

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.

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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.