

Writer's Workshop Guide

A large part of this course is about regular participation in a writing workshop group. For each major essay, you'll be reading at least two of your classmates' drafts and be providing written feedback to assist each other as you work toward a final version of the essay. Remember, you're responsible not only for your own success in this course, but also for the success of your peers. Take this seriously.

How can I comment on my peers' drafts when I'm just learning myself?

Well, the most important thing to remember when participating in the workshop is don't correct, respond. I don't want you to play teacher, but instead to be readers. We can all respond to a text; we do it all the time. I am asking not that you look for "errors," but that you read carefully and describe how the text is affecting you as a reader.

In literature classes, we tend to describe what is going on in a story, poem, or novel rather than judge it or find mistakes. So, really what I'm asking you to do is write a short essay (yes, an essay) in response to your peers' drafts. Inherent in such an approach is respect for the text. The result is learning—allowing the text to speak on its own. You can benefit from asking that kind of respect for your writing and showing that kind of respect to the writing of others. But it isn't easy to describe what is going on in a piece of writing or to discuss how the piece works. It helps to have some strategies.

Some strategies for descriptive responding

The following are ways you can "describe" your peers writing without criticizing it. Giving descriptive responding is very useful to writers because it is "readerly" feedback, not "teacherly" feedback. After all, we write for readers, not teachers. So honest, thoughtful feedback from careful readers is more valuable than one just pointing out errors and mistakes. Use some or all of the following strategies to help you respond to your peers' drafts.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES:

- *Pointing:* Which words, phrases, or features of the writing do you find most striking or memorable (or which do you like the best)?
- *Summarizing:* What do you hear the piece saying? What's the main meaning or message?
- *Listening for What's Almost Said or Implied:* What do you think the writer is going to say but doesn't? What ideas seem to hover around the edges? What do you end up wanting to hear more about?
- *Finding the Generative Center:* What do you sense as the generative center or the source of energy for the piece? (This center might not be the main point or the "thesis." Sometimes an image, phrase, detail, or digression seems to give special life or weight to the piece. The center might be something minor that is "trying" to be major.)
- *Structure:* How is this piece of writing organized? Note that there's no such thing as "no organization." You can always describe what serves as the beginning, middle parts, and the end.
- *Voice, Point of View, Attitude Toward the Reader:* How would you describe the voice you hear (e.g., tentative, concerned, self-centered)? What is the writer's point of view or stance on the subject? Does he or she speak from an objective position or as an involved participant? (And does he or she speak in the first, second, or third person?) How does he or she seem to treat the reader?
- *Level of Abstraction or Concreteness:* Are the writer's generalizations appropriate to the subject? Are there places at which you feel you need details or an example?
- *Language, Diction, Syntax:* What kinds of words are used (technical, down-to-earth, rich in metaphors and images)? What kinds of sentences and phrases? Are there sentences that confuse you because of their word order or the way they are punctuated?

Responding on four levels

Another way to think about responding to your peers' drafts (and professional literature) is by responding on four different levels. There are many ways to read and respond to a text; the four listed below can help you organize a written response to your peers' essays. Consider each of the four when responding; maybe you can write a paragraph or two for each of the four levels.

- Literally—what do you think is going on in the passage?
- Emotionally—what personal associations do you make?
- Intellectually—what ideas or questions does this raise for you?
- As a writer—what did you notice about the author's craft?