

Etiquette for the Poetry Workshop by Summer Tate

The process of refining your poetry commences here. It does not conclude within the workshop environment once you depart from the table; rather, the editing procedure extends beyond the collective conversation regarding your work and persists as you contemplate the insights received from feedback. To fulfill our responsibilities as poets, it is imperative that we diligently practice our craft. The development as writers often arises from the constructive tension generated when others critique our words.

Here are a few tips for the Writing Workshop Process:

1. Choose a poem that you have genuinely wrestled with and are struggling to finish. The piece you select for the workshop should be of suitable length and something you wish to improve. Use the workshop to refine a poem that you can no longer evaluate on your own and need the support of other writers. Avoid selecting a poem that you believe is ready for publication and want to showcase to the group before submitting it, unless you feel the poem still requires final touches to be just right.
2. If you happen to receive the poem before the workshop, we kindly encourage you to take a moment to read it and share your thoughts. This not only shows respect for your classmates but also helps the workshop flow smoothly, giving everyone the opportunity to shine during their time. Plus, diving into the poem more than once allows you to reflect and discover new insights—it's amazing how different readings can change your perspective!
3. Let's keep in mind the logistics of our workshop model! We'll have all writers seated in a circle, allowing us to see and hear each other clearly. When it's time for the poet to share their work, they'll read their poem aloud without offering any commentary before or after. Once the poet has finished reading, they'll take notes quietly while the other writers share their thoughtful critiques and discussions. During this exchange, the poet should listen without interrupting. After the discussion wraps up, they'll have the chance to ask questions to help clarify any suggestions made about their poem.
4. When the workshop begins, it's crucial that we start with a clear understanding of the poem itself. We aim to employ basic evaluation methods, including determining the poem's structure, speaker, subject, and theme. We can also consider the following questions:
 - a. What is the poem about?
 - b. Is the poem lyrical or narrative, and does it have a concrete plot?
 - c. Who are the characters in this poem?
 - d. What literary devices are used? (i.e., rhyme, alliteration, consonance, assonance, repetition, metaphor, simile)
 - e. What images stand out, and which ones are unclear?

After we discuss what the poem is about, we can then consider what is more or less effective for understanding. This is the evaluative portion of the workshop; it's important to keep in mind that this part of the process must be constructive and example-based. We should provide the poem and poet with concrete examples for improvement rather than vague comments and critiques.

Don't just say "You did a good job"; explain what made it captivating and interesting. What specifically did you like, and how did it impact your understanding of the poem itself? *It's better to discuss how and why something means what it does, instead of just talking about what it means.* This is how the analysis of technique shines over interpretation.

Workshop members should avoid giving empty praise or unjustified criticism. For example, while it's nice to hear "I like it," we want to know why you like it. What affected you, or what resonated with you? Similarly, when we hear "I don't get it," we want to understand why not. Do you mean overall or just this line or stanza? Is there a word you don't know, or is there an image you can't relate to? Does a metaphor not work for you? What is it that you do or don't understand specifically?

5. After your work has been thoughtfully workshopped and you've received a wealth of feedback, you'll have the opportunity to ask the workshopers any questions you may have. Remember, it's perfectly okay if you don't have questions right away—feel free to take your time reading through your notes first! However, if questions do come to mind as you reflect on your notes and you seek clarification or specific feedback to assist you in your revision, don't hesitate to ask then. It's really important to remember that this is a safe space, so avoid the urge to defend your work following the workshop. You can also feel free to disregard any feedback that doesn't resonate with you—it's all about what serves your creative process!

Now, it's time to dive into revising your draft. This stage really allows you to benefit from the time and distance, giving you the chance to return to your work with fresh eyes. If you're finding it tough to decide which feedback to embrace and which to set aside, consider chatting with a professor or a classmate who can help you create a plan for your revision. You've got this!

6. Finally, be sure to share your wonderful poem for publication!