Workshop Guidelines

In almost any situation, a workshop is the quickest and easiest way to get feedback on a piece of writing. The benefits are numerous, including an unbiased reading of the piece. While you are able to fill in the blanks on motivation and character development and you know exactly what you meant when you wrote a passage, new readers have only the text to go by and give their impressions on. Thus, workshopping serves primarily to tell an author what works and what does not.

However, as any writer knows, sharing your work can be difficult and nerve-wracking. To that end, every workshop has a set of guidelines that should be followed for both the author and the readers. The following is a set of rules that you should follow when workshopping for this class.

During the in-class workshop, we will go around the classroom twice. The first time around, you should give a one-word description of something that you think was done very well about the piece. During the second round, you should give a one-word description of something that you think could be improved. These can be narrative devices such as plot, characterization, pacing, word choice or they can be specific aspects of the story such as a character name or a theme you see.

After going around twice, we’ll give more in depth discussions using the positive aspects first and then the aspects that can be improved.

Below is a general set of guidelines for your commentary during the workshop and your notes on the manuscripts.

Author

* Submit your manuscript to the class via hard copy or e-mail a week in advance of your scheduled workshop. If you can’t meet the deadline, don’t expect detailed feedback, as you need to give readers sufficient time to read and comment on your work.
* If your piece is a first chapter of a work or a complete short story, there is no need to write any additional comments. You should present the work as it is because a reader should be able to understand what’s going on from what’s on the page.
* If you are presenting a piece from the middle of a longer piece, you should provide a brief summary of characters and plot developments up to the point where the piece takes place, but no information on what’s going on in the piece you submit.
* You should not speak during the workshop. After the workshop, you’re free to respond to questions and comments as well as ask questions of your own. You should not tell any readers that they are wrong as they’re only presenting their impressions of the piece from what you submitted, but you don’t have to take all suggestions into account. It is your piece of writing, so you get the final say on what comments you decide to incorporate. As you listen to feedback, you should write notes for yourself on your own copy of the piece, such as: “work on this section, people seemed confused by my description of the setting,” “this part worked really well, they got what I was trying to do,” “ask for feedback to clarify this point.”
* Authors will have the chance to read aloud 2-3 paragraphs of their work at the beginning of their workshop, both so that the author can hear what it sounds like when spoken and the reader can get a sense of the intended inflection.

Readers

* You are not line-editing, or in other words, grammar-checking the work. Please refrain from correcting grammar, sentence structure, or word choices (but please note if the way a sentence is constructed is confusing or if you don’t understand what the writer is trying to say). If a sentence is unclear, you should write a note that it is unclear and why it is unclear.
* You should provide detailed notes about how a passage affects you. Examples are, “I really like that Jenny stands up for herself here,” or “I don’t think it’s clear why George is reacting this way.” Comments should not be “I liked it.” or “I didn’t like it.” This doesn’t help the author. Try and figure out why you liked or didn’t like what you read. This will help you in your own writing as well.
* Other acceptable comments are, “This passage made me feel really sad,” or “I laughed out loud!” If it evoked an emotional response of some kind, you should tell the author so that they can decide if that was the response they wanted. Similarly, if you can tell that you’re “supposed” to feel something (a character gets very sad news), note if you feel it is believable or not and why.
* You should bring an annotated copy of the work to class with you for the discussion. You can, however, continue adding notes in the margins as we are going through critique. If you can, try to change the color of your pen so that the author can see the difference in how you took the piece at first and then through discussion.
* Remember to be constructive in all of your criticism. Don’t be cruel in your comments. We’re here to help one another, not tear one another down.