

# Writers' Workshop

## Responding

In this Writers' Workshop you will:

- Learn the difference between proofreading and responding.
- Learn how to respond to another writer's work.

### Responding

Responding is the heart of the writing process, but there is nothing natural about asking others to critique your writing. Most of us, even experienced writers, feel uncomfortable sharing our work-in-process, like we are being asked to stand naked on stage.

There is also nothing natural about responding well to others' writing either. It is a skill that develops with practice. But giving and receiving response is essential to the process professional writers use and the main business of writing workshops and writing groups. Responding to others strengthens your own writing.

#### Responding

Takes place after drafting and before revising

Addresses issues of content, organization, clarity and diction

Asks:

- Is this clear?
- Can I make this more interesting by adding more information or description?
- Do I need more or fewer facts in support here?
- Are things in the right order?
- Do you understand that I am trying to be satiric here?
- How can I make this transition make more sense?

Can be done by listening (though responders may read as *well as* listen to a text) for content, clarity, diction and tone. Digital response maintains the tone of a conversation about the writing.

Worries about engaging, amusing or communicating with the reader

May be divided into two stages

- the first to examine the content and organization; and
- the second to examine word choice, clarity and tone.

May be recursive—the revision that follows a peer response may require another response and further revision.

The better the writer, the more the writer cares about response, about how the writing communicates to the reader.

#### Proofreading

Proofreading comes just before publishing

Addresses conventions that appear on the printed page

Asks:

- Is this spelled correctly?
- Should this be capitalized?
- Are the paragraphs divided correctly?
- Is this paper formatted correctly?
- Are all sentences complete?

Can only be done by looking carefully at the printed page.

Worries about presenting the text so it will be respected and easily read.

### Mini-Lesson: The Responding Process

Form groups of three or four. When you really care about your work, you will choose the most honest and critical people you know, people the least like you, to give you a response.

Unless the work is very short, it is best for everyone to have a copy.

Face each other so you can talk without speaking loudly and so you can show each other the papers in your hand.

1. The writer reads her work aloud.

- During the reading, the writer *may* make marks in the margins to note where it “does not sound right.” Writers will discover things about their own writing as they read out loud.
- The responders may put marks in the margins of their copy to remind them of points they will discuss with the writer.
- They are *not* to proofread for spelling, for conventions or for any other aspect of writing that exists only on the page. This is responding, not proofreading. They should be listening for content and clarity.

- Be sure that the response, as done by real writers, is almost always *oral*. Do not write notes to the writer on the pages. Talk to them. Even when you respond electronically through shared documents, talk to the writer rather than trying to correct their work.
2. The responders give praise.
    - This is important—the writers need to know what they do well. Praise also helps the writers accept suggestions later on.
    - Remember the purpose of the writing. Find praise that relates to the type of writing you are doing. *Great action verbs in the play-by-play. Clear lead. It really sums up the events.*
    - Most teenagers hear a great deal more criticism than praise, so this may feel awkward at first. But try it. You'll like it!
    - Make the praise as specific as possible. *I like the place where you say. . .*
    - If you cannot find anything to praise, you can say, *I hear you saying that . . .* The gap between what the reader understands and what the writer means to say may be helpful to the writer.
  3. The writer asks questions.
    - The question may be specific to the type of writing you are doing. *Does my narrative headline repeat the lead too much? Does this lead capture your attention? How could I improve it? Is this in the right order?*
    - The questions may ask for suggestions for rewriting the places that did not sound right to you as you read.
    - Sometimes the response group will work with you to rewrite a section during response.
    - The questions may focus on places you struggled as you wrote. *Was I clear and interesting when I wrote. . .*
    - Ask if your writing is fair and objective. Is there a weak spot where you verge on editorializing?
    - Beginning writers who may not have developed concern for their audience ask fewer questions and less significant questions than better writers. The more you give and receive response, the more powerful your questions become.
  4. Finally, the responders give suggestions.
    - These may include the criticisms and suggestions you have been dying to make from the beginning.
    - Good responders do not take over another writer's work.
    - These should be based on the type of writing or form of journalism being written and the needs of the audience.
    - These also will become more powerful as both the responders and writers become more skillful.
    - Writers may revise their work based on their new knowledge of their writing and bring it back for further responding.

#### Notes on the responding process:

- As with any important concept, you will not master it in one session.
- Writers may not accept all the suggestions they receive. They may ask for clarification of the suggestions, but they do not need to rebut their responders' suggestions, convince him of the correctness of the writer's choice, or defend themselves. They merely need to listen.
- Be respectful of others' work and their feelings. Listen attentively and respond respectfully.
- Practice giving specific encouragement to another students' draft. Practice accepting feedback from other students on their essay draft.

#### Apply It!

Makes notes of what you learned in response sessions both about your writing and about how to respond. Consider these topics:

- Who responded to your draft and how wisely you choose your responders? Would you have liked a different mix?
- Which response questions helped you the most when you asked them?
- What did you learn from responding about your writing and what did you change?
- What did you learn by giving response to others?