

Appendix E

Guidelines for a Paper Workshop

Workshopping in Groups¹

The goal of a peer workshop is to help the writer of an essay see what aspects of the essay still need work and to suggest possible approaches to the essay's revision. It is a time for the writer to work directly with the audience to make the essay as effective as possible.

Readers: You are the audience of this essay, and it is your task to help the author achieve his or her desired reaction to the essay. The workshop is *not* a time for you to read your response verbatim to the author; he or she can read the response later. The workshop is a time to *talk* with the author about your reaction to the essay, about the author's concerns, about areas you think need more development, about ideas you did not understand, etc.

As the audience, you should tell the author how the text "reads." Your response to an essay cannot be "wrong" because it is your opinion. It is helpful to the author to know how readers are responding, and he or she can decide whether or not to revise the essay to avoid or heighten this reaction.

Focus on the essay's argument and main ideas. Talking about the argument of an essay is more valuable than talking about the details of the prose because after revision of the argument, the prose of the text may be drastically altered. Ask yourself, what are the two or three things I can say which will help this essay the most? Matters such as purpose, tone, perspective, large-scale organization, and logic should be first on the agenda. Do not ask the writer to accept or reject any suggestion on the spot. You are simply suggesting possible alternatives, which the writer can mull over.

Authors: Most of us have trouble responding well to criticism of our own writing. Writing can be a personal act, and an essay can become an object of affection and of almost parental pride. It can be difficult to separate criticism of the essay from criticism of our ideas and from criticism of ourselves.

Approach the workshop with a positive mind-set; remember that the session is for your benefit and will help you improve the essay before it is graded. You can set the tone for the workshop; if you seek out constructive advice, you will usually elicit it.

Try to avoid becoming overly defensive; if you argue away all your readers' reactions and suggestions, you defeat the purpose of a workshop. If you find yourself feeling defensive, take control of the conversation and start asking questions about the aspect of the essay—questions you know will help you in revision. Create a situation in which you feel your readers are working *with* you on the paper, not against you.

Do not feel, however, that you must accept every suggestion from your readers unquestioningly. Sometimes your readers' responses will be contradictory or confusing. Ask them to explain or elaborate. You are the one with an intended purpose for the essay, and only you can accomplish it. Your readers can help you see where you have gone astray, especially if you explain your goals to them.

Group Dynamics: You will be working in groups of three. Do not work from your written responses for the in-class workshop; instead, use your copy of the draft (which should already have your comments on it) as the basis for discussion. It often works well if the writer controls the discussion, at least in the beginning, but if the writer does not feel comfortable with this role, one of the readers should get the ball rolling. Your group should spend about twenty minutes on each paper, which should be enough time for you to discuss each paper thoroughly.

If you are looking for some structure, here are a few basic questions you can use to guide your discussion.

1. What did the readers see as the essay's argument? What was the author's intended argument? If these are different, what has gone awry?
2. Is the argument focused enough? Is it developed enough? In other words, does the author need to push his or her ideas one more step?
3. Does the author fully support and develop the argument? Do all the main ideas support the argument? Do any need more detail?
4. Is the organization of the essay clear? Are there transitions between ideas/paragraphs? Are the author's ideas easy to follow?
5. Are there any paragraphs which do not have a clear function within the essay as a whole?

6. Are there any generalizations in the essay you thought were unsupported or weak?
7. Was the author's tone in the essay effective? Was his or her diction (word choice, style, etc.) appropriate to the subject?
8. Did the introduction get your attention? How is the transition from the introduction into the argument? Does the conclusion do more than regurgitate what already has been said?
9. Does the author have any remaining questions?

¹Adapted in part from Jack Rawlins, *The Writer's Way*, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).