

ARTIST COMMONS

# HOW TO CRIT BETTER



# CORE AGREEMENTS

## ASSUME GOODWILL

We're here to help each other grow.

## MULTIPLE READINGS CAN COEXIST

Your interpretation is a viewpoint, not the final truth.

## BE PRECISE

Specific statements beat vague ones every time.

## CONFIDENTIAL

What's shared in cohort stays in cohort.

# PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES

1

## NO MONOLOGUES

Cap any single comment to 30–45 seconds.

2

## RAISE HANDS

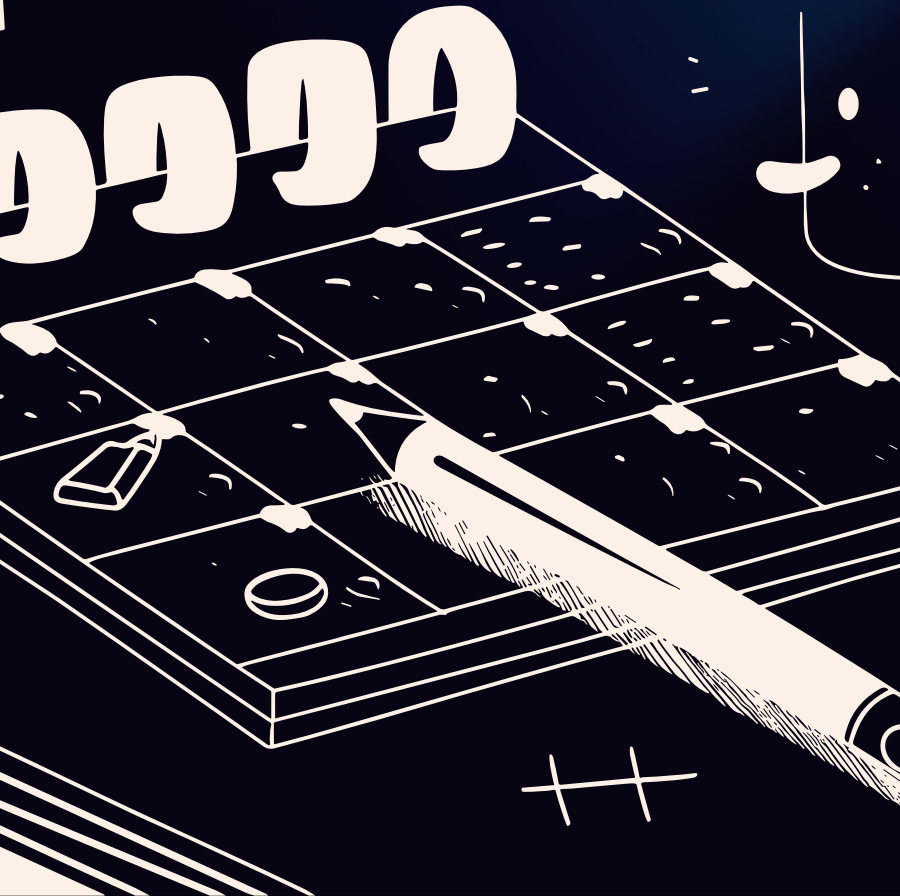
Your mentor will call on you in the order they see hands.

Don't raise your hand again until you've seen that everyone has gone at least once.

3

## QUIET MEMBERS

Quiet members should commit to at least 2 contributions per presenting artist.



SHARE THE ARTWORK 24–48 HOURS  
BEFORE YOUR COHORT FEEDBACK  
SESSION

*Don't share any text or explanations.*

# KEY COMPONENTS

## OBSERVATION

What you see/hear

## EVIDENCE

What in the work caused your response

## EFFECT

What it did to you as a viewer

## EXPLORATIONS

A question or a next step to try



# THE LANGUAGE WE SHOULD USE

## USE "I" STATEMENTS

"I notice..."

"I'm confused by..."

"I'm curious about..."

## BACK UP YOUR PERSPECTIVE WITH EVIDENCE

"I felt \_\_\_\_\_ because..."

"Because the lighting does \_\_\_\_\_, I read it as..."

## NO CERTAINTY LANGUAGE

"Obviously"

"Always"

"Never"

"Everyone will..."

## USE "PERHAPS" OR "MIGHT" OR "ONE POSSIBILITY"

Avoid should statements like: "you should do \_\_\_\_\_"

Instead open a path of possibility: "I would be curious to see what would happen if..."

# CRITIQUE CRAFT CHOICES, NOT THE PERSON

This includes not critiquing their motives or taste:



## MOTIVE

Don't ascribe motive or psychologize them.  
"You're afraid to..." or "You want attention..."

## TASTE

Don't impose your taste or judge other people's taste.  
"I don't like digital art" or "I don't get abstract art"  
is not feedback.

# THE ARTIST'S RIGHTS



THE ARTIST CAN ASK FOR WHAT THEY NEED

Request more craft notes, more talk about the meaning of the work, or just questions.



THE ARTIST DOESN'T NEED TO RESPOND TO ALL FEEDBACK

Simply say "Noted" and move on (no debate required).



THE ARTIST CAN HIT PAUSE

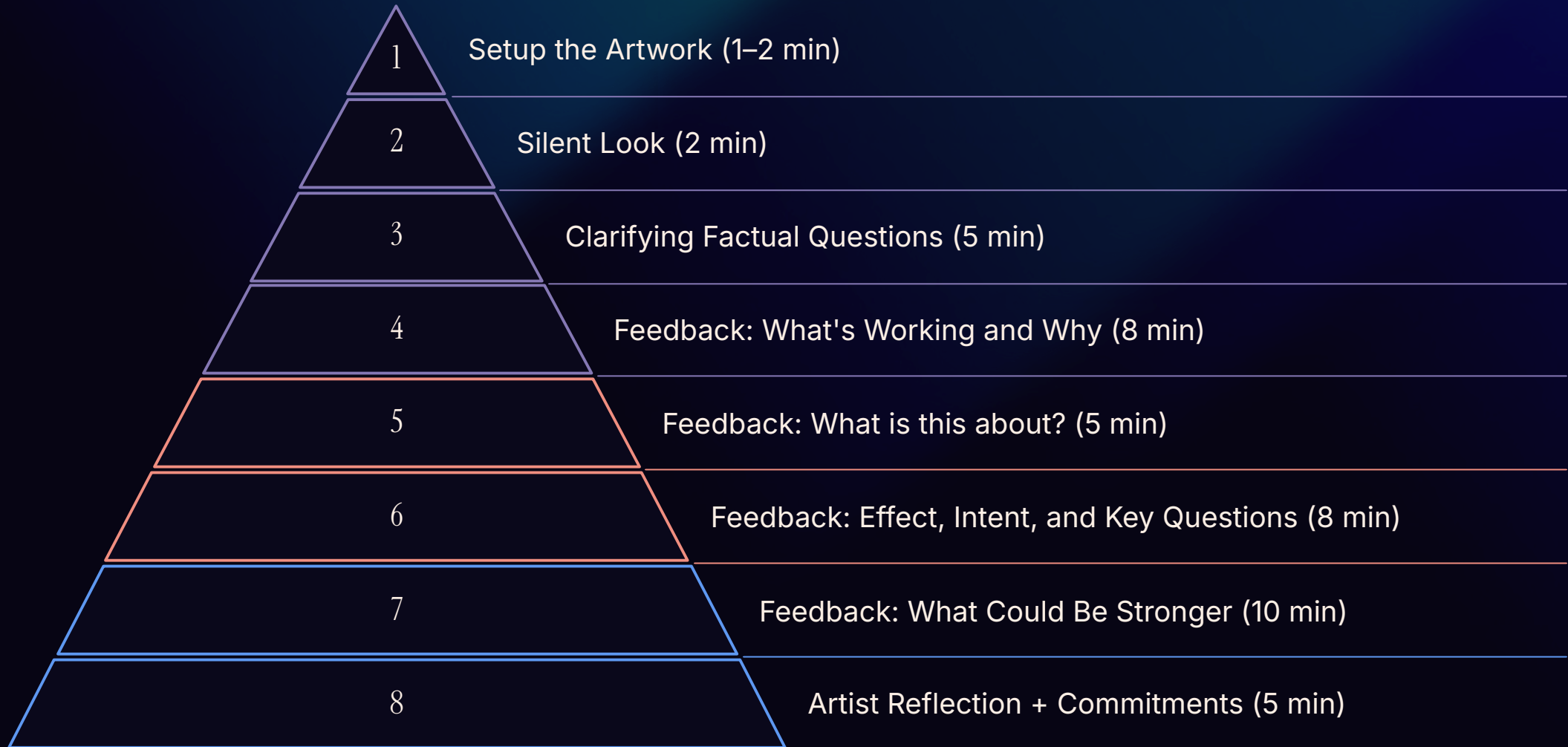
You can pause the feedback session if it becomes unproductive or unsafe.





**The Presenting Artist always has power here.** This Feedback Session is for you. We are for you. We are here to help you get out of your head. To help you see your work more clearly. To help reveal that there are a multitude of perspectives and relationships to any image. The goal is better next steps, not perfect consensus.

# FEEDBACK FRAMEWORK (45 MIN)



# 1. SETUP THE ARTWORK

1-2 MIN

1

WHAT THIS IS

Title/series/context

2

WHAT STAGE IT'S IN

Early/later draft

3

WHERE TO LOOK

How to access or navigate

**Rule:** *These are only the logistics the group needs to look (number of images, order is fixed or flexible, is sound on/off, etc.)  
No sharing intent, meaning, or goals. You won't get a neutral read on the work if you do.*

## EXAMPLE: ARTWORK SETUP

This is called *Time Explorations*. These pieces are part of a series of digital works. There are eight images here made over the last few weeks. I'm looking to release it online for collectors in about two months. This is about a dozen hours of work, but it still feels like an early draft.

Make sure you click the diagonal arrow in the corner so you're seeing it full-screen when you look. You can use the arrow keys to flip through.

# WHAT THE SETUP TIME IS NOT FOR

① Explaining Intent or Meaning

② A long backstory

③ Self-deprecating framing

"This is bad," "Sorry it's not ready," "I hate it."

It nudges the group toward reassurance instead of analysis.

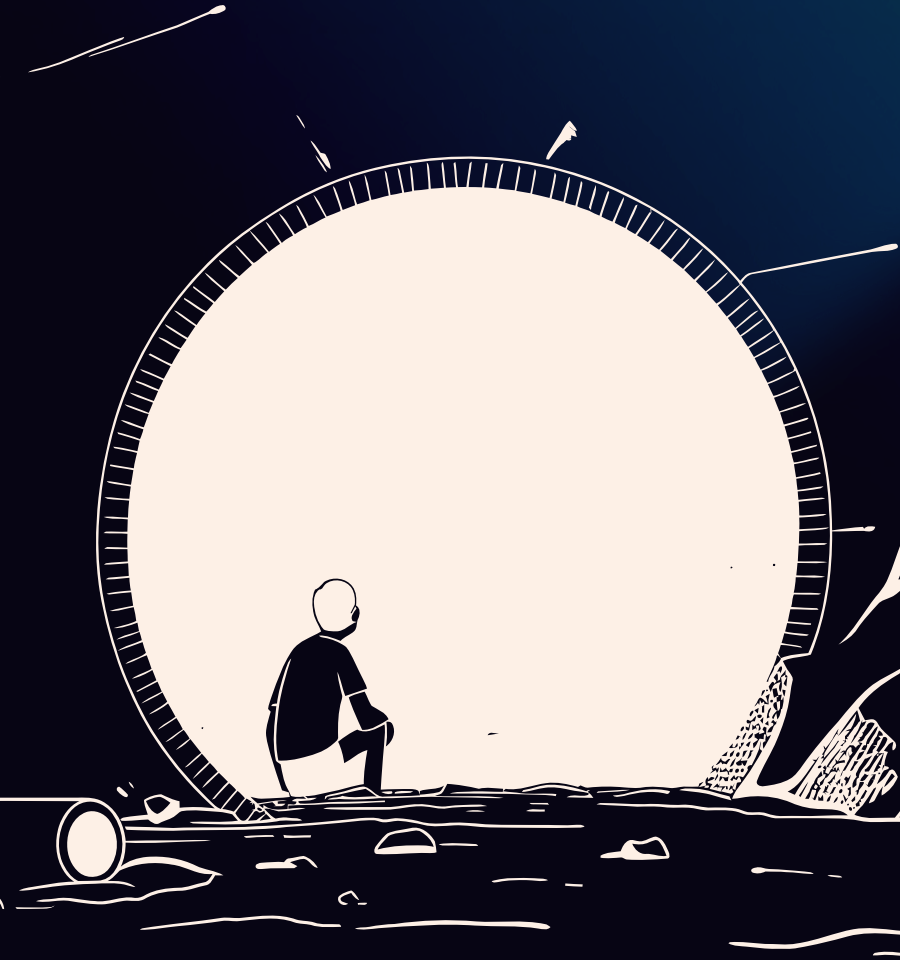
**You made something. Let the work speak.** We care about you. Let us come in neutral so we can see it most clearly and be most helpful to you.

## 2. SILENT LOOK

2 MIN

Everyone looks without speaking and makes notes for later rounds. This is a chance to slow down from our usual pace and way of looking.





## WHAT TO AVOID DOING DURING THE SILENT LOOK

- No reactions out loud: "wow," "I love this," "I'm confused."
- No feedback or clarifying questions (yet).
- No advice in chat or side messaging.



**Rule:** no talking until the silent look is done.



## SIMPLE PROMPTS FOR TAKING NOTES

"I NOTICE..."

"I'M DRAWN TO..."

"I WONDER..."



## THESE COULD INCLUDE

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Where your attention goes first

---

Repetition, such as forms,  
colors, gestures, motifs

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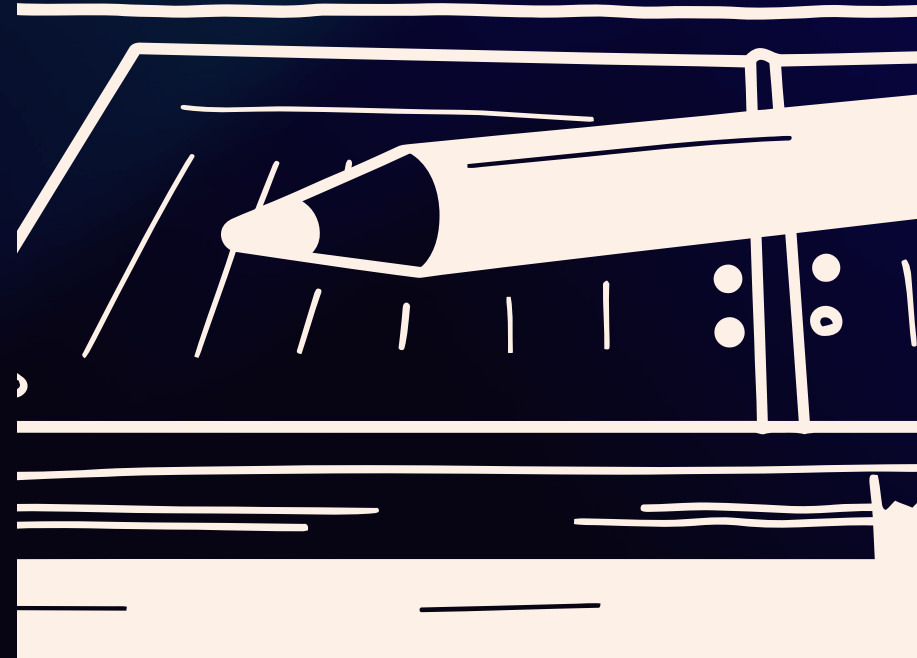
Visual shifts in tone, scale,  
rhythm, density, space

---

What feels most alive or a  
moment that holds you

---

What you're unsure about



### 3. CLARIFYING FACTUAL QUESTIONS

5 MIN

These are **what** and **how** questions. Clarifying questions are for shared understanding. They help the group see the work accurately before anyone interprets it.



# CLARIFYING QUESTIONS ARE



FACTUAL

What, where, when, how



PHYSICAL

Materials, size, process, sequence, constraints



NON-LEADING

They do not imply what should change



ANSWERABLE QUICKLY

Ideally 1 sentence long

***Think:*** "What do I need to know to read this fairly?"

## EXAMPLE: CLARIFYING FACTUAL QUESTIONS

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What's the intended format (print, web, installation)?</li><li>• What size is this in the real world?</li><li>• Is this the final order?</li><li>• What materials or tools did you use?</li><li>• What parts are hand-made and which are not?</li><li>• Any limits you're working within?</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is fixed and what is still flexible?</li><li>• Do you have any hard deadlines or submission requirements?</li><li>• Is there accompanying text or should it stand alone?</li><li>• Where will this be encountered and who is the intended audience?</li></ul> |
|---|--|

# WHAT CLARIFYING QUESTIONS ARE NOT

## INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

- "What does the red represent?"
- "Is this about grief?"
- "What did you have in mind when...?"

*Interpretation comes later, when the group reports what they read in the work.*

## OPINIONS DISGUISED AS QUESTIONS

- "Don't you think it would be stronger if...?"
- "Have you considered making it less...?"
- "Isn't the problem that...?"
- "Why didn't you just...?"

# PRESENTING ARTIST GUIDELINE FOR ANSWERS

ANSWER IN 1-2 SENTENCES

IF YOU FEEL PULLED INTO  
MEANING

Say: "Hold that for  
later."

IF THE QUESTION IS  
OUTSIDE TODAY'S SCOPE

"That's not my focus for  
today, so it's not  
decided yet."

IF YOU DON'T KNOW

"I'm not sure yet."  
That's a valid answer.



# CLARIFYING FACTUAL QUESTIONS ONLY.

No opinions yet. No praise, no critique, no advice. We're just information-gathering to make sure we all know what we're looking at. "Just the facts ma'am."

## 4. FEEDBACK: WHAT'S WORKING AND WHY

8 MIN

Our first opportunity for feedback is about what is landing, not what should change. You're sharing with the artist what you found resonant, exciting, or memorable about a work-in-progress. We start with positive and non-judgmental feedback that is specific to build trust and empower the artist before we move into a deeper critique.

- 1 Share a "what's working" or "what's strong" statement that is specific and grounded in evidence.
- 2 Tell the Presenting Artist what was striking about the work. ("I like...")



# EXAMPLES

“

"I notice the repeated horizon line. It made me feel steadier, because it anchors each image even when the landscape changes."

”

“

"I like the pacing from image 2 to 3. It made the shift feel dramatic, because the negative space opens up."

”

“

"I love how the sound sits under the voice. It made the piece feel intimate, because that mixing choice puts the voice in the foreground."

”

# A GOOD "WHAT'S WORKING" COMMENT HAS 3 PARTS:

01

OBSERVATION

What you saw/heard

02

EFFECT

What it did to you as a viewer

03

EVIDENCE

What in the work caused that effect



**Simple formula:** "I notice \_\_\_\_\_. It made me \_\_\_\_\_. Because \_\_\_\_\_."

# SUGGESTIONS FOR WHAT TO COMMENT ON

## A) VIEWER EXPERIENCE

- What grabbed your attention first?
- Where did your eye go next?
- What stayed with you after looking?

## B) CRAFT AND FORMAL CHOICES

- Composition, palette, scale, rhythm, sequencing
- Material handling, finish, clarity, consistency
- Where tension is created and resolved

## C) MEANING AND READING (WITHOUT INTENT CLAIMS)

- What themes or questions you read
- What emotions or atmosphere the work carries
- What feels ambiguous in a productive way

## D) COHESION AND VOICE

- What makes it feel like "this artist"
- What feels consistent across the series
- What feels newly specific or sharpened here

# WHAT'S NOT ALLOWED

## VAGUE PRAISE

- "It's beautiful." "It's cool."  
"Nice work."
- If it's true, make it useful by naming why.

## EVALUATION LANGUAGE

- "This fails." "This is weak."
- The goal is to be descriptive and responsive, not judgmental.

## ADVICE OR SUGGESTIONS

- "I like it, but you should..."
- "This would be stronger if..."
- "Have you considered..."

THE ARTIST'S ROLE HERE

LET YOURSELF RECEIVE.

This round of feedback is about how the work is already reaching people.

Take notes on what resonated. Especially if you hear something you hadn't realized about the work.



## 5. FEEDBACK: WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

5 MIN

This round is about what the work is communicating right now — what it's saying and how it's saying it. Many artists do not begin with a fully formed artist statement. Meaning often arrives through making. This step gives the artist a mirror for how much of what they put into the work is coming across.

We do this before the artist weighs in, and thereby weights how we're viewing the piece when, in the next round, they describe their intended effect and Key Questions. Right now is about naming what we think the work is doing, saying, or asking to help the artist hear that early meaning.

# OPERATIVE QUESTION: WHAT DO YOU THINK THIS IS ABOUT?

## 1. CLAIM

What you think it's about

## 2. EVIDENCE

What in the work led you there



**Formula:** "I read this as communicating \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."

## 6. FEEDBACK: EFFECT, CONTEXT, AND KEY QUESTIONS

8 MIN

This round is where the feedback session becomes **artist-led**. As the artist, you finally get to share the intended effect of the work and the context behind it. You then choose what kind of help you want by asking 2–3 Key Questions. The group responds directly to your request.

Our goal is not to cover every concern you have about the work. Our goal is to get clarity on pivotal choices that will move the work forward.



# IN THIS ROUND, THE PRESENTING ARTIST WILL DO TWO THINGS

## STATE YOUR "EFFECT SENTENCE"

Describe in one sentence what you want the viewer to experience, understand, or feel when they encounter the work. What is your intended effect?

## DESCRIBE THE CONTEXT

In a minute or two, describe the context behind the piece(s). Keep it simple. The more you speak here the less time there is for you to receive feedback. Only say what is absolutely necessary.

## ASK 2-3 KEY QUESTIONS

Each question should focus on a single decision embodied in the work. Our aim is to sharpen pivotal choices you made with clear, actionable feedback.

You're encouraged to come prepared with your 2-3 key questions. Though you can change them as you hear feedback.

**The Cohort responds to the questions as asked, with no detours.**

# A STRONG KEY QUESTION IS

## SINGULAR

One concern/choice  
per question.

## SPECIFIC

e.g. it's about attention,  
clarity, tension, pacing,  
cohesion, etc.

## ANSWERABLE

Each question should  
be something a viewer  
can answer from what  
they see in the work.  
They shouldn't have to  
guess or ask you to  
explain.

## DECISION DRIVEN

It will clarify which  
direction to take.

## EXAMPLES: KEY QUESTIONS

- "Where does your attention go first, then second?"
- "Does X feel consistent across the series?"
- "Does Y help the emotional tone land?"
- "What looks least resolved right now?"
- "What feels unclear or underdeveloped?"



# AVOID IN YOUR KEY QUESTIONS

## ASKING FOR EVERYTHING AT ONCE

Too many questions makes feedback shallow.

**Ask one Key Question at a time.**

## LEADING QUESTIONS

"Do you see how it's about grief and surveillance capitalism?"

**Ask neutral questions instead, so you don't accidentally box viewers into one way of seeing.**

## 7. FEEDBACK: WHAT COULD BE STRONGER

10 MIN

This last round of feedback is where we move from what is already working to what might strengthen the work next. Our goal is not to redesign the entire project. Our goal is to offer a small number of clear, high-value possibilities that the artist can experiment with.

**In this round, we offer:**



# FOUR TYPES OF FEEDBACK YOU CAN OFFER

## INTERPRETATION/EVALUATION

- "I think the work gains/loses energy when..."
- "For me, the part that feels most/least coherent is..."

## CONSTRUCTIVE ADVICE

- "It might be worth trying..."
- "I'd be curious what happens if..."
- "Perhaps the next step could be..."
- "One adjustment that might help is..."
- "It could be interesting to see what happens if..."

## COMPARATIVE STATEMENTS

- "For me, compared to the rest of the works in the series, this piece carries more weight because..."
- "This one appears to answer a different question than the others because..."
- "I think this image is perhaps the strongest/weakest link right now to bridge these two sections because..."
- "Perhaps this output, more than these others, points a way forward for the rest of the project because..."

# WHATEVER YOU SAY HERE SHOULD BE

1

FRAMED AS JUST YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Using "I" and "perhaps" statements.

2

BACKED UP WITH EVIDENCE

"Because I see in the work..."

3

OFFER POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE AND EXPERIMENT

"Perhaps" and "might" offer a branching path of possibilities.



## EXAMPLE: WHAT COULD BE STRONGER

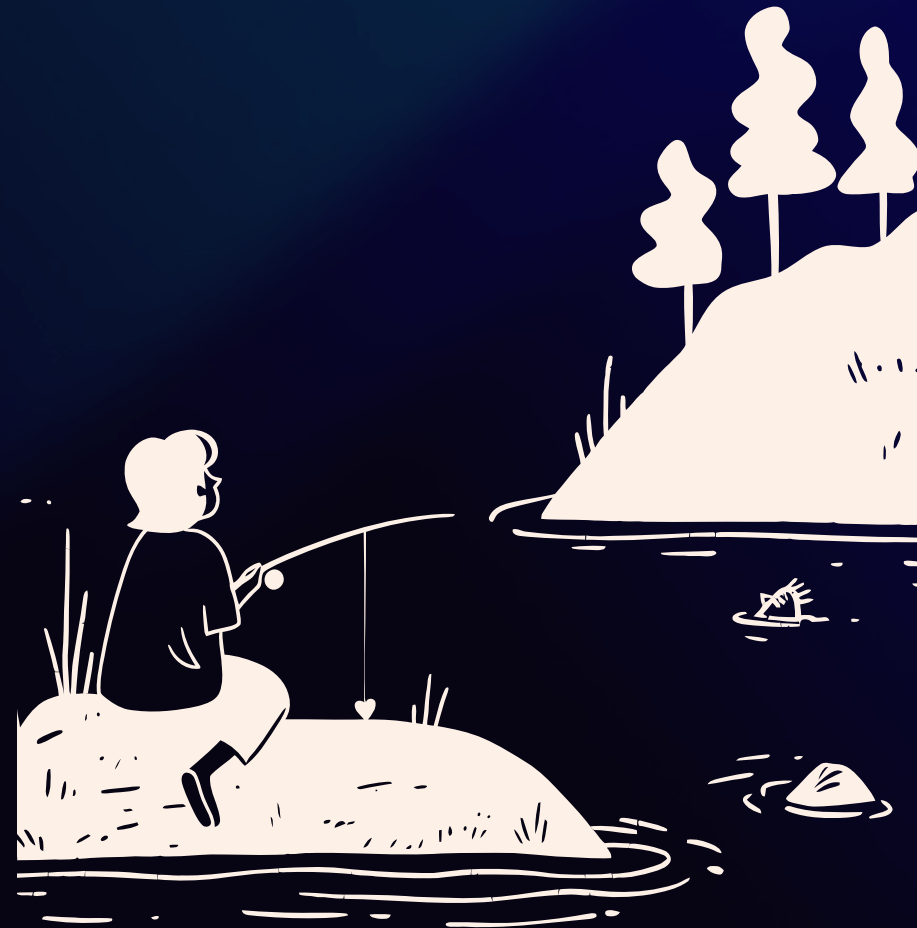
"The palette reads quiet, almost restrained in this abstract piece, because the values stay so close together. It creates a sense of calm for me. But my eye never finds anything to anchor on to keep my attention in the frame. I want to linger, but I'm finding it hard. I'm curious what would happen if you experimented with adding a couple high-contrast accents to create some clearer points of interest for the viewer."



## 8. ARTIST REFLECTION & COMMITMENTS

5 MIN

This is where the feedback becomes useful for after the session. The goal is not to defend the work or answer every comment. The goal is to turn what you heard into clear next steps.




# PRESENTING ARTIST SHARES UNINTERRUPTED

- "What I'm taking..."

- "What I'm not taking..."

- Two concrete explorations to try before next time.

 **Rule:** The Presenting Artist doesn't debate feedback, they synthesize it.

# WHAT I'M TAKING

*Name the strongest things you heard. Keep it specific.*

## STRONG PROMPTS:

- "The pattern I noticed in your feedback was..."
- "The biggest surprise for me was..."
- "The most helpful clarification I got is..."
- "What I want to preserve as I revise this is..."
- "The tension I want to lean into is..."
- "The choice I'm more confident about after hearing you is..."
- "The question I want to keep working with is..."


# WHAT I'M NOT TAKING

*Name what you're setting aside for now, and why.*

*Keep it neutral. This is not rejection. It's focus.*

## STRONG PROMPTS:

- "I'm setting aside \_\_\_\_\_ for now because it's not my priority this week."
- "I'm not taking \_\_\_\_\_ because it would pull the work away from \_\_\_\_\_."
- "I'm parking \_\_\_\_\_ until I solve \_\_\_\_\_ first."
- "I'm not ready to decide \_\_\_\_\_ yet."

 **Rule:** You don't need to justify yourself. One sentence is enough.

# COMMIT TO TWO EXPLORATIONS

A good exploration is:

1

SPECIFIC

You can tell if you did it.

2

LIMITED AND REALISTIC

It fits in your available time and resources.

3

USEFUL EVEN IF IT FAILS

It teaches you something.

# EXPLORATION PROMPTS

- "Before next time, I'm going to experiment with..."
- "I'll make two contrasting versions to explore where..."
- "I'm going to remove/add/shift \_\_\_\_\_ and see what changes."
- "I'm plan to try a variation that pushes \_\_\_\_\_."

## ACCOUNTABILITY:

- "I'll post a progress update in the cohort WIP channel by \_\_\_\_\_."



# WHAT THIS REFLECTION TIME IS NOT FOR

- Re-explaining intent or the backstory
- Responding to each person's comment
- Asking the group new questions (save that for the cohort text chat)

## EXAMPLE: TAKEAWAYS & EXPLORATIONS

### WHAT I'M TAKING

Several of you responded most strongly to the restraint in the palette and the tension between geometry and softer marks. That tells me the quiet intensity is the strength to protect in this body of work.

### WHAT I'M NOT TAKING

I'm setting aside the idea of adding text for now. I want this to stand on visual structure first.

### EXPLORATIONS

I'm going to make two studies, one with a single high-contrast accent and one with none, and compare what happens to attention. I'm also going to push the hard/soft contrast further in one area and see whether it sharpens the central tension.



# FEEDBACK FRAMEWORK (45 MIN)

