

Start Writing Fiction

Commenting on the work of fellow writers

Reading and offering feedback on the work of fellow writers can be enjoyable and inspiring, but there are some pitfalls that you may be able to avoid by being aware of them from the start. First of all, it is important not to be so worried about getting it wrong or so afraid of hurting the writer that you offer only praise or superficial comments. One of the considerable benefits of creative writing study is that you can get feedback from someone other than your mother, husband, best friend or sister. Be sincere and constructive. Support your fellow writers by trying to help their work become the best it can be rather than by protecting them in the short term.

While being honest, take care not to be dismissive. Even in the rawest of drafts, there may be a glimmer of something that will become good in subsequent drafts. The whole point of offering feedback is to be able to openly discuss unfinished, sometimes even embryonic work. Reading can be as intense and passionate an experience as writing. Sometimes fellow writers may explore controversial topics that trespass on your personal values or feelings. Remember that if you feel disturbed by another writer's work, this may be precisely the kind of response they were aiming for.

If a piece of writing offends you, you can state this truthfully without blaming the writer and then try to evaluate the piece objectively. For example: 'I have to say that I found your satirical portrayal of mental illness and its treatment very jarring as it seemed to me to ridicule the patients and showed all of the medical staff as monstrous. But in terms of what you're trying to do, satirising the system, this is a savage and uncompromising piece. Also, your main characterisation of the woman is distinct and goes beyond satire, by contrast to the rest of the piece and the other characters; she is not stereotypical at all.'

If you continue to find a piece of writing upsetting and unacceptable, you have the right not to read it and not to comment on it. Never assume that writings are strictly autobiographical, even if they appear to be so. One of the basic tenets of Start writing fiction is that you may draw on your memories, life and experiences in inventive ways, but you will also write convincingly about things which have

never happened directly to you. It is important not to inhibit each other by asking intrusive questions like 'Do you have a mother-in-law like that?' or 'Were you anorexic, then?'

Here are some feedback guidelines:

- If you are asked to focus on three aspects of the writing – don't forget to address those specific issues.
- If you think an aspect of the writing works well, try to analyse why, but also look for its faults. Usually there will be some.
- If you think an aspect of the writing doesn't work, again, analyse why. Make sure you look for the parts that might be working better in the piece. Almost always there will be positive things to focus on as well.
- Try to go beyond 'Oh, I liked that, but I didn't like that.'
- Always comment on the idea and its implementation, not on the surmised personality of the writer.
- Bear in mind that, more often than not, you will be passing comment on a 'work-in-progress', a piece of writing that is not finished. Try to assess where it might go and what tactics might be used in its development.
- Always try to show evidence for whatever claims you make. Evidence, in this instance, is the part of the writing you are talking about. Point out the use of language you are focused on so that the writer knows which part you mean.
- Rather than being imperious in your comments, explain what you mean, point out the evidence – but also freely suggest there may be other opinions. This can be done with little nudging queries: 'I wonder if anyone else thinks this?'
- Think about how well the writing is geared to its intended readership.

Receiving comments on your work

Receiving feedback on your work from your fellow writers can be confusing. Your initial impulse may often be to try to explain and defend your writing – possibly by email or in the course discussion/comments. This impulse is natural but can sabotage the possibility and proper effect of illuminating feedback. Try to be calm and curious and give yourself time to sift and reflect. Everyone loves praise and validation and these can encourage writers tremendously, but so-called 'negative' feedback can occasionally be a great gift too when it mobilises your imagination or offers you some fresh insight into your writing.

It is equally important not to rush into redrafting. Wait and deliberate. Never redraft immediately after getting the first comment on a piece of work. All suggestions may be welcome but don't try to implement every one of them. You are not trying to satisfy a tribunal or produce some kind of 'writing by committee'. With practice you will develop two things – an emotional robustness regarding comments on your work and the power to discriminate between suggestions that are useful to you and those that are genuinely wrong-headed or unsuitable.

Here are some guidelines:

- When assessing comments you may wish to rewrite the idea completely. Don't rush into this.
- You may wish to tweak your story a little, rewrite completely or just leave it as it is. Any of these options is possible. There is no correct way of responding to critical comments. You may choose to accept some comments and reject others. Remember: you are the final arbiter; you are the writer.
- If you are lucky and receive more than one lot of feedback, pay special attention to areas where there seems to be a consensus of opinion, even though it might be an opinion with which you strongly disagree. Ask yourself: 'Have I ever had doubts about this before I got these comments?' Be honest with yourself. If the answer is 'Yes', then the area almost certainly needs attention – even if it happens to be your favourite section.
- Ask yourself whether the piece under discussion is going to be developed any further. If so, how?
- If it isn't going to be developed, what can be salvaged from it? You might wish to use a character, a metaphor, a line of dialogue. It's important to realise that even if you eventually abandon an idea, there may be some small part of that idea – sometimes just an image, a line or even a phrase– that you can use at a later date, in another piece.
- Remember: your fellow writers are commenting on a piece of work at a particular stage in its development, not on a finished article, and they are certainly not commenting on you personally.

If approached in the right way, sharing your writing and passing comment about the work of other writers can be rewarding. It can dramatically boost your development as a writer, because, if only temporarily, it drags you out from the necessary isolation that accompanies the act of writing. In those brief illuminating interludes you will gain insights that might otherwise take you months, if not years, of solitary redrafting and editing. It is a rare opportunity, one that should be grasped. After all, it's not every day that you have guaranteed readers, readers

who will pay meticulous attention to detail and who have a mutual interest in offering constructive criticism.