

Guidelines for Workshop Etiquette and Feedback on Fiction and Poetry

FICTION GUIDELINES FOR WORKSHOP FEEDBACK:

Comments that are less than insightful and courteous are not acceptable during workshops, so use the art of being tactful when addressing areas that may need strengthening in a peers' work. Our workshops should be a positive learning experience, so everyone feels safe in sharing their work. Therefore, do not just flatter and praise peers with empty words of "I loved your story" but actually identify the WHY and specific examples of what worked well. It helps no one to understand their strengths or weaknesses if you do not answer WHY it doesn't work or WHY/HOW it does work well. Moreover, if you want to receive feedback on your work, you must also provide feedback on your peers' work by using some of the points below as a guide to help you discuss a work of fiction.

Note, during the workshop session of your work, you should be listening carefully and taking notes on the feedback others provide on your work. Remember you should not interrupt others when they are giving feedback and do not become defensive, but listen, take notes, and at the end of the feedback, ask members questions if you require clarification on something that they identified. Again, anyone who is less than courteous in giving or receiving feedback will be asked to leave and come back when they have constructive and helpful feedback to offer. A good rule of thumb is the "sandwich approach" by layering your feedback in the following way: identify a specific strength in the work, follow with an area that needs improvement, and end your feedback by offering another key strength in the work.

1. What's working and why?*

- We will first focus our attention on the things the writer has done well in the manuscript. These comments should center on particular elements of craft as well as particulars of theme, style, and whatever else really grabs your attention.

2. What's the central conflict?

Here we'll move to a discussion of the story's focus. Consider the following kinds of questions:

- What problems is the main character working out?
- Is the story about an idea in the author's head or about a character's life?
- Is the meaning of the story inseparable from the character's experience?
- How do the story's beginning, middle and end function? Does the story feel resolved?

3. Which elements of craft are at work in the story and which areas of mechanics (grammar and punctuation) may need to be strengthened?*

- Consider which element(s) you feel that the author has best utilized in the story. Then consider what's missing. What elements (image, character, voice, point of view, dialogue, setting, scene, summary, story, plot, structure) need to be explored more fully to ensure the story's success?
- Consider which grammar and punctuation issues need to be corrected, such as spelling, missing punctuation (i.e. apostrophes, commas, etc.) for minor mechanical errors. Then, consider some major mechanical errors that they need to address; in other words, do they have run-ons, fragments (incomplete sentences), subject-verb agreement errors, inconsistencies in verb tense (jumping back and forth between past and present), etc.?

4. Some setting questions:

- Is the setting important to the story?
- Do we need to know the specific place or atmosphere in order to fully understand the narrative?
- Is the specific time or time period important?
- Does the author establish the setting quickly enough?
- If the setting is unusual, do we learn enough details to make it believable and vivid?
- Does the setting help to reveal character and/or story?

5. Some character questions:

- Who are the central characters?
- Are the characters consistent and believable?
- Are we sympathetic to the character? Do you think the author wants us to be?
- Does the character appear to have a life of his own, or does he feel manipulated by the author?
- Are the characters distinct and vivid? If not, is this because the author is relying on
 - 1) telling rather than revealing character through action, dialogue, etc...?
 - 2) relying on stereotype to construct character?
 - 3) not using enough concrete detail to give a fresh impression of the character?

6. Some point of view questions:

- From what point of view is the story told? Are there good reasons for telling the story from this pov?
- Do we know whose story this is?
- Are there sudden switches in pov that are jarring?
- If the story is told from the first person pov, does the character have a distinct voice?
- Does the author's voice intrude in the story? Does it affect the story positively or negatively?

7. Some dialogue questions:

- Does the dialogue sound natural or wooden?

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- Does it reveal character personality?
 - Does it move to swiftly or seem overly talkative?
 - Do all the characters talk alike one another?
 - Does the character's speech confirm other things we know about her?
 - Do exchanges between characters feel real, or are they manipulated for the author's purposes?
- 8. Some style and structure questions:**
- Is the writing consistent—does it suddenly become flowery or abstract in places?
 - Does the style of the writing obscure meaning?
 - Does the language suddenly switch from comic to serious or vice versa without explanation?
 - Does the form fit the content? Is there a reason for the story's structure?
- 9. Speculate on theme, plot and structure:**
- First, plot out the narrative as it is given then summarize the story.
 - Does the choice of plot make sense?
 - Are there things we still need to know to fully understand the story?
 - Does the story's structure release information in a sensible order and manner?
 - Does the opening paragraph correctly indicate what's to come in the story?
- 10. Consider alternatives for better exploring the story:**
- The manuscripts critiqued in workshop should be considered just one way to approach the story. Is there any advice you can give the author about what you would do with the material that is and isn't included in the current manuscript?
 - Where do you really feel that the story starts and ends?

POETRY GUIDELINES FOR WORKSHOP FEEDBACK:

Comments that are less than insightful and courteous are not acceptable during workshops, so use the art of being tactful when addressing areas that may need strengthening in a peers' work. Our workshops should be a positive learning experience, so everyone feels safe in sharing their work. Therefore, do not just flatter and praise peers with empty words of "I loved your poem" but actually identify the WHY and specific examples of what worked well. It helps no one to understand their strengths or weaknesses if you do not answer WHY it doesn't work or WHY/HOW it does work well. Moreover, if you want to receive feedback on your work, you must also provide feedback on your peers' work by using some of the points below as a guide to help you discuss a poem.

Note, during the workshop session of your work, you should be listening carefully and taking notes on the feedback others provide on your work. Remember you should not interrupt others when they are giving feedback and do not become defensive, but listen, take notes, and at the end of the feedback, ask members questions if you require clarification on something that they identified. Again, anyone who is less than courteous in giving or receiving feedback will be asked to leave and come back when they have more constructive and helpful feedback to offer. A good rule of thumb is the "sandwich approach" by layering your feedback in the following way: identify a specific strength in the work, follow with an area that needs improvement, and end your feedback by offering another key strength in the work.

1. What's working well in the poem and why?*
2. Does the student leave the reader with any unanswered questions? If so, what are your questions that would help clarify your understanding of the poem?
3. Does the reader understand the meaning of the poem and can identify a central idea or theme? If so, summarize the meaning of the poem, or are the student's references too vague and contrived that it is too abstract to identify the meaning.
4. Does the student use specific, concrete details and imagery to "show" rather than simply "tell" the reader? Is the language vivid, not flowery, archaic, or cliché? Does it sound original, use colorful images, and elicit an emotional response?
5. Do they use a consistent and appropriate point of view? If not, what helpful suggestions can you make?
6. What sort of tone do they use in the poem? Is the tone appropriate? If not, would a more sarcastic, didactic, or melancholy tone work?
7. Does the student use forced rhyme or does the rhyme enhance the poem? If so, what lines need work and why? What appropriate suggestions can you make?
8. Does the student use figurative language, such as personification, simile, metaphor, or hyperbole, and does it enhance the meaning of the poem or is it used inappropriately? If not, what suggestions can you make?
9. Does the student use an appropriate structure with stanzas and/or an appropriate meter for each line to create harmony and consistent beat/rhythm or simply smoother transitions and continuity between lines or does it create more confusion because the lines are too lengthy or wordy and maybe the line breaks make it difficult to understand?
10. Does the student have major mechanical and/or minor mechanical errors? Which grammar and punctuation issues need to be corrected, such as spelling, missing punctuation (i.e. apostrophes, commas, etc.) for minor mechanical errors? Then, consider some major mechanical errors that they need to address; in other words, do they have subject-verb agreement errors, inconsistencies in verb tense (jumping back and forth between past and present), etc.?