

WORKSHOPS

---from the Warren Wilson MFA Guide

The workshop is an opportunity not merely to receive response but also to give it--a sustained practicum in criticism. The eclectic nature of the student body challenges and stretches one's own aesthetic assumptions.

When preparing worksheet material, participants should try first to discover the work's intention, setting aside for the moment one's own tastes and preferences. Toward the end of the discussion one could raise doubts about the intention--i.e., why would the poet want to make this a sonnet; wouldn't a third-person narrator be more efficacious for the thematic intent; is the convention chosen too great a limitation. But at least initially, the reader should try to describe rather than evaluate, and be open to the premises of the work. Often, a first reading will provoke more questions than comments--one pleasure of workshop is when your questions are answered simply by the perceptions of other readers. A second level of engagement with the task is to locate those passages/devices/choices that seem most effective in pursuit of the work's intent, or core. Often the most useful response a writer can receive, particularly when a piece is acharacteristic, but with any work-in-progrss, is to learn what is successful. A natural extension of this engagement is identifying passag-es/devices/choices that seem at cross-purposes with the rest of the work, or not as fully realized, clear, detailed, or graceful as they need to be. Workshop groups can be useful in speculating about change or additions--again, though, not in blind application of the reader's own taste or preference but in light of the work's deepest purposes.

At all these levels of consideration, comments need to be precise and detailed, offering evidence from the text for their assertions. A workshop should not be a poll; it is insufficient to say, "I like the first stanza of this poem." Comments should be supported by analysis and should be as descriptive as possible, without sliding into jargon.

It is extremely important that students monitor themselves in the crucial balance between active participation and domination. Some checkpoints might be:

- * Don't initiate the talk with a small editing point or a broad challenge to the basic premises of the work. A good place to begin is with that first level of engagement: description of, or a question about, the work's intention.

- * Don't ALWAYS be the first one to speak. At the same time, a student who never speaks denies him/herself the chance to learn through articulation, and shows a lack of generosity to fellow students who speak about his/her work.
- * Comments should be about the work at hand and not about the person who wrote it. Writers, above all others, should be most vigilant about the power, privileges and protection of the imagination.

The "buddy system" often helps. Singling out some other member of the workshop to ask, over coffee, for a summary of what was said, or reviewing the criticism with the instructor. Remember, the poem or story goes back, after workshop, appropriately to your desktop. Sometimes a comment recalled later will open a window, suggest a new way of thinking about the work; sometimes, the group has misnamed but nevertheless located a weakness, and this prompts you to a greater clarity of purpose; most often, what you learn from the discussion will be made manifest less in the work discussed but in new work, a furthering.

The tone of the workshop should be supportive but rigorous, analytical but not judgmental, noncompetitive, vigilant against workshop jargon or preferred aesthetic. Participants should always feel free to question what seem weaknesses, poor choices or inadvertent missteps, but should also recall that the work has been snatched from the desktop, that some of its awkwardness may be the absence of authority that attends most work-in-progress, that it does not seek to represent the author's best or finished work. Workshop is not an occasion for merely congratulating the author nor "fixing" a flawed piece. The importance of workshop is the chance to enlarge one's capacity for strong work.