

WRITING WORKSHOPS

WHAT IS A WRITING WORKSHOP?

A workshop is a process for discussing the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing of any discipline, in a group setting or one-on-one with another person. During a workshop session, participants present their work with the shared goal of improving each other's writing. Although workshops are most often done for an assignment with classmates, it can also be helpful to workshop pieces of personal writing with a writing group. Workshops are beneficial for **both** writers and commenters as suggestions offered to the writer can provide the rest of the group with useful ideas and strategies for their own writing.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE WORKSHOP PROCESS

While each workshop is unique, it is critical to follow some steps to ensure that each session works smoothly and efficiently. Keep in mind that there are no set rules for a workshop, and these steps can be adapted or added to according to your group's needs. Here are some general guidelines that can be used for a workshop:

1. All participants decide how to split up the time between those sharing their work.
2. The first writer sharing their work introduces what their piece is about and their biggest concerns in the piece.
3. The writer reads their piece (or a short excerpt) out loud or gives adequate time for silent reading. Commentators should make notes for feedback during this time.
4. The commenters begin sharing their feedback, starting with the positives of the piece. Writers should be taking notes at this time.
5. As their end time approaches, the writer may clear up any confusion they had with any of the suggestions made before moving to the next writer.

These steps can be followed for the rest of the participants sharing their work until the time for the entire session runs out. Remember that a successful workshop uses guidelines that members develop together and that help everyone in the group actively participate.

WORKSHOP ETIQUETTE

In a workshop, it is important to be ready before and throughout the session so that everything moves smoothly. Here are some suggestions for keeping good workshop etiquette.

Commenters should be mindful of how much time they are taking to make their suggestions, giving others equal time to speak.

Commenters should be prepared to give written and verbal feedback on each piece of writing.

If possible, writers should ensure that all participants have access to their work, such as in a shared file or printed copies, prior to the session.

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Writers should ensure they have chosen the section of their work they will discuss prior to the session, so that no time is wasted in the session.

Writers should ensure their work is not so lengthy that it takes a long time to read.

Writers should thank each commenter for their suggestions, even if they may not agree.

Writers should keep an eye on the time to ensure they will not cut into other writers' time.

Writers should disclose if their work describes any sensitive topics that anyone in the group may be uncomfortable with prior to the session.

All participants should limit distractions out of respect for whoever may be speaking.

TIPS FOR WRITERS AND COMMENTERS

After learning about the workshop process, it is valuable for writers and commenters to know how to ask, receive, and give constructive feedback. Here are some practical tips to use during a workshop:

For writers:

- Don't be afraid to tell the group about your major concerns. For instance, if you are a multilingual writer who needs help finding the right vocabulary for a section, tell the group that.
- If you are unsure which type of feedback you want to ask for, start with discussing the purpose of the section or any goals you had for the writing. Ask the group if they felt that was achieved.
- Remember that a criticism of your work is not a criticism of who you are as a writer.
- If you do not agree with a suggestion, it is okay to not use it.

For commenters:

- Be considerate that sharing one's writing is a vulnerable process when giving feedback.
- Balance giving constructive feedback with asking the writer questions about the piece.
- Don't focus on grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Instead, focus on the bigger picture of the piece such as the organization and development of ideas.
- Offer feedback that focuses on the writing instead of the writer. For example, saying "I couldn't follow this section because..." rather than "You totally go off track here" is more useful and does not single out the writer.
- Provide feedback that is more suggestive rather than prescriptive to preserve the writer's ownership of their work. For example, saying "I understand your ideas here, but I suggest focusing more on one idea because..." rather than "If you want this to sound better, you need to put down what I said" acknowledges the writer's ownership and keeps the feedback suggestive.