be spent workshopping one another's work. It is important, then, that we respect one another in this process. That we come to these interactions with the best of intentions and that we work very hard to step outside of our "likes" and "dislikes" to see what the story is actually doing. Here are some very important ground rules for workshop. Please read them carefully now and again later, when we start workshopping.

The workshop is an opportunity not merely to receive response but also to give it—a form of practical criticism. Students should read carefully and make notes on all of the material for the workshop in advance of the discussion. It is disheartening for a student to see fellow-students writing comments on manuscripts during the workshop discussion. Students should write up a page or so of comments before the workshop begins, this page to be given to the person whose work will be discussed; such comments may be more specifically directed to the work than the workshop comments offered during the discussion period.

When preparing workshop material, participants should try first to discover the work's intentions, setting aside for the moment one's own tastes and preferences; toward the end of the discussion one could raise doubts about the intention--i.e., wouldn't a third person narrator be more effective for the thematic intent; is the convention chosen too great a limitation--but at least initially, the reader should try to describe rather than evaluate, and to be open to the premises of the work. To this end, it is often useful to tell the author what you remembered best about the piece a few hours (or a few days) after you first read it. Often, a first reading will provoke more questions than comments--one pleasure of workshop is listening to your questions being answered by other readers. A second level of engagement with the task is to locate those passages/devices/choices that seem most effective in pursuit of the work's intent or core. Often the most useful response a writer can receive is an indication of what is successful, but only after a discussion of the work's form and content. Thus, when writing comments, first try to describe the work's content in relation to the form chosen for it. A natural extension of this engagement is identifying passages/devices/choices that seem at cross-purposes with the rest of the work, or not as fully realized, clear, detailed, or graceful as they need to be. Fourth, workshop groups can be useful in speculating about change or additions--again, though, not in blind application of the reader's own taste or preference but in light of the work's deepest purpose.

At all these levels of consideration, comments need to be precise and detailed, offering evidence from the text to support assertions. A workshop should not be a poll; it is insufficient to say, "I like the opening of this story," or "I wanted to know more about the narrator"--comments should be supported by analysis and should be as descriptive as possible, without sliding into jargon.

As faculty leader, I serve not only as an active participant, but as discussion moderator. I usually wait for students to initiate the conversation but I may intervene to focus or redirect it. I also work to maintain a balance among the questions that might be raised, related to the work's strengths and weaknesses, the author's future work, and more abstract matters that the piece might raise.

It is quite important, as well, that students monitor themselves in the crucial balance between active participation and domination. Some checkpoints might be:

- Don't initiate the talk with a small editing point nor a broad challenge to the basic premises of the piece--a good place to begin is with that first level of engagement: description of, or a question about, the story's intention/plot/central conflict/tone.

- Don't ALWAYS be the first one to speak. New students in particular might be well advised to listen first for the tone of these conversations. At the same time, a student who never speaks denies him/herself the chance to learn through articulation, and shows a lack of generosity to fellow students who speak about his/her work.
- While preparing the manuscript, your comments are addressed to the author or to yourself, but the discussion in class is a dialogue. Members of the group should address/respond to one another as conversation unfolds yet not belabor points already covered thoroughly.
- Comments should be about the work at hand and not about the person who wrote it—writers, above all others, should be most vigilant about the power, privileges, and protection of the imagination.

In the past, the etiquette of the workshop has required that the author not speak during the discussion, unless called upon to supply some necessary information, not only to avoid "defense" of the piece but also to insure that he/she hears what readers take from the page (or have failed to take). Roughly half way through the discussion, he/she may wish to ask questions of the group or request a brief summary of the response--or to re-direct the discussion. It may be more useful to experiment with the author's participation: to ask questions, raise issues, or redirect the discussion. A workshop may be frustrating if there has been wide disagreement or if s/he feels especially attached to/vulnerable about the piece. The "buddy system" often helps--singling out some other member of the workshop to ask, a few hours or a day or so after the workshop, for a summary of what was said--or reviewing the criticism with the instructor. Sometimes a comment later will open a window, suggest a new way of thinking about the piece; sometimes, the group has misnamed but nevertheless located a weakness, and this attention prompts you to a greater clarity of purpose; most often, what you learn from the discussion will be made manifest less in the piece discussed but in new work.

The tone of the workshop should be supportive but rigorous, analytical but not judgmental, noncompetitive, vigilant against workshop jargon or preferred aesthetic strategies. Everyone should try to put their egos away. Participants should always feel free to question what seem weaknesses, poor choices or inadvertent missteps, but should also recall that the piece has been snatched from the desktop to which it will return, that some of its awkwardness may be the absence of authority that attends most work-in-progress, that it does not seek to represent the author's best or finished work. Everything is a draft, always.