

When a fellow writer entrusts a manuscript to us for response, our goal is to inform them clearly and specifically about how we experience their writing on the page. Always make it clear that your responses are subjective – the writer’s judgment comes first. We probably cannot write down every response -- so we need to concentrate on those elements that we feel are most important.

Here are the steps that I take:

1. I find a comfortable spot and read the whole piece for enjoyment. No marks on the page at this point, just my complete attention.

2. After a break, I re-read with a highlighter and a pencil in hand. I highlight the parts I found strongest, from a single word up to a paragraph. When I think it will be helpful, I note why I like those parts. If several sections represent an ongoing element of the piece that I think is working well, I might make a numbered footnote that refers to them all -- e.g. *1.) your references to songs help place me in space and time.*

When I have a critical comment, I put a carat [>] in the margin, and if there is room, a specific question, comment, suggestion, copy edit -- trying to be as clear as possible about what made me stop and want to comment. If there isn't room, I'll draw an arrow to the back of the page, or, if there are several related comments scattered through the piece, I'll make a numbered footnote that refers to them all -- e.g. *2. long passages in Cyrillic make me feel left out.*

3. My approach is to go with my own responses, rather than try to guess what someone else (a hypothetical magazine editor, for example) might think. The idea is to give the writer clear information to take into account as she moves to the next level of revision. *"Everyone finds the Cyrillic confusing, ok, I'll offer translations."*

4. After another break, I review the manuscript and the responses I've made, and write a brief summary -- what I enjoyed the most, what I felt was missing or wanted more of, what disrupted my attention or understanding -- the overall impression that the piece has made on me.

5. In the workshop, we generally discuss the manuscript after our writing time, before the break. The author can tell us what question is foremost in her mind for this piece, and read aloud about a page. We will take about ten minutes to offer brief, specific responses to what we like the best; then about ten minutes to consider problems we found with the text; and finally, the author will have a chance to talk back to us, ask or answer questions.

6. Finally, the author gets our marked-up copies back to consider during further revision of the piece.