

21W.742J, Spring 2003

THE WRITING WORKSHOP

The writing workshop, as another writing teacher has called it, is "a communal conversation" among the members of a writing class about a piece of writing-in-progress done by one of the writers in the group. I like the phrase "communal conversation," so I've borrowed it for our use. To describe the workshop in that way highlights that all of us participate actively in that conversation, stresses that each one of us is responsible for reading the text in question with an open mind, reading it carefully and with our full attention, and then for contributing our perceptions, insights, and visions of the piece, what we see as its strengths, where we think it is going or could go, and how we think the writer might engage further with it in order to make it more successful--all in a process of focused dialogue, or conversation, with the writer and other readers in the group.

The first step in preparing for the workshop is *reading*. In that way it has much in common with your reading for the course, but with a significant difference: those published works are finished, so your reading is an exercise in discerning the operations of the text for your own purposes of learning from what it has to say and how the writer has managed to say it. When you read the writing of another member of our class community, though, your reading is aimed at assisting the writer to intervene in the text's production, to help the writer shape and hone and refine it.

In preparing for the workshop, you should read the text that is to be discussed once, and then read through it very carefully again. Try to locate the places in the text that seem to you to be in some way its *centers of gravity*, places where something happens which focuses the text and moves it in some particular direction. Then think about questions you have which the text does not answer--what do you still need or want to know? Finally, given what you understand of the writer's intentions for the piece, what suggestions would you give the writer for improving it? Write a brief note—a substantial paragraph to half a page—to the writer with your suggestions; you'll give your written response to the writer after the workshop conversation on his or her essay.

I don't mean that you prepare what you have to say about the piece, and then say it in the workshop, and you're done. It's nowhere near as cut-and-dried as that, and we don't want it to be. Instead, the communal conversation is *dynamic*: the talk stimulates new ideas, altered ways of seeing or thinking about the piece, and opens up possibilities that perhaps none of us foresaw before we began the conversation. That's what makes the workshop lively and valuable for everyone involved.

When we begin our discussion of the text in question, the writer will open the workshop by asking questions of us and waiting for our responses. The writer's most important role in the workshop is to **listen**. Sometimes, out of nervousness perhaps, writers do too much talking about their own work, and the important opportunity to hear how others read it, is lost. I'll help with trying to avoid that pitfall.

Our submission and response procedure will be this: On the day your essay is due, bring a hard copy to me in class, and **post a copy in the appropriate discussion forum on the server**. Print copies of the essays by people in your assigned workshop group and read and respond to them (in writing) in preparation for the in-class workshop. **Post a summary of your response on the server** two days before the class workshop (this will usually fall on a Sunday) so all of us can read everyone else's responses before coming to the workshop. When I have selected an essay for us to discuss as a whole class, print out a copy of that essay too, respond to it, and come to class prepared to talk about it. If this system works as I hope it will, we can begin the class workshops at a more advanced level, aware of how other readers have read the work and ready to build on that preliminary exchange in helping the writer to think about revision.

In class, the basic workshop format will be the writer asking these questions:

1. What strengths do you see in what I've written?
2. What seems to you to be my idea or point here?
3. What questions remain for you after reading?
4. What suggestions do you have for me in thinking about ways to make this better?

It is also appropriate, when time permits, for readers to ask at the end of the workshop for the writer's assessment of how useful our comments have been and what the writer's plans are for continuing to work on the piece.

The format I've outlined here is not fixed by any means, but will change as our focus of attention changes for particular pieces of writing. For instance, I might ask you during the workshop to think in a particular way about the text we are discussing, or to address particular questions about the text which I think could help every writer in the class or the group in thinking about her or his own work. Likewise, the writer whose work is being discussed might have specific questions about the piece and so might ask for our response to particular areas or issues regarding the work.

The process of the workshop, then—the specific ways we focus our attention on the texts at hand—will alter to meet our changing needs. Sometimes the whole class will focus on the work of one writer at a time; at other times you will work together in small groups and I will circulate to offer assistance and guidance. There are some things that must not change about the workshop, though:

- **The atmosphere must always be a safe and supportive one** for writers whose work-in-progress is up for discussion;
- The workshop must be **encouraging** at the same time that we strive to develop **a serious critique of the work under scrutiny** (and remember that a *critique* does not imply just negative criticism, but is the result of reading with critical insight—including recognizing what works well, how the writer has succeeded in realizing his or her intentions);
- The "communal conversation" of the workshop should **produce new insights and possibilities** for the work under discussion; should, that is, **provide the writer an incentive for further engagement with the text** and some concrete ideas for how to begin revising;
- **No one should usurp all the linguistic space in the workshop**; everyone should have equal time and opportunity to express her or his responses;

At the conclusion of a workshop on something you have written, you as a writer should be more conscious of how a reading audience responds to your work, should feel renewed interest and energy for returning to the piece and engaging further with it, and should have some specific ideas about how to begin the process of revision to achieve your purposes and aspirations for what you are writing.

The workshop has something to offer you when you serve as a reader too: an opportunity to learn how other writers approach a task, to acquire and practice using a critical vocabulary applicable not only to your own and your classmates' writing but to any text you read, and to hone your skills as a textual critic.

My hopes for our class workshops are that they will be focused, serious, energetic, and productive, and I will try to lead them in such a way as to ensure that they are a rich source of learning for everyone. I count on each of you to help me in that effort.