Chapter Five

Workshops: what they are (and aren't) and how to make the most of them

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Most writers have someone, usually family or friends, who will tell them their writing is superb. However, as fantastic as it feels to hear that your work is excellent, it will not help you to improve as a writer. To do this, you need honest, thoughtful feedback on your writing, and the creative writing workshop is an ideal environment for this to occur. The format, the style and the shape may change depending on your lecturer's style, but the core idea remains the same.

The roots of creative writing in academia can be traced back to 1880 at Harvard University, and the University of Iowa began to accept creative work for degrees in 1922. Throughout the twentieth century, many universities established creative writing programmes, and, along the way, the workshop became the default form of teaching. In the twenty-first century, the basic workshop form is common throughout the world – mainly because it's been proven to work. Many celebrated writers, including Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Tracy Chevalier and Rita Dove, attended creative writing programmes and workshops. Critics sometimes malign it, but the workshop remains in place primarily because it is successful.

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AN: 630335 ; Norris, Sharon.; Studying Creative Writing
Account: s3700943.main.ehost

One criticism sometimes levelled at workshops is that participants may not be very experienced writers. They may have published little, if anything at all, by the time they come to attend their first workshop. However, writers or not, we are all bombarded constantly with narrative and imagery through novels, stories, journalism, films, plays, television, poetry and advertising. This experience in reading narratives and imagery will give you the basic skills to enable you to participate in an introductory workshop, and, as you progress through your studies, you will become increasingly proficient readers and editors of creative work. As your skills in reading others' writing develops, your ability to edit and read your own will also increase. Furthermore, the skills you from workshopping (such as editing, giving and receiving feedback and working effectively in small groups) will stay with you long after you've completed your creative writing course, whether you become a published writer or not.

This chapter will explore the structure of a workshop and then consider best practice within the workshop, both when your own work is being discussed and when you contribute as a reader and editor.

The structure of a workshop

A workshop is, in its most basic sense, a space where writing is discussed. It gives you a rare chance to get a group of people to pay very close attention to your work. In most undergraduate workshops, you will read some published work, complete some writing exercises (in and out of class) and workshop your own and other students' writing. Reading is discussed in more detail elsewhere in this

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book, but remember as you workshop that the reading you are assigned (and the reading you complete generally in your life) will influence the way you discuss writing. As you read, think about the techniques and the craft decisions the authors have made. These are the same craft and technique choices that face you as you write, and discussion of these choices in relation to the writing you have produced will benefit both your own writing and that of your peers.

Workshops give you an excellent opportunity to improve your writing. They aren't a place for therapy, airing your political views, carrying out personal vendettas or imposing your will on everyone else. Nor can any workshop promise to make you a best-selling author. But workshops can help you to improve what you write. Workshops also are not a place for you to submit a half-done piece of writing and wait for a committee to finish it for you. You will garner ideas, suggestions and feedback, but it will not magically improve a piece of writing you have not put time and energy into creating. While workshopping may improve your grade, in that you have gained readers who will copy-edit, that should not be your only motivation for workshopping.

When you enter into a workshop, you are entering into a collegiate relationship with your fellow participants, whether you are a BA student, a postgraduate or a published writer. Think of the workshop, no matter how informal, as part of your professional activity as a writer. The other participants are your fellow writers, your associates and not simply 'students'. In other subjects you might take, the student sitting next to you will be discussing subjects such as literature, history, archaeology, chemistry, etc.

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The discussion is generally prompted or led by the teacher, and the content you are studying has been created or discovered by a person who is either long dead or at least living and working somewhere else.

In contrast, in a creative writing workshop, you and the people sitting around you have created the content. You are engaging in professional activity by creating, presenting and discussing writing. The professional nature of the classroom should engender an ethos of supportive, encouraging yet honest feedback and respect for your fellow writers. Approaching all the participants as professional colleagues also means that your behaviour within the workshop needs to be of a certain standard. This certainly doesn't mean that you have to dress as if for an interview or never laugh at jokes. The best part of being in a workshop is the strong relationships that build up between participants, particularly if you remain the same group for a period of time. You will probably know the students in your creative writing workshop better than those in any other class. Yet with established, clear boundaries, you can personally make a workshop more productive and enjoyable for everyone.

When you first begin workshopping, the lecturer or leader is likely to be quite active. She or he will guide the group and may prompt people to expand on their comments. She or he may also offer their own suggestions. As you advance through your career as a writer, student writers will begin to play a much larger role in the workshop. This increased responsibility will be discussed later in the chapter.

When fellow students give you their work to read, you are being asked to do a great favour. You also have

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a fantastic opportunity to have other people read your work. But how do you participate in the workshop to gain the maximum benefit, both for yourself and your fellow writers?

Your own work

The workshopping method can improve your writing because you gain new readers. Your workshop colleagues are far better able to gain an overview of your piece than you are: they come to it cold, just as a reader picking up a book in a shop does. They can ask questions that might seem obvious to you (of course the background of character X includes Y!), but their questions can raise issues that you have not noticed. Considering answers to these questions may also resolve or solidify ideas or concepts you had been pondering but had not yet made a firm decision on.

If your work is scheduled for discussion, share it in a timely manner. Remember that people have busy lives, so it might not be convenient to read it at the last minute. Make your copy as 'clean' as possible; edit it several times. While it is useful to get copy-editing feedback, it's usually more useful to get substantive feedback, not extensive notes on spelling and grammar. Speak calmly about your work. Try your best to avoid being defensive: remember that the feedback you receive in a workshop is far more considerate than anything you're likely to get back after you've finished your education and are sending out manuscripts 'for real'.

Sometimes it can be difficult to put your work forward. Maybe life interfered, and you only had an hour to work on it rather than two, or maybe you just couldn't manage

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to get the piece to come out properly. Perhaps you have spent hours and hours on your work, but the thought of giving it to other people to read makes you feel just a little bit sick. All of this is perfectly normal. However, no matter how nervous you feel, try your absolute best to avoid saying, 'Here's my story/poem/play/scene, but it's really rubbish.' A negative approach puts undue pressure on your fellow writers. They will either (1) see it only as a poor piece of work and seek out the flaws you have so clearly declared to exist, or (2) be as nice as possible about the piece to try to build up your confidence. The latter is far more likely to occur in a workshop environment, especially if a group is new to workshopping. Neither is particularly useful to you, and it makes your colleagues as nervous and distressed as you are.

Workshops usually are structured in one of two ways. In the first, the author cannot speak until the end of the workshop. This means you can't answer questions or defend your decisions. The second method allows for writers to enter into the discussion and answer direct questions. There are advantages to each. The first means that you have to listen more closely. It also means that you do not spend the majority of your workshop talking, which limits how much feedback you can receive. However, being able to speak can help point the workshoppers towards areas you want to discuss: for instance, you can settle at the beginning that something isn't a typo, you did intend for the female character to have green hair, etc.

Most workshops will include a point where you can ask any questions you want to be addressed. Take advantage of this opportunity and prepare some in advance. These can be technical questions (point of view, verb tense, etc.)

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or they can be overarching questions about imagery, character, structure or endings. Write them down before you come to the workshop, as it's very easy to forget them once in the workshopping environment. You will not be able to remember everything that is said, so it's also useful to take notes during the workshop. People will often say things aloud they will not write down. Keep notes, or ask a friend to take notes. When the active discussion ends, be polite and thank people for their feedback.

After your workshop ends, allow some time to settle yourself emotionally. It is rare to gain such an intense burst of attention for something you have done. If the discussion has been intense, allow some time to re-establish the dynamic between yourself and the other group members. This is another excellent reason to take notes – you have recorded everything, so you don't need to analyse all your feedback at once. As the group moves on to the next piece to workshop, make sure you participate fully in the next discussion. You can analyse your own workshop after the class ends.

Give yourself some time to reflect on your feedback. Examine the notes from other writers and your lecturer, and look at the notes you have taken in the workshop. You are likely to disagree with at least some of the comments you have received. Sometimes you will receive feedback that bothers you personally. You have spent a huge amount of time crafting your work, and how dare those other writers not recognise the brilliance of it? Dealing with this is an important part of workshopping. Remember that you do not write by a committee. The piece remains yours, and your name alone will appear on it. Do not feel that you have to change your piece to please everyone. There

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are a few exceptions – *do* correct spelling mistakes, and think seriously about grammar or punctuation feedback you receive. The copy-editing feedback you receive can be very useful, as it can be all too easy to overlook small mistakes.

Think carefully about how you respond to feedback, and remember that your fellow writers are trying to help you. Don't complain loudly about someone who doesn't understand as you leave the room. It's also not a space for a personal vendetta. As you workshop, it is likely you will identify two or three people whose feedback you value highly. It may be that you feel they 'get' your writing, or it may be that they are exceptionally good editors. This is normal and useful. However, do not discount the other voices in the room. Your readership, once you get published, will not only be people who 'get' your work. Reviewers will not always 'get' your work.

Workshopping in an age of social media also brings its own set of challenges. While in the past university workshops used to involve lecturers or students spending time and money photocopying writing and distributing it to the rest of the group, now work is often shared on universities' virtual learning environments (VLEs). Classroom discussions can sometimes extend beyond the official environment into social media such as Facebook or Twitter. Remember to consider this space public (unless your privacy settings are very strict) if you are discussing other participants or their work, and don't post anything online you wouldn't say in front of the group. Other opportunities exist to share your work beyond the classroom, including new online 'writers' workshops' and other reading groups. Some of these are run by reputable organisations, such as

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publishers or agents, but others are not. Always investigate these carefully before you post your work, and certainly before you pay anyone to edit your work.

The work of others

Creative writing workshops generally focus on the writing of a few participants per session, which allows for each piece of work to undergo substantive discussion. Your work will probably not be discussed every week, but think about how you want to be treated in a workshop and extend the same courtesy to other people in the group when it's their turn to have their work discussed. Make sure that you attend each session if you are at all capable of making it. Pay attention – which means don't whisper to the people sitting around you, don't text or surf the web and definitely don't fall asleep!

Even if you feel anxious about contributing to the workshop, it is still important to attend. There will always be a few members of every workshop group who seem to have a lot to say about every single piece, and that can feel intimidating if you are a quieter person. However, the one short, pertinent comment you have to offer may be more useful to the author than all the rest. Moreover, you are constantly learning in a workshop. If writer A has an issue with characterisation, the suggestion writer B gives might just help with your own writing. As has been mentioned before, learning to be a better editor of others' work can be extremely useful in translating back to editing your own work.

In a writing workshop, you may be asked to read work that is completely different to what you would read for

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pleasure. You might be reading horror, sci-fi, literary fiction, etc. Whatever the genre, always remember you are reading with an eye to improving the writing.

Often, workshops are arranged in a circle or square, so you can see everyone. Even though the lecturer is leading or moderating the workshop, do not address all of your comments to him or her. Address your comments to the person whose work you are discussing. The lecturer does not need to know that changing a word on page three will improve the piece – the author does. Making eye contact while giving feedback is an excellent way to maintain the respect levels and friendliness in a workshop. Sometimes lecturers will want you to jump into the workshop when you have something to add. Some lecturers will go around the room, asking each student to alternate with praise and something constructive. Each workshop leader will have their own style, so this chapter will address best practice for giving feedback generally.

As a first step, prepare for the workshop and be ready to address the work under consideration. If you have been asked to read a piece in advance, read it in advance. If at all possible, try to read through each piece twice. For the first time, read it as you normally would for enjoyment. See where the piece goes, think about the plot, the narrative or the structure of the poem. Look at it in a macro level. If you bought this in a bookshop, what would you think? The second time through, read it on a micro level. Think about the function of each word, each image, each line. Read some of the dialogue aloud. Throughout this process, keep notes. If these notes are for you alone, you can be as blunt as you like. Write down everything you think about the piece. Given the pressures of university life, it's

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likely you'll often walk into the workshop room having come from other classes, and you may have read the work late the night before, or even a day or two ago. It can be very easy to forget your reactions, and no author wants to hear that you had a very good idea but you forgot it on the bus. Make notes about each piece – ideally on a printed copy of the text, or on a bit of paper you can then give to the author.

Authors may have a chance to raise issues in advance of the workshop, for example, saying they are unsure if the ending works and they would welcome ideas. 'Ideas' mean just that – they aren't asking you to write the ending for them. Comments from the group may trigger a new spark of inspiration for them, but they are under no obligation to apply all the suggestions in the notes. As mentioned before, no one writes by committee, so don't be offended if authors don't implement your brilliant idea for them.

Try to consider the author's requests, but also formulate your own questions and suggestions. This does not mean suggesting that a story they've set in New York in the 1980s should be set in space because you like science fiction. Nor does it mean that you need to make suggestions about how to make it more like your own writing. You might instead comment that the fashion of the 1980s doesn't appear much in the work, and you think mentioning clothing could really enhance the setting or the development of character X. Similarly, if you are reading work that uses very concrete metaphors and you prefer abstract metaphors, do not tell the other writer they are doing it incorrectly. Instead, consider how the imagery works throughout the poem. If, for example, in the middle of a

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series of nature images, an image of urban decay pops up, think about whether the transition works or if it jars.

Once you enter a workshop, certain types of feedback are best avoided. The worst possible thing to say in a workshop is 'I really liked it' and stop. While it is lovely to hear, it does absolutely nothing for the writer in terms of improving their work. Immediately follow up with a comment that specifies why you thought it was good, such as 'I liked the portrayal of the character', 'I liked the use of rhythm'. Be specific. 'The use of rhythm in the second stanza is very strong, particularly in line three.' This also allows you to follow up with what could be improved. 'The image in the fourth line isn't as concrete as it is in line six', or 'the character does something on page three that seems completely out of character based on what happens on the previous two pages.'

Only through specifics can the author see how a piece may be improved. Think both small-scale and large-scale. Examine the work sentence by sentence and any poetry line by line. Think about the choices behind each word. At the same time, think about larger questions, such as the overarching tone of the piece, the creation of characters, the voice, the point at which the piece begins and ends. Does the title fit? Is there a title?

Avoid attacking the writer personally. Always assume that the narrator is not the author (unless you are in a life-writing or creative-non-fiction class). Avoid saying, 'the way you killed the mother on page three': make it clear that you are discussing the character's actions. The character's actions are not the same as the author's! Remember when you are talking about the work that the person who wrote it is in the room, not dead or in another

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country or city like in a literature or history class. Even if your best friend in the world is in the group, do not tease them about the writing *or* give their work lavish and unwarranted praise. Treat their work exactly the same – as a professional colleague.

As mentioned before, early on in a workshop, your lecturer will prompt you to go further in your feedback. Try to avoid single statements – even positive ones such as 'It's perfect, I can't find anything to fault.' Again, a comment like this is lovely to hear, but not very helpful. In a workshop, you are not necessarily looking for 'faults'. You want to stretch a piece further, pushing both the work and the writer to take it to a higher level of creativity, expertise and fluency.

Raymond Carver wrote that 'Evan Connell said once that he knew he was finished with a short story when he found himself going through and taking out commas and then going through the same story and putting commas back in the same places … I respect that kind of care for what is being done' (Carver, 'On writing', p. 24). You want to take similar care both with your own writing and with that of your fellow writers in your workshop. You should also apply Carver's advice to your own writing – and learn to know when you need to stop editing!

Getting the balance right in feedback

This chapter has discussed the two extremes of workshop feedback, from what we might call the 'I really liked it' approach to the personal attack. Where does the balance lie between constructive criticism and destructive criticism? In part, that balance is achieved in tone of your

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feedback. For example, when I was an undergraduate, a student in my workshop put forward a story. The main character was brilliantly written as a truly terrible character who hurt everyone around her. I said, 'I really hate this character because' but the other writer clearly never heard my 'because'. He went bright red and stayed upset with me for some time. It is vitally important to be honest in your feedback, but it is worth pausing for half a second to consider how to phrase your feedback. The tone you strike is particularly important.

As your creative writing expertise increases, your lecturer will probably start to take a diminished role in the workshop. As you and your colleagues contribute more to the workshop, finding that balanced line is increasingly important. The best policy is to give very detailed feedback. For basic-level editing – spelling, vocabulary, syntax – make a note of it on the copy of the student's work or on a spare sheet of paper and hand it to them. This frees up time to have substantive conversation about a piece – what Spencer Jordan's chapter on editing calls 'summative editing', the bigger picture. Rely on the notes you made while reading the piece. If the piece is presented in class, take notes as it is being read. You may find that you disagree with something another writer in the group says about the piece under discussion. Say so. It can be very useful to a writer to have two colleagues discuss their views about a particular issue. A forthright debate between two or more members of the workshop will be beneficial for the writer to hear. It reminds everyone that viewpoints differ, and, between themselves, the two workshoppers may come to agree with a different view. Furthermore, in discussing another student's work, you may also want to

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argue passionately for some point, and you should. Just make certain you maintain that same level of respect.

You will find that you will not please everyone when you come to submit your work to agents or editors. When you send your work out, remember the differing viewpoints you have heard in your workshop and remember that agents and publishers similarly have conflicting opinions. For instance, both William Golding's *Lord of the flies* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone* received multiple rejections before eventually being published with great success.

Workshops are also invaluable for teaching you how to let go of your pieces. Regular workshopping can not only improve your writing, it can also improve your confidence, which means you are able to submit your work more easily.

Workshopping after university

Students on most creative writing programmes churn out writing at a pace that can be difficult to maintain after formal education. This speed of creation means that writing is often workshopped quite quickly. Having immediate feedback on work can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. Enthusiasm from your workshop can spur you on to finish the work, or a lukewarm response can make you want to drop it completely. Consider when is best for you put forward a piece. Keep in mind that you are showing a work in progress, so don't let the reaction of your workshop turn you completely off something.

After you leave formal education, if you decide to pursue a career as a writer, you will receive feedback from

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professionals. Your aim will be to get your writing in front of agents, editors and publishers, and you will long to receive feedback from them. However, as noted above, the feedback they send is likely to be far more brutal than anything you receive in a workshop. Many writers continue in workshops they organise themselves after leaving university in order to continue to receive feedback. Think about asking the people from your university workshop who you got along with particularly well to stay in touch and keep discussing writing.

Conclusion

Workshops allow you to connect with others and gain vital feedback to improve your work. They won't make your creations perfect or guarantee financial success, but the supportive and challenging environment they provide can be just the spur you need to get your work to a publishable standard. Two key points to remember: you don't write by a committee. It will be your name on the final product, so make sure you are happy with it. And second, your workshop participants want to help you: they are generously sharing their time and attention. Treat them as you want to be treated, and respect their writing just as they respect yours.

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