



Procedures for Writing Workshops



Dr. Kevin E. Ball

Associate Provost for Academic Programs and Planning, Youngstown State University

REGULAR PROCEDURES: Do these all the time!

- Divide the time equally (10-15 minutes per person).
- The writer distributes copies, then reads her work aloud **without apologizing** for it.
- Before or after reading (writer's choice), the writer should give an Author's Note.
- **The writer guides response talk**, dictating what is allowable and what is off limits.
- Sometime after group, write to yourself about what happened and what to try next.

SOME TYPES OF RESPONSE

(Do these when appropriate.)

SUPPORT & ENCOURAGEMENT

The following kinds of response focus on exploring and expanding the meaning readers get from the piece and the parts they like best:

REMINDING: *"This reminds me of something I experienced / read /thought about..."*

SAYBACK: *"I think I know what you're saying here. You're saying that..."*

POINTING: *"I really liked this part right here because..."* or *"The part of your writing that really sticks with me is..."*

BACKGROUND: *"Where did you get this idea? Tell me what prompted you to write this piece..."*

ENCOURAGING: *"I really liked this section. Can you expand it and tell me more?"*

Support and encouragement responses emphasize the ways readers connect with the ideas in a piece and connect with the experiences of the writer. They show that someone is listening, is listening carefully enough to explore the writer's message, and is not playing evaluator. Such responses are important for writing ideas that are just beginning, and they are good for building a positive group environment.

IDENTIFYING TROUBLE SPOTS

Response talk becomes more focused once the members of your group feel comfortable enough as a group that they can disagree or when the writer feels a need for discussion of specific aspects of his writing.

DIRECTED RESPONSE: As a writer, say, *"As I was writing this piece, the part that was really hard was X. It was hard because Y. What did you think about this?"*

STARS & SQUIGGLES: *"As I read, put a star in the margin next to anything you particularly like, and put squiggly lines under anything you are confused by or don't like. I'll ask you to explain your marks after I read."*

MOVIE OF THE MIND: *"I'm worried about this part here. I want you to describe*

what you were thinking about and expecting as I read up to this point, what happened to you when I read this part, and then what happened as I moved on into this next part. Give me a movie of your mind as I read. I'm interested in the different movies readers had as I read."

ASK WRITER FOR GUIDANCE: As a responder, you can ask, *"Is there anything in this piece that was particularly difficult for you? Do you want specific responses?"*

IF I WERE THE WRITER: As reader, you think you can suggest an activity that might help the writer, or the writer has just asked for suggestions. Try this: *"If I were working on this piece, I think I'd try doing X next, because I think I'd most need to figure out Y before I continue with the piece, and X is a way of doing that."* This is a respectful way to suggest writing strategies for someone else to try.

Reasonable expectations for your group

- Everyone should make **at least** two comments on everyone's paper.
- Everyone should have brought in a new draft or a **substantial revision**.
- Everyone should treat each other and their work with respect.
- Everyone should expect to be confronted by me or other group members if they fail to meet the above expectations.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

An Author's Note, oral or written, gives responders the crucial context they need to know how to respond. It should always include three sorts of information:

- A statement of where the text is in the process of development (first draft, ninth draft, based on a dream I had last night, an attempt to fix the second half by switching it to dialogue, penultimate draft, etc.).
- Your own writer's assessment of the piece (*"I like this about it because..."* or *"I am worried about this part because..."* or *"I tried to do X but I'm not satisfied because Y."*).
- Any general sort of response you want and any specific questions you want answered (*"Today I think I need Support and Encouragement comments"* or *"Please mark at least three Stars spots and two Squiggle spots as I read this aloud"* or *"I'm worried about how I describe my grandmother here, so I want you to tell me how you imagine her from what I give you"*).

Author's Notes are the primary way to focus on the specific TASK you, as writer, want accomplished during your small group time. Using Author's Notes well means knowing ahead of time where you are with a piece and how response will help you. Often we will know this ahead of time, but just as often we won't. Consequently, in writing Author's Notes, my advice is to provide as much information as possible, experiment, and figure out what types of response help you the most.