

USING PEER REVIEW TO IMPROVE STUDENT WRITING SUPPLEMENT 2: GUIDELINES FOR SMALL GROUP WORKSHOP

Guidelines for Small Group Workshop

The goal of small-group workshops is to help the writer see what aspects of the essay still need work and to suggest possible approaches to the essay's revision. This is a time for the writer to work directly with the audience to make the essay as successful as possible. By reading and responding to each others' work, you also learn from each other and improve your ability to revise your own work. The following guidelines outline how to work together to create effective and respectful workshops.

The Role of the Reader: Preparing Your Comments for Workshop

You will need to prepare your comments on the student essay based on the commenting method outlined by your instructor. Whichever method you use, be sure to focus on higher-order issues, such as the overall purpose, argument, thesis, evidence, analysis, and organization. As the audience, your goal is to help the writer achieve her or his desired reaction to the essay. Ask yourself what you can discuss that will help the essay most substantially.

Don't get bogged down in questions about language use, punctuation, or formatting, unless these issues interfered greatly with your ability to comprehend the paper. Be aware of the fact that "grammar issues" often have more to do with sentence structure than with details like subject-verb agreement or missing or incorrectly used determiners. (Determiners are words like "the," "many," "some," "his," and "all.") Thus, it may be helpful to respond to substantial "grammar issues" by simply pointing out that certain sentences are difficult to understand. Suggest that the writer break these sentences down into several shorter sentences. Each of these shorter sentences should contain a single idea. All of these new sentences should be linked together by precise transition words. If you feel comfortable providing a model that the writer can follow in breaking down such sentences, it's OK to provide one sample during your workshop.

The Role of the Writer: Workshopping Your Writing

Most of us have trouble responding well to criticism of our own writing. Writing is such a personal act, so it can be difficult to separate criticism of the essay from criticism of our ideas and of ourselves. Approach the workshop with a positive mindset. You're all in the same boat and working toward improving your writing. The session is for your benefit and will help you improve the essay before it is graded. You can set the tone for the workshop by asking a few key questions of your critiquers before they begin discussing your work. Create a situation in which you feel your readers are working *with* you on the paper, not against you. Try to avoid becoming defensive. If you argue away all the readers' reactions and suggestions, you defeat the purpose of the workshop. Do not, however, feel that you must accept every suggestion from your readers. Sometimes you'll get contradictory or confusing reactions. Ask for explanation and elaboration. Your readers can help you see where you've gone astray if you explain the goals of your essay to them.

Don't get bogged down in questions about language use, punctuation, or formatting, unless you found it very difficult to express yourself accurately in parts of the text or you struggled to format your paper according to the instructor's requirements. If you had difficulty with these issues, ask very specific questions, like this: "Can you understand what I want to say in the second sentence of the third paragraph? If not, can we talk about different ways of expressing this idea?" Or, "Do you know how I can change the line-spacing in Word?"

General Workshop Principles

1. Start with Concerns of the Highest Order. All parts of writing contribute to the overall meaning and effectiveness of an essay, from main argument to word choice to use of the semi-colon, but because of the limited time of workshop, focus on the elements considered to be of higher concern first. For example, don't begin by critiquing comma use; begin with the main argument. Focus on depth of analysis or use of evidence, not typos or punctuation. Once larger issues have been discussed, then look at lower order concerns such as grammar and mechanics.

2. Use specific examples. Avoid general blanket statements. Don't just say "there is lots of evidence," but say which evidence is successful, which isn't and why. Point to specific paragraphs ("I can't follow the argument from paragraph 5 to 6") or sentences ("I feel like the second sentence in paragraph 5 makes a generalization"). If the writer needs to go deeper, point to the place that left you too much on the surface.

3. Offer critique, not summary. It might seem like summarizing what the essay does makes apparent the problems inherent within it, but workshop doesn't offer enough time for summary. Jump right into specific points and use well-chosen details as a means of evidence for your critique. No need to offer a play-by-play.

4. Be kind. It is generally true that people will be more likely to listen to critique when it is paired with positive feedback. Take a moment at the outset or during the workshop to say something positive about the writer's work—what impressed or surprised you? Also, be considerate when offering critique. Put yourself in the writer's shoes.

5. But, seriously, offer critique. Writing is an act of discovery, and there is no end to discovery. Aside from a few kudos you feel should be pointed out, the workshop should be focused on what can be improved or explored further. Even if you love an essay, consider further questions you have about the writer's ideas in order to offer him or her a new way of seeing their work (though this doesn't mean being nit-picky!) and developing it.

On the Day of Workshop

The following steps will help the workshop stay on track. *Don't just read from your written critique.* This may overwhelm the writer and will not create a threaded discussion. Instead, use your copy of the draft with margin comments as the basis for discussion and offer your comments at appropriate moments in the conversation.

It often works well for the writer to lead the discussion, but if he or she isn't comfortable doing so, another member of the group can get the ball rolling. The group should allow about fifteen to twenty minutes for each paper, depending on the length.

Step 1. Start each workshop by discussing a few positive attributes of the essay in question. Be specific about which parts are working and discuss what the student's strengths are.

Step 2. Share with the group what you think of the essay's argument. Discuss any discrepancies that arise between each differing interpretation of the argument. Then address any confusion or questions you had about the argument. Point to specific areas of the essay where the argument got off track and discuss how they could be improved.

Step 3: Discuss the other issues that you commented on as needing work. Each point that a student brings up should be discussed by the group before moving on to the next issue. Each point should also be discussed in relation to specific areas of the essay. *Avoid conversations about sentence-level issues unless a sentence interfered with your ability to understand the overall argument.* These issues can be reserved for margin comments.

Step 4: Once all points have been covered thoroughly, the writer should ask any follow-up questions he or she has. The questions can be ones that he or she had before the workshop and/or questions that arose during the workshop.

Step 5: Once all students have been workshopped, hand the marked up essay to the student being workshopped. Use any remaining time to work on the issues that came up in workshop. You may look over your peers' feedback and ask more questions, freewrite about the argument, write a revision to do list, or work on clarifying areas that were pointed out during workshop.