

# How to Be a Good Workshop Partner

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## Overview

We are here to help one another become better writers, to help our workshop partners improve the quality of their fiction so that it reaches its full potential. Period. To that end, here's how I want you to approach this task: Think of this group as the editorial board at a publishing house or a magazine which already has accepted the piece. There is no point in trashing it. Your job is to help the writer make it as successful as it possibly can be.

As this workshop's leader, my job is to encourage honest feedback, prompt critics to better articulate their concerns, and help writers whose work is being critiqued to process, apply, and occasionally ignore the suggestions that have been offered. I will deliver my opinions along with everyone else, but typically will do so after everyone else has had their say.

## Process

Having read the work under discussion for a particular class, we will go around the table. Each of you will be asked to offer your thoughts about the piece. (Try to imagine how embarrassing and damaging to your grade it will be if, when your turn comes, you say, "I did not have time to read this. Sorry." That is simply not acceptable in a workshop.) Don't be afraid of agreeing or disagreeing with suggestions that already have been offered. Everyone's opinion is valid, and it's up to the writer to sift what's useful from what is not. But when you critique, remember: It's not what you say; it's how you say it. I suggest a simple formula: 1/3 Sincere Praise + 2/3 Constructive Criticism = Optimum Workshop Participation (and a better grade).

The writer may be asked to clear up specific points, but in general should keep silent until the end of the discussion, when he or she may wish to comment upon the commentary. However, the workshop should discuss what the author has put down on the page, not what he or she *thought* was there.

If your work is being discussed, here's my advice: Chances are, nearly every one of your colleagues in this class will be smart, helpful, courteous, kind, and sincerely interested in trying to help you improve your work. That's not to say they won't criticize or tell you hard truths about what, at this moment, you're convinced is the greatest piece of fiction ever written. That's why they're here. But there's also a chance someone may say something hurtful, such as "I find your main character to be vapid, self-absorbed, sexually repulsive, and generally intolerable" when you know, deep down, that character is actually a more heroic version of you. Here's my advice: Flinch as little as you can, swallow hard, take earnest notes, and thank that reader for his or her input. And try to smile. If the feedback rings true, be honest with yourself and use it to improve your story. If not, simply let it bounce off your rhino hide. Then thank the reader again for taking the time to read and think about your work.