

SKIDMORE

C O L L E G E

New York State Summer Writers Institute Workshop Guidelines Robert Boyers & Adam Braver, Co-Directors

The workshop is intended to be a respectfully critical setting. Under peer review, works should be considered based upon strengths and weaknesses, all addressed in a manner that allows writers to retreat into their work with new perspectives to consider while revising the work into a stronger piece of writing. The workshop is a forum for critical discussion of the works, not merely for sharing them. While the Institute has no fixed expectations for what any workshop session will entail, we offer the following basic suggestions, pointers and rules:

The Presenter=Student Whose Work is Under Review:

- You should sit and listen. However, if you don't understand something, it's okay to find out what people mean. (Example: "When you say the Doctor in the story is unbelievable, what specifically makes you feel that way?")
- Be willing to hear negative comments. They are not an attack on your ability to write. Instead, they are commentary on what seems to be preventing you from making your work even more effective. Think of yourself as lucky to have such honest readers. It will be harder and harder to find them in the future.
- Think about what you have heard, and don't react by declaring for or against suggestions or comments. Give yourself time to let the responses sink in. Don't feel as though you have to fix things immediately.
- While considering all the feedback you've received (including the written comments), analyze how much you do or do not understand about what you are writing. Why are you using that approach you chose? Why do you need it be in third person? Should your poem be broken up into short stanzas? Does your personal essay offer enough context for the story you wish to tell? What are you really trying to say? Is it possible, based on the impressions you've taken in, to salvage what you've written by making major (or minor) alterations in your manuscript, or should you consider starting over, more or less from scratch?

The Reader

- Give a written synopsis of strengths and weaknesses, in addition to specific comments in the margins (**suggestion: read the piece twice: first time just read it through without making comments; second time around make marginal notes and queries; then provide an overall statement as your response**)
- Be honest. Nobody learns from disingenuous praise.
- Be clear in your criticisms. Explain why you did or did not respond to something in the writing. The more detail you give, the more helpful it is to the writer.
- Give suggestions, but don't feel as though you have to provide the answers. Bring examples from common readings into the conversation. That is your reference. Your toolbox. How did Russell Banks write through a story in which his principal character was very unlikable and yet keep a reader interested and somewhat sympathetic? How do Henri Cole's sonnets revolutionize the sonnet form, in several respects, while still maintaining relevant aspects of the form? What allows a memoirist to use striking metaphors without seeming to be showing off?

The revision process should not end with the workshop and your own changes. You will still need time and reflection to see how things are working as you make adjustments, each of which will impose new considerations of tone and idiom. Remember, the point of a workshop is to improve a piece of work by getting each of us to think more about it. The more frequently you revise and get feedback, the stronger your piece will be.