

# A Note to Workshop Leaders

There are a dozen ways to run writers' workshops. You may have a method you're comfortable with, but we ask that you consider ours.

The primary effort is to assist the writer in revising the manuscript into a better piece of writing. A useful stance might be that the workshop is an editorial board at a publishing house or magazine which has already accepted the piece. There is no point then in trashing it. The critical faculties of the leader and the workshop can instead be aimed toward making it do even better what it is already successfully doing.

In a group, you may be working with participants who have MFAs alongside participants with no formal writing education, some of whom have never before been in a workshop environment. Also, of course, participants come from many different regions and backgrounds. Rather than focusing on pedagogy, a better focus of the workshop is to encourage participation; we all know that participants learn much from the examination of the writing of others. It is important to make room for the quiet ones. If the leaders in their professional status as published writers or editors announce opinions at the outset, there will be little give-and-take in the discussion. Participants will be forced to agree, or feel they must disagreeably disagree. If the leaders have performed their function well, sometimes their own opinions may well change to align themselves with the consensus. Ideally, the leaders are not telling the group what to think; rather, the point of the discussion is to lead participants to form and revise their opinions. By examining what's successful or unsuccessful in the work of others, writers may come to a better understanding of their own work. Furthermore, they may start to get a feel for general universal principles of good writing.

A method we have found effective is this: First the leaders go around the table, asking each participant to describe what's admirable and important in the manuscript, and then, secondly, how it might be made better. The leaders then continue around the table, allowing short outbreaks of general discussion (where fruitful), making certain that all participants have their say. Often many of the opinions will be similar, but it is useful to the author to hear them in quantity as well as quality.

For years we encouraged authors to listen to and observe the conversation of what is on the page and save intentions, explanations and defenses for the endplay, when the group's misunderstandings can be cleared up, or their questions answered. However, some leaders find it more useful to begin with the author's intentions and encourage the author to weigh in throughout the discussion.

However you plan to lead the workshop, we ask that you dedicate at least an hour (of the three hours allotted for morning workshop) to each of the two manuscripts.

We know you will set and maintain a tone of positive, supportive, and helpful feedback. We don't want to limit the easy free flow of ideas, and yet we ask that you be prepared for how an author's words on the page, or participant comments, might land amiss. Should potentially difficult issues arise, we ask that you bring your considerable teaching skills to bear and address them in the moment before moving on. We hope to have rigorous, positive discussions about art and craft, create new writing friendships, and explore what is possible in prose. In this spirit, we'll gather with kindness, sensitivity, openness, and warmth.