

Peer Critique Workshop: Responding Constructively to Drafts

Once you have completed a first draft of a piece of writing, it is helpful to get direct feedback from thoughtful readers so you can see exactly how your writing is working. This is especially true when those readers are also writers working on the same writing problem, where your colleagues in the class can give you useful ideas about how to rethink and reshape your work for later revisions, and you can do the same for them.

In this class, we do what I call “live critiques”—where we work together in collaboration to respond to, analyze, and discuss each author’s work within an open and dynamic dialogue that generates more diverse feedback than a peer-to-peer critique or a teacher-to-student critique. To make the critique workshop as constructive as possible, I have prepared the following list of guidelines to help you generate useful feedback for the writers in your group. Please note that we will not follow this like a script; the questions are meant to prompt you to ask specific questions so that you have specific things to say to each writer. The goal is for each of you to prepare to have something specific and concrete to add to our dialogue. What does not work is vague, general feedback—either bland praise or global dismissiveness.

Finally, while main focus here is on your role as a peer critic providing constructive criticism, you also need to prepare to *receive* peer criticism constructively as well. **The golden rule of the live critiques is:** *“Give the kind of critique you would like to receive and receive critique the way you would like to have your critiques of others received.”* That means that you go into your role as a critic ready to give productive, creative, helpful, and concrete critiques, and you go into your role as author ready to be open to hearing feedback and ready to ask questions that clarify the feedback, not set up to defend yourself from criticism. If we stay specific and have an attitude of constant improvement, it all works.

SUMMARIZING: How do you interpret the piece as a whole? What do you think is the main idea or message of the piece? How and why did you reach that conclusion?

POINTING TO THE CENTER: Is there a central image, passage, or detailed description that seems to give special life or power to the essay that would not be there otherwise? Which words, phrases, or other features of the writing do you find most striking or memorable? Why? What do you think of the way the author handles these important aspects?

POINTING TO THE EDGES: What are some of the important messages left implicit? What do you think the writer is going to say but doesn't? What does this tell you about the kinds of assumptions the writer appears to be making about her or his audience? Are there important details left out that are necessary for context? What ideas and questions seem to hover around the edges of the essay? Do you think these implicit messages would be more effective if they were made explicit or would you like to see the writer keep them subtle? Why or why not?

EVALUATING THE ESSAY AS AN ASSIGNMENT: Does the essay satisfy the central requirements of this particular assignment?

ORGANIZATION AND COHERENCE: Do the writer's points seem to follow one another clearly? Are there significant gaps in the exploration of ideas that create transition problems? Is the essay coherent and unified? Are the author’s voice and point of view consistent?

GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS: Are there any basic sentence errors? Are there a significant number of typos, misspellings, or other basic mechanical problems? If so, what do they do to your experience of the essay?

OFFERING SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR REVISION: If you were to identify one or two specific things you think could be changed to significantly improve the essay as a whole, what would they be?