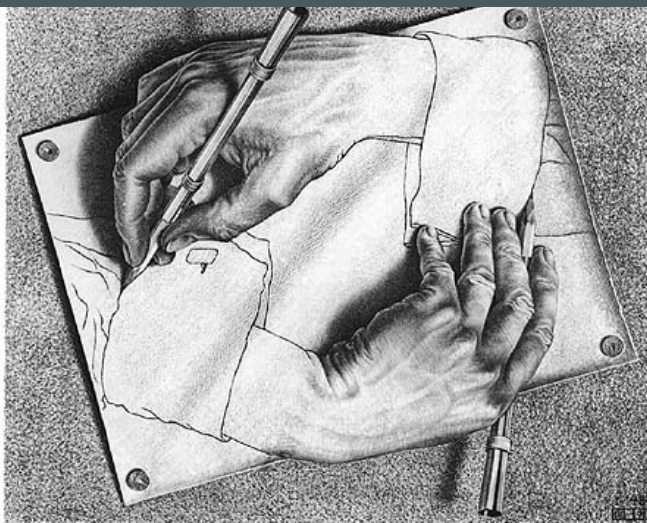


The Workshop Method

(a path to enlightened writing)



We share, critique, and learn from each other.
(in that order)

In a workshop situation, students read their peers' writing in advance—writing comments, notes, questions, and ideas in the margins of the work.

Then, on workshop days, the writer reads his/her piece aloud and shares his/her corrections and concerns. We call this “first say.” Writers always get first say because they know their own work the best.

Once the writer has had “first say,” then the floor is open for comments and questions. During this time, the writer does not respond. S/he simply takes notes and listens to the

conversation. Oftentimes, the people in the workshop agree about a particular problem. This signals to the writer that s/he needs to address that weakness. Othertimes, the people in the workshop will disagree (sometimes passionately). In that case, the writer knows s/he has a decision to make.

After everyone has spoken, the writer can answer questions that were asked and ask questions. This is not a time to “defend” the work, but **ONLY** to clarify what was said so that the writer has a clear path for revision.

Then we move on to the next piece.

It's not personal.

Critique the writing, not the person. That's difficult when someone writes about a personal event or a feeling. But we still owe the **writing** a critique.

It's not for “nice-nice.”

Writers deserve to know what they did well, but if all we ever tell each other is how great and meaningful and powerful the writing is, we'll never be able to improve. Tell the truth.

It's not general.

Specificity is still king. “I don't like the first stanza” or “I don't get it” doesn't help a writer. Instead, “In the first stanza, I'm confused about who the speaker is. It seems like the gender changes between lines 1 and 4.”



Words are
sacred.

They deserve
respect.

If you get the
right ones, in
the right order,
you can nudge
the world a
little.”

—Tom Stoppard,
British playwright

Useless Critique Words:

happy, sad, boring, bad,
good, nice, cool,
interesting, amazing,
awesome, beautiful, fine,
great, really

Some ideas for critique...

1. What confuses you? Be specific. The gift of a specific question cannot be undervalued.
2. What do you hear the piece saying overall? Do you think that's what the writer intended?
3. What words, sections or pieces are strongest? Weakest? Why?
4. What parts are the most believable? What parts are not? Why?
5. Which lines most appeal to the ear? Which do not appeal to the ear at all?
6. Are there awkward sentences? Which ones? What makes them awkward?
7. Which images stand out? Why? Which images seem a little dry or underdeveloped? What might help those images come alive?
8. Are there errors in punctuation, grammar, spelling?
9. Are there clichés? Where?
10. Is the writer trying to do something that doesn't quite work yet? Where? What could s/he do to make that technique or idea work?
11. Are the sentences or lines an appropriate length for the genre?
12. Does the writer use too many adjectives or adverbs? Where?
13. Is the writer "showing" or "telling?" If the writer is "telling" where do you see that happening? And what could the writer do to change that?
14. Are there paragraphs, lines or stanzas that could be cut? Where? Why?
15. Are there paragraphs, lines or stanzas that could be moved? Where? Why?
16. This list never ends...