Gwen Ottinger

# Make Your Writing Workshops Effective

The assignment was straightforward: Read a draft of a classmate’s senior thesis and write a critique of it. As a brand-new college professor, I felt I was doing a good thing for my students. I explained to them that peer critiques would help them improve their theses—and their grades.

The peer critiques students turned in were not what I’d had in mind. “This is really good,” some said, or “You’re a great writer!” Others invoked writing dogma they learned in high school. “Don’t use passive voice.” “Your sentences are too long*.*” I couldn’t see how this feedback would help students improve their theses. I quietly abandoned the assignment.

I ran into the same problem again when I began taking creative writing workshops. I submitted my early attempts at short stories for critique and got feedback from my classmates that was evaluative (“This is terrific!”) or prescriptive (“Your characters need more depth”) but that didn’t help me understand how to make my stories better.

I was tempted to abandon the workshops, just as I had the peer critique assignment. But deep down I knew I needed that feedback. I just couldn’t put into words what I needed it for. Without understanding its purpose, I couldn’t get what I needed from my creative writing workshops. I also couldn’t explain to students how to give their peers the right kind of feedback. I saw the same confusion in the writers around me, and even in many workshop leaders. We all knew that feedback was good for us; we were less clear about why.

A decade of workshops, revisions, and peer critique experiments later, I can finally explain why we seek feedback on our writing. As authors, we want to know whether the words on the page are fulfilling our creative vision. Whether that vision has to do with making an argument or making a reader feel the pain of an unlikely hero, there is inevitably a gap between what we want our words to convey and how a reader experiences them. We hope that getting feedback from readers will help us close that gap.

Insightful critique can also help us clarify our creative vision. Few writers start out knowing exactly what we want to say and why. We discover it in the process of crafting the work. Hearing how readers understood the meaning of a piece can help us recognize our intentions. Readers may articulate a theme in a surprising new way. Or their misinterpretations may push us to blurt out what we *really* mean.

Ultimately, it is up to us as authors to measure readers’ responses against our intentions. That’s why feedback that is primarily evaluative or prescriptive— the kind of feedback I was seeing in my writing workshop and in students’ peer critiques—is seldom helpful. A reader can’t judge something “good” or advise the author on what she “should” do if he doesn’t fully understand what the author is trying to achieve.

The best feedback is descriptive. It occurs when readers let the author know what the work is conveying to them. It occurs when readers share

170 | The 33rd

what they experienced as they read. With this kind of feedback, we authors can determine whether readers’ experience is in line with what we meant to convey. If not, readers’ observations can help point us to particular aspects of the text that aren’t serving our vision in the way that we hoped.

Understanding how feedback should function for authors, I now approach peer critiques and workshops differently. As an instructor and as a reader, I look for ways to reflect back to authors what their work is accomplishing. I’ve found a number of strategies effective, and weave them into my peer critique assignments:

**Summarize the work.** Statements such as “The main point that I take away from this is…” or “For me, the major theme was*…*” can be invaluable in helping an author understand what is coming through, what isn’t coming through, and where readers may be getting the wrong idea.

**Share strong reactions.** “I shuddered when the protagonist opened the door on p. 23,” or “When you talked about the mother and the asthma meds, that’s when I really got mad” can let an author know whether she is striking the right chords.

**Give specific praise.** “I loved the section about the garden, because I know exactly how that woman feels” is much more informative for an author than, “You’re a great writer*.*”

**Identify points of confusion as specifically as possible.** “On p. 16, I thought you meant one thing, but p. 45 seems like it says the opposite” or “I wasn’t sure why that character would make that decision.”

**Ask questions about the author’s vision.** “How did you want us to feel about this?” and “What motivated you to write this piece?” can help an author articulate what he’s trying to accomplish with his writing. Knowing more about an author’s intentions can in turn help readers offer more useful comments and suggestions.

As an author, I also approach discussions of my work differently. When I submit a piece for workshopping, I know I want specific, descriptive feedback to help me close the gap between my draft and my intentions. So I ask readers questions tailored to elicit that kind of feedback. If someone says they like a character—or can’t stand them—I’ll try asking, “How would you describe that character?” or “What do you know about the character?” For an argumentative essay, I avoid asking, “Did you agree?” and instead ask “What piece of evidence did you find most powerful?” And when a reader expresses confusion, I try not to clarify right away, but wait for other readers to respond. Watching a group puzzle out a confusing aspect of my work can suggest both what I need to clarify and how best to do it.

Feedback is good for us. In fact, it’s essential for authors to have the input of readers as they create and revise their work. But workshops and critiques are most effective when everyone involved understands that their purpose is to help authors understand and achieve their vision. The most powerful feedback reflects back to authors what they are accomplishing with their writing, so that they can move closer to what they *want* to accomplish.

Faculty Writing | 171

The 33rd Volume 14 Drexel University

Department of English and Philosophy 3141 Chestnut Street

Philadelphia, PA 19104 drexelpublishing.com

Cover photo by Kala F. Summers Back Cover photo by Dylan Lam

Copyright © 2021 by the Drexel Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

*The 33rd* is published once a year.

Submissions are open in the spring, winter, and fall terms of each academic year. Manuscripts must be submitted as an e-mail attachment (MS Word). Visit drexelpublishing.com for submission guidelines.

ISBN 978-1-7324500-3-5

draft

Deepest thanks to: Dr. Kelly Joyce; Dr. Norma Bouchard; Dr. J. Roger Kurtz; all the judges from the Drexel Publishing Group Creative Writing Contest (Stacey Ake, Jan Armon, Valerie Booth, Judy Curlee, Lisa DiMaio, Casey Hirsch, Henry Israeli, Greg Jewell, Lynn Levin, George MacMillan, Jill Moses,

Karen Nulton, Margene Petersen, Sheila Sandapen, Doreen Saar, James Stieb, Kathleen Volk Miller); the Drexel Publishing Group Essay Contest (Stacey Ake, Ron Bishop, Anne Erickson, Jordan Hyatt, George MacMillan, Deirdre McMahon, Jonson Miller, Karen Nulton, Rakhmiel Peltz, Marilyn Piety, Don Riggs, Sheila Sandapen, Eric Schmutz, Fred Siegel, Errol Sull, Monica Togna); the First-Year Writing Contest (Jan Armon, Benjamin Barnett, Judy Curlee, Lisa DiMaio, Anne Erickson, Lea Jacobson, Liz Kimball, Rachel Kolman, Roger Kurtz, Deirdre McMahon, George MacMillan, Leah Mele, Chris Nielson, Karen Nulton, Margene Petersen, Gail D. Rosen, Sheila Sandapen, Fred Siegel, Scott Stein, Errol Sull, Maria Volynsky); the Department of English and Philosophy, especially Liz Heenan; contest participants; and the Drexel Publishing Group staff.

The fonts used within this publication are Laski Slab and Source Sans Pro.

.

ii | The 33rd