

A Workshop Guide for Creative Writing

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these questions to discuss others' work or your own, in or out of your workshop, or to help you to focus your reading.

Topic	Questions
Image	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the imagery convincing on a concrete, sensory level? 2. Does the imagery create a fresh perception, both of the objects rendered and of the larger abstract concepts suggested? 3. Is the imagery consistent with the story's or the poem's emotional, psychological, and thematic content, as well as its physical setting and its characters?
Voice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How would you describe the narrator's or the speaker's voice? Is it consistent throughout the story or poem? Are changes justified by developments in the story or poem? 2. Are the characters' voices clearly defined and distinguishable? Is it always clear who is speaking? If not, where and why? 3. What does the voice of the narrator, speaker, or main character contribute to other elements of the work—setting, physical description, dialogue, gestures and actions, sound, rhythm, form, and image?
Character	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How would you describe the main (or any other) character? Consider voice, appearance, habits, gestures, and activities. What details in the story or poem convey these impressions? 2. Are some primary characters more clearly drawn than others? What more would you like to know? Do secondary characters distract attention from more important elements of the story or poem? What questions do these characters raise? Would the story be enhanced by developing them further, or by downplaying or eliminating them? 3. How do the other elements—setting, physical description, dialogue, gestures and actions, voice, sound, rhythm, form, and image—contribute to the character?
Plot or Problem	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What central question or problem does the story or poem present? How clearly is it presented? What possible answers exist? What answer is given? 2. How is this question or problem organized and presented—by event, as is much conventionally structured fiction; by idea or formal means, as is much poetry? By some other method? 3. Do you care what happens—how the conflict or problem is resolved or explored? If so, why? If not, what information might the writer supply that would enable you to care?
Form	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the form well-suited to the subject? Why or why not? 2. Does the form help to develop the material? If so, how? If not, why not? 3. What would happen if the same material were presented in a different form?

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Sound and Rhythm	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the sound and rhythm of the piece meaningful and purposeful—is it congruent with other aspects of the work? 2. Does the piece read aloud well—do you stumble or trip over your tongue as you read it aloud? Do you lose your breath? Are there long stretches of unrelieved narration or speeches? 3. Are repetitions purposeful?
Setting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you envision the physical elements of the setting? Are the relevant sensory details present and appropriately integrated with other elements, such as action? 2. If more than one setting is rendered, does this variety serve your purposes rather than distracting from them? Are the settings related enough through their function in the poem or story, and in their tone, style, or thematic content, to keep the story or poem from breaking apart? If not, is it possible to rewrite or reorganize segments in order to avoid disorienting readers? 3. What, other than its aesthetic value, does the description contribute?
Theme	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you conscious of a theme in the story or poem? If so, does it inappropriately dominate other aspects of the work such as character or image? 2. Are there places where the thematic content is confusing? What questions are raised? What information is missing? 3. What in the work do you find thought-provoking? What problems or ideas are raised?

QUOTATIONS

We must be alert to preserve the helpful, proper attitudes toward whatever we learn to do with fluency and grace.

—WILLIAM STAFFORD,
interview

Everything is gestation and then bringing forth.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE,
Letters to a Young Poet (New York: Norton, 1934,
paperback reissued 1993), p. 29

This above all—ask yourself in the stillest hour of the night: must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple "I must," then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE,
Letters to a Young Poet (New York: Norton, 1934,
paperback reissued 1993), pp. 18-19

I am also writing so that you may not feel yourself alone while writing. It's a hard thing to be alone when creating. Bad criticism is better than nothing, isn't that right?

—ANTON CHEKHOV,
In a letter to his brother, A. P. Chekhov, May 10, 1886
[Anton Chekhov's *Short Stories* (New York: Norton,
1979), p. 270]

Listen now. When people talk listen completely. Don't be thinking what you're going to say. Most people never listen. Nor do they observe. You should be able to go into a room and when you come out know everything that you saw there and not only that. If that room gave you any feeling you should know exactly what it was that gave you that feeling. Try that for practice.

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY
By-line, pp. 219-20; from *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, ed. Larry W. Phillips. Copyright 1984 by Mary Hemingway and Larry W. Phillips. Simon and Schuster, 1999. p. 31

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WORKSHOP ETIQUETTE: RECEIVING CRITICISM

There are all kinds of writers, and all kinds of workshops. Your approach to discussing your own work in a workshop setting may be largely defined by your instructor's guidelines. In addition, a few general rules, listed below, apply in most workshop situations. Use the blank lines to add ideas of your own, or those you learn from your instructor and other students.

BEFORE YOUR WORKSHOP

- **Turn in a clean, complete manuscript.** Be sure to use a readable, 12-point font, and leave margins wide enough for readers to write comments. Double-space, and number your pages. Remember that respecting deadlines gives others time to read and comment on your work thoughtfully.
- **Write down your questions.** As you work, list places where you're uncertain, technical questions that you may have, and passages you wonder about. Include page numbers, and be specific about the kind of information you want from readers, such as ideas, an emotional response, or a critical judgment.
- **Prepare emotionally.** This rare opportunity for concentrated critical attention will be both helpful and stressful. It may help to remind yourself that you joined the class in order to improve your writing, and that is what the workshop will help you to do. Before your workshop begins, resolve that the draft is finished: it must stand on its own.

DURING YOUR WORKSHOP

- **Engage.** If your workshop allows it, ask some of the questions that you had noted while you were preparing for your workshop. If you can't ask questions during your workshop, keep them in mind anyway; having a clear objective will help as you process the information you receive.

- **Question purposefully.** Use open-ended questions to stimulate discussion; use yes/no questions to redirect it.
- **Take notes.** Keeping a careful record of others' comments will help you to recall the discussion, which may be difficult to remember in detail otherwise. Consult your notes after some time has passed and you're ready to revise; or, use the notes as a reference to remind you of questions you'd like to pursue with individual readers.
- **Listen.** If your workshop emphasizes receptive learning, don't just sit there—pay attention and try to understand others' ideas. If you're allowed to speak, spend this time asking purposeful questions rather than defending the work. It may help to remind yourself that you're under no obligation to accept the criticism you're offered. In any workshop, the last word is the writer's final draft.

AFTER YOUR WORKSHOP

- **Wind down.** Relax. If possible, stay with the group for a while. Keep talking. Often the discussion is just gathering steam when the class dismisses, and the best criticism happens outside the classroom.
- **Consider.** Give yourself some time to think over all the ideas that you've received. If possible, it may help to take a break before starting to revise. Try using this incubation time as a reading period—the voices of other writers will be an added positive influence.
- **Maintain your integrity.** No one has to write by consensus. Over time, you'll learn to recognize the critical voices that are most helpful to you, and not to be shaken by those that are less beneficial.

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WORKSHOP ETIQUETTE: GIVING CRITICISM

Your own compassion and common sense, and your teacher's suggestions, will be your best guides as you discuss other writers' work in a workshop setting. A few general rules, listed below, also apply in most situations. Use the blank lines to add ideas of your own, or those you learn from your instructor and other students.

BEFORE THE WORKSHOP

- **Read the work attentively at least once.** Follow your workshop guidelines and write a thoughtful response. If you're unable to do so by the time of the workshop, make arrangements with the writer to follow up later.
- **Talk to the author.** People are often nervous before their workshops, and if you don't say hello they may assume you didn't like their work.
- **Take notes as you read.** It's much easier to comment in detail if you have the details in front of you.

DURING THE WORKSHOP

- **Practice professional criticism.** Just as writers must learn to respond to criticism in a professional manner, critics must learn to offer it responsibly. Critical responses should be concrete and specific; explain clearly and thoughtfully what you mean. Demonstrate that you've tried to understand the writer's work.
- **Keep your tone appropriate.** Pitch your voice down; speak calmly and slowly. Avoid sarcasm and jokes, which can misfire when you're talking about someone else's work. Never use a workshop to vent your impatience with imperfection.
- **Allow the work to stand alone.** The writer needs your "cold eye" in order to know whether the story is succeeding. Put aside friendship, competition, annoyances, and all other irrelevant reactions, and focus on the writing itself: does it work?
- **Respect the writer's process.** Writers need your honest criticism, but keep in mind that

workshops produce works in progress. Always let your respect for this difficult work be felt.

Practice good communication. It is one thing to articulate the flaws in a work; it's quite another to communicate these insights in a way that the writer can understand, accept, and use. Try focusing on your own response to the work—how you felt as you read—rather than harping on its flaws.

Be honest and sensitive. Honesty does not mean a free-for-all, and sensitivity doesn't mean sugar-coating the truth. Try to identify precisely how the work affected you as you read it. Try to communicate this in a way that won't alienate the writer.

Ask questions; even if the writer can't answer at the moment, a question shows respect, as well as raising legitimate concerns about the story.

- **Above all, never skip a workshop unnecessarily;** many writers take this personally.

AFTER THE WORKSHOP

- **Return your clearly marked draft to the author.** Belonging to a workshop is a kind of mutual promise—others will respond more fully to your work if they receive a generous response from you.
- **Speak to the author; re-establish equal status.** Most people feel pretty awkward and vulnerable right after their workshops. Help break the ice by making conversation. Remember that the writer is probably still feeling a little self-conscious and may be wondering what you thought of his or her work.
- **If you're interested in the work or in the writer, keep talking.** The writer likely still has questions and concerns and will welcome your interest. You'll probably find it returned during your own workshop.