

Workshop Do's and Don'ts: How to Give and Get Good Feedback

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We will workshop two texts per class. This means that time is of the essence. I use a timer to ensure fairness and to make sure we get to everyone's pieces.

I ask the person whose work is being workshopped to read 1 or 2 paragraphs from his/her/their text, then we begin the conversation. Participants should all be ready with constructive feedback and have 1-page feedback letters on hand.

(NB: Workshoppers to bring 2 copies of this letter to class. One goes to the writer whose work is in question; the other is filed in the workshopper's portfolio file along with all other materials produced throughout the semester. The portfolio resides in a file box I bring to class each day.)

Workshop Rules: I do not “gag” writers in my class. This means you are allowed to talk during your own workshop. You need not sit in total silence. You can ask clarifying questions, for example. Sometimes I ask writers some questions about what they might have been trying to accomplish. That said, when your text is being workshopped, it's important to listen. Try not to get defensive. We're all here for the same reason. We're all trying to learn from one another.

Everyone should speak in every workshop. I conduct workshops as a conversation, and you should jump in as you have something to add. If you haven't contributed, I will call on you.

Do:

- Tell the writer what is successful in the text. What's working?
- Point out any areas of confusion. What's unclear?
- Speculate on what you think the “big” of this essay might be. What's it really about?
- If the essay hasn't found its point yet, then make a suggestion as to how this writer might find a point. What *could* this essay be about?
- Suggest avenues of inquiry (research) that might be fruitful. What might this writer try?
- Think about the structure of the piece and make suggestions or comments regarding it. How could this piece work better if rearranged?
- Try to see what this writer is trying to do. What does this text want to become and how can you help it get better?
- Think about what we've been talking about in class (i.e., scene, research, reflection) and how those lessons might apply here. Can you point to a specific passage of something we've read to help illustrate your suggestion or comment?
- Be generous in your reading of others' texts. We all make mistakes. If you find a passage that is wrong-headed, problematic, or even offensive in

some way, think about how to raise the issue generously but honestly. Don't assume the worst. Let's allow room for clumsiness and growth.

Don't

- Obsess about typos. You can point them out in your letter, but then move on.
- Start with the negative. Be sure to say what's working before you launch into critique.
- Be defensive (if you're being workshopped)
- Be cruel or mean (if you're workshopping another's text)

Phrases to avoid:

- *"I loved" / "I liked."* It's not forbidden to use these but please know that this kind of feedback is not especially useful. Sure, it makes a writer feel good but it doesn't give any insight. Better: describe what you see happening in the text and think about why you like it. That is more useful.
- *"this text was really relatable"* – OK, this is one of my pet peeves. This phrase is empty and is no better than "I liked this text." It might even be worse. Better: *"this text resonated with me BECAUSE..."* It's what comes after "because" that matters. I want you to try and identify what works in a text and think about why. That's being analytical. And being analytical is good.

Details to watch out for as you read and as you write:

- tenses: pick a tense and stick with it; don't flip flop between past and present for no reason
- subject/verb agreement
- structure: often we write our way to understanding and our last paragraph should actually be our first. Don't be afraid to play with the structure of your text and to move pieces of it around. Just because it came out of you in a particular order doesn't mean it must stay in that order.