

Robin Barber and Carol Edelstein are certified Amherst Writers and Artists workshop leaders. Their writing workshops follow the Amherst Writers and Artists practices designed by their mentor, Pat Schneider, AWA founder.

Contact Robin to learn when the next 10-week series will begin. Sessions meet at 16 Vernon Street, Northampton, Ma. (6:30 – 9:30 PM). Enrollment is limited to twelve.

Currently, I write fiction, memoir, and an occasional essay (see note below), and I love working among writers using these and other forms: non-fiction, poetry, songs, plays. Writers in this workshop are encouraged to continue with any projects already in progress, and also to experiment, sketch, try new forms. Participants vary in educational background, amount of writing experience, age, and culture. We celebrate variety. Because this is not an academic writing class, competition has no role, and we strive to create an atmosphere of caring and support in which to work. Writing is an act which can make us vulnerable, so we are careful and thoughtful in managing fears and blocks to the creative process.

Each workshop series is structured to provide time for writing and response. To begin, at 6:30, I present brief readings and writing exercises as a trigger for exploration. After about an hour of writing time, participants may then share their work (or not, if privacy is preferred).

When someone wants critical response, he or she gives copies of an edited, neatly typed manuscript to all participants. Prepare up to ten pages of prose, or six poems, and consider including a question about what elements you want readers to focus on for commentary. A week or two later we discuss the manuscript in the workshop, and copies are returned to the writer with written comments. In addition, workshop participants may request one private consultation during each ten-week series.

Workshop Leader

Born in Northampton, Robin Barber, M.A., is a writer, teacher, and photographer. Certified by Amherst Writers and Artists leadership program, Robin has been in writing workshops since 1987, and leading the Wednesday workshop since 1998.

Registration: occurs prior to each ten-week series, or when an opening occurs. Participants wishing to re-enroll will have first priority over those on the waiting list.

Fees:

There is no fee to come to the workshop once to try it out--give me a call at (413) 585-8530 to arrange a visit.

\$250.00 per ten-week series. (Substitutes will pay \$25.00 per meeting). I ask that members pay the full fee in advance. If you have any difficulty with payment, please talk to me. Members who must miss a session will be reimbursed substitute fees that I collect.

Q: Am I responsible for the fee if I can't come on a given night?

A: If you are signed up as a member of the workshop

it is your responsibility to either pay for the session or find a substitute if you can't be here on any given night. The sign-up board and email notices are offered as a courtesy and can potentially make it easier for you to find substitutes ahead of time. You may also try the printed list with phone numbers and email addresses of those looking for the chance to substitute.

_____ If you are signed up as a substitute:

You are not required to be available on any given workshop night; but once you have agreed to show up, it then becomes your responsibility to either show up on that night, pay the \$25 fee, and/or find a different person to substitute from the phone/email list.

Courtesy

- The basic rule is to protect everyone's writing time.
- Try to arrive a little early to begin with everyone – but if you must come in late, or leave early, do so quietly.
- Give your full attention to anyone reading. If you are not ready to stop writing when reading begins, the 3rd floor is always available.

On Giving and Receiving Comments

Our goal when commenting on another's 'newborn' writing is to support and encourage, to leave the writer excited by the possibilities of the work they've just presented. Giving and receiving comments is an art in itself, and involves skills which can be practiced and developed. It is one of the most important functions of this group. We want our communications to enhance our sense of safety within the group, and the effectiveness of our work together. Please read and occasionally review the following guidelines.

If you are receiving comments, simply read your piece and then listen to discussion that follows. Avoid disclaimers *before* you read—"This is just junk, but ..." After you read, the group may be silent as we take in what we have just heard. Don't be rattled by that silence-- in it we are forming decisions about how to respond carefully in a way that is useful to you. You are free, of course, to discuss your work after the workshop. Members often exchange drafts with one another for further commentary between workshops.

If you are participating in commenting on another's new writing: the basic idea is to be supportive and to encourage what is working well.

- 1. Remark only on what strikes you as strong and good** about this writing. Save all questions or problems for an occasion when the work is presented in manuscript form for a critique.
- 2. Please be brief.** You will likely have many thoughts about the piece you have just heard, so take the time to organize in your mind what you want to say before you speak--choose one aspect and focus there. A sentence or two will suffice, and will allow others the room to comment as well.
- 3. Respond aloud only to specific aspects of the writing you have just heard.** Stay with the writer's text. Refrain from agreeing or disagreeing with the comments of others. Refrain from referring to books, other authors, television or movies. Refrain from relating a personal story that the piece evokes, even if you know it will entertain us. If the piece evokes strong emotions in you, say so without

giving personal details or stories to explain why--stay with what specifically in the text evokes your emotion.

4. **Resist the temptation to compare** the writing to previous work of the writer, or to the work of another writer, even a famous one who you consider superb. Again, the purpose of this is to focus on the specifics of what is working well in the piece we have just heard.

5. **Resist the temptation to confuse the narrator's identity with the writer's identity.** Always refer to "the narrator" even if the writer gives information indicating that the material is or might be autobiographical. The purpose of this convention is to contain the discussion to what works as art, and to provide a safe environment for experimental, bold and heartfelt writing.

6. **Strive for balance in the way you interact within the group.** Note your own tendencies and work to counterweight them--i.e. if you often comment first, hold back. If you often hold back, try being among the first. If you often remark on a global aspect of the piece, remark on a small, internal aspect--a sentence or a particularly effective word choice. If you often need to leave early, vary how you use the time you are present--sometimes read aloud, sometimes listen. If you haven't brought in a manuscript for a while, bring one in. Don't feel compelled to say something about every person's writing every time--you will have a next time, or a chance privately.

7. **Keep in your awareness what respectful listening looks like, and do your best to maintain that posture, even if you are feeling tired or restless.** In order to have the courage to present our newly written material to the group, we need to feel a sense of security with our audience. That sense of security can be compromised if we perceive someone's attention has lapsed.

8. **Do address the matter directly** if you have questions or are upset by commentary about your own or anyone else's work.