

Roadside America

Peer Critique Workshop: Responding Constructively to Drafts

Once you have completed a first draft of a piece of writing, it is helpful to get some specific feedback so you can see exactly how your writing is working for readers. This is especially true when those readers are also writers working on the same writing problem. 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.

To make the critique workshop as constructive as possible, I have prepared the following list of guidelines that you as a reader/writer can follow to give useful feedback to the writers in your workshop group and to the class as a whole. If you ask yourself these questions about each draft in your WorkGroup and make some notes to yourself about specific elements that work well and ones that don't for each draft, we will have a productive critique workshop.

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, dialogue exchange, scene, 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? 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? Are there important narrative details left out of the story?

EVALUATING THE ESSAY AS AN ASSIGNMENT: Does the essay satisfy the central requirements of the assignment--that is, does the essay tell a vivid American road story that opens into ideas that the writer explores? More specifically, is the story represented vividly enough for you to imagine the scenes, characters, and dialogue clearly? Are the author's ideas developed extensively enough for you to know not only *that* the experience was/is meaningful to the writer but specifically *why* and how the experience was/is meaningful to them. Does the writer use narrative and ideas to show you they are?

ORGANIZATION AND COHERENCE: Do the writer's points seem to follow one another clearly? Are there significant gaps in the narration and exploration of ideas that create transition problems? Is the writing 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 piece?

OFFERING SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR REVISION: Are there one or two specific things you think could be changed to significantly improve the narrative as a whole?