Help Build!
Or, Talking About Work in Progress

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction
II. A Conversational Approach
III. A Few Comments Best Avoided
IV. How To Offer Expertise
V. What About Cultural Expertise?
VI. Writing Outside Your Expertise
VII. Avoiding the (Scape)Goat
VIII. Confidentiality at the Workshop — “The Cone of Silence”
IX. General Workshop Suggestions
X. A Final Note: Line-Edits, “Corrections” and Happy Accidents

I. Introduction

The heart of the Six-Week Workshop is passionate engagement with new work. If you respond to your classmates' writing in positive, expansive, encouraging, and inspirational ways, the ensuing conversation will be positive, expansive, encouraging, and inspirational for everyone. Even you!

Authors will have opportunities to outline what kinds of feedback they are looking for in their Author Statements. In some cases, an author may say "open to any feedback." Others, however, may feel particularly close to a story or protective of some aspect of the work, and they may request that some types of comment are out of bounds. Please respect these requests and check in with the author for permission first if you are not sure.

II. A Conversational Approach

In general, think of your comments on a story not as theses nailed to a wall in the public square, but as conversational openings that invite comment from your classmates, including the author. You're basically making observations and asking questions. Every piece could invite dozens of observations and questions, though you'll probably have time to discuss only a few during class. Some will occur to multiple readers, others only to you. Here are a few examples of this conversational approach:

- "What I really admire here is …"
- "The first time I read this story … . Then I read it a second time, and …"
- "The narrative voice in this story is interesting. Who is telling us all this, and what's their stake in things? You said you were open to feedback about the main character. Would you like a suggestion?"
- "The title of this text is interesting. What does it imply, and to what extent is that implication fulfilled, or reversed, or complicated, in the story?"
- "I'm curious to know how other people read this particular scene, this particular moment, this particular exchange, this particular line in the story. Here's why ..."
- "Here's something I noticed. …"
- "How might this story be different if …"
- "What do you all think about … / Have you all thought about …"
- "Could this element be doing more for the story? For example, …"
- "Do you have a particular audience in mind for this story? I can see it doing well with …, and this is why!"
- "I could envision this story in a certain magazine, or a certain anthology, or a certain publisher's fall list, and here's why."
- "I'm fascinated by the language of this story, and here are some examples."
- "This story reminded me of another story (or novel or film or TV show or comedy sketch or news story or essay or discovery or innovation or trend or folktale or myth or song or

artwork or quote or earlier point made in class, etc.), and here's why I say that."

Likewise, questions to the author should come from a place of curiosity vs. judgment. It may well be that the scene you found so clumsy was written in a disjointed way in order to achieve a specific effect. You'll learn far more by asking the author: "What did you intend to do by using short sentences in this section?" then by stating, "this section felt jumbled to me, you should rewrite it."[1]

Crucially, these examples all avoid the assumption that this story needs fixing, and you're just the right person to do it. It may well have problems worth noting — as even published, award-winning stories often do — but don't go in with hammer already in hand, focused exclusively on nails. You need to see the story whole, including its opportunities.

What you *are* trying to do is share your individual reading experience in all its complexity, by discussing the things that you find both more and less interesting, resonant, powerful, noteworthy, admirable, intriguing, etc. This isn't a workshop to fix things; it's a workshop to build things in collaboration. So **help build!**

III. A Few Comments Best Avoided

Here's some language that experience teaches is best avoided, because it can introduce problematic tensions into a workshop. These can range from slight awkwardness to outright insult, depending on a host of factors of which the speaker may well be unaware.

Please note that all these are very commonly heard in formal writers' workshops and informal critique groups; they wouldn't be on the list otherwise. In fact, you may have used or experienced some of these yourself and felt no harm in them. That's OK. Only recently have many of us begun to reflect on the downsides of traditional workshop language, and to try more inclusive alternatives.

Moreover, if you or your classmates fall back into one of these well-worn grooves occasionally, that's OK, too. We're all learning together, and making mistakes together, as part of a supportive community. No one in the cohort should feel obligated to enforce these matters, but everyone in the cohort is welcome to kindly redirect the conversation as needed, and to privately contact the instructor or Clarion West staff with any concerns.

- Dogmatism/arrogance: "Fiction doesn't work this way." "Fiction should not work this way." "This story isn't science fiction." "Even fantasy has to have rules." "Here's how comedy works." "This wouldn't happen in real life." "You must change this one thing."
- The implication that the story is not the property of the author, but written on commission for you, the demanding client: "Here's what I want you to do." "I need some closure here." "I'd like this to happen." "You're not giving me what I need."
- Similarly, prescriptive critiques that tell the author exactly what you think the story

[1] See our document "Defining and Using Neutral Questions" for more…
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ui8cMPCr3pelOK9hMn-DnVL-DIhSLupU_HzQs1TmAdU/edit

should be doing, rather than offering it as an option: "This story needs a flashback here." "You should add more description here." "The ending should do this instead." If the student has not requested prescriptive feedback, please avoid it.[2]

● Irrelevant self-absorption in general: "I'm not your ideal audience, because I don't usually read this sort of thing." "I would have written the story this other way." "I don't like this character."

● "This story reminds me of a long anecdote about myself." At various informal points this summer, classmates will bond by spontaneously swapping such stories, but generally not in the classroom.

● Capitalist language that suggests the story is merely a commodity, its value set entirely by the marketplace: "This ending isn't earned." "This scene has no payoff." "You would profit by doing this."

● "Show, don't tell" and other anti-exposition prejudices.

● "This reads like a comic book/video game/fanfic" when meant as a negative criticism that dismisses entire genres and communities.

● "This is too sentimental/melodramatic/tear-jerking" and other dismissals of emotion.

● "You can't possibly write about this topic without first reading this classic novel on the theme" and other gatekeeping assertions. (Note the contrast with the very positive "I really think you would love Novel X, as it has some thematic overlap, but don't worry, it's very different from what you're doing here.")

● "This needs to be a novel." Be careful about this one! You might mean this as a compliment, and it might be gladly received by an author thinking along those lines. But for an author who isn't interested in expanding a story, or who isn't so confident about the idea, it could be panic-inducing. It might also imply that novels are just expanded short stories, rather than a separate form. A better wording might be: "Are you considering writing more about this character/world/theme? If so, here's an idea."

IV. How To Offer Expertise

You may have specific, personal knowledge of a topic, a place, a time period, an activity that your classmate is writing about. That may be very useful for the author to know, but be careful not to claim veto power over their creation ("I'm here to tell you it wouldn't happen like this") or to assume they don't also have specific, personal knowledge of a topic. They may be an expert simply because of their identities. If you position yourself as an expert in someone else's culture, for example, this might come across as a microaggression.

If you still feel you have something to add, it's best to offer help and be open to the author

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[2] There are opportunities clearly outlined in some workshop models to offer feedback that comes with an opinion. Otherwise, avoid this unless it is explicitly requested by the author.

saying, “No thank you.”

Examples of good ways to offer help include:

- “In your author statement you ask for resources on asexual romance. One of my partners is asexual, and they’re open to me sharing their contact information with you if you have questions.”
- “You’re calling this creature a soucouyant, but as a native Trinidadian, I feel that what you’re describing is much closer to a classic Transylvanian vampire. If you’re interested in making it more Trinidadian, I can help you with that.”
- “You probably don’t know this, but I actually grew up on a farm, something like the setting of your story. If you’d like to quiz me later, one on one, just let me know.”
- “My sister’s a competitive fencer and talks about it ALL the time. If you need any details for this training sequence, I’m happy to make introductions. Just let me know.”
- “I’m so happy that you’re writing about a meteorite! I’ve read so much about them, it’s embarrassing. Anytime you want to talk meteorites as you work on this, let me know.”

Whether such help is wanted, or even needed, is up to the author. Don’t fret if they never tug your sleeve. Some writers obsess about researching the tiniest details; others don’t. That meteorite may be purely metaphorical or poetic, a thing not of silicates but of syllables. And at this point, the author may be more interested in who this character *is*, what this character *wants*, or how this character *sounds*, than in which surfboard or tax loophole or metro station they use.

V. What About Cultural Expertise?

The most complex questions of expertise arise whenever a writer seems to be trying, but to various degrees failing, to represent a culture not their own. Cultures are determined by a host of factors, a few of which are race, gender, religion, class, language, age, ability, geography, income and education. These are crucial to our individual self-images, our composite identities, and it’s human nature to notice, and resent, whenever one or more of these building blocks is marginalized or misrepresented in any way, for example through stereotype, appropriation, romantic illusion or condescension. Suppose a manuscript gets *your* culture wrong?

First of all, if a depiction is upsetting to you, you have every right to be upset. Just as importantly, no one in the workshop bears any unique burden to educate their classmates. You may not want to say anything at all, and that’s OK — you may even decide to abstain from finishing the story or commenting on it. If a story has affected you so deeply that you couldn’t finish it, please just say that. Say why if you can — or stop there if you judge that to be better in this situation. Or you may decide to share your concerns privately, with someone not the author. For example, you may want to give the instructor and workshop staff a private heads-up, to alert them to a cultural issue in that day’s text, even if you preface it with, “I’m not going to say anything in the group, but.” You may have spotted a great discussion opportunity they would

have missed otherwise.

If you want a specific action taken, it's best to work with the staff and instructor to address an issue before class. At any time, a staff member can intervene and talk with an author, or even — in a more extreme situation — suggest that a story receive private feedback rather than being brought to the table. While your classmates are there to support you, be careful about building alliances "against" an author and/or creating a mob mentality around a piece.[3]

You also have every right to voice the issue yourself, in group discussion and/or notes to the author. In phrasing your response, please keep in mind what we said before: We're all learning together, and making mistakes together, as part of a supportive community. Assume the authors are people of good will who want to get it right, and respond in kind. Point out an example or two in the text, explain what the issues are, suggest some good models, and offer to talk over some possible avenues of exploration later. Remember that you are critiquing the story and not the author.

What if you think the text, or the discussion of it, may get someone *else's* culture wrong? Be an ally simply by raising the possibility and suggesting that the author solicit feedback from members of the population being written about. Whatever your good intentions, you don't want to claim expertise you don't really have. Avoid sweeping assumptions about another culture, and don't claim kinship because you once worked with, or went to school with, or dated someone from that culture. Be wary, too, of co-opting the discussion to talk about your own marginalization; whatever their similarities, apples are not oranges. And always remember that others in the group may be much better placed to speak on a given culture than you are.

In other words, while cultural expertise is obviously a FAR more important type of expertise than, say, expertise on orbital Lagrange points, that's all the more reason to handle the discussion in a positive way, and how we handle those less fraught conversations can be good models for the bigger conversations as well. As always, though, how the author responds — if at all — may be out of your hands.

Keep in mind, too, that an excellent way to raise these enormous issues in a workshop setting is to become an advocate for texts that handle them sensitively and well. Whenever authors have gotten something right, laud them in front of everyone, point out specific examples in the text, and explain why this is a big deal! Positives can be teaching moments, too.

VI. Writing Outside Your Expertise

Clarion West pushes you to write beyond your comfort zone — to experiment, to try things you've never tried before, to test a new POV, to write the other, to try being romantic or tough, or dare to walk the edge of sentimentality or horror, to try something you've never done before. Facing the constant pressure of producing a new story in a very short period of time is challenging enough. Additionally, you're writing and sharing early drafts, which would rarely

[3] See Section VI, "Avoiding the (Scape)Goat"

otherwise see the light of day. Everyone tells you not to pull any punches, and not to flinch. (Don't! Really!) But this means the potential to offend someone grows exponentially.

You are all going to be pushing the boundaries in some way and we want to encourage you to do that: testing your abilities is better than worrying too much about succeeding or failing, especially in an atmosphere like the writing workshop.

We definitely do not want to stifle experimentation or make you so worried about offending someone you can't write. We do encourage you to do your research and to let classmates know (in your author statements, or in content notes) when you are covering territory you don't know well or addressing painful topics.

In many cases, you may not realize your story might offend someone because you're concentrating on other aspects of the story and have given the offensive part minimal attention. And that's usually what shows in these first drafts.

If a classmate approaches you to let you know they were hurt or made uncomfortable by your story, don't get defensive. Consider the Community Agreements your class made together during orientation and whether any apply to this situation. Find a time where you can hear them out without responding reactively. Invite a staff member to mediate if you'd prefer. Acknowledge that they don't owe you this conversation, and they are perhaps being very brave by approaching you about this sore spot. Listen to your classmate, take notes, and try to understand their concerns and where you may have misstepped. Don't beat yourself up about this or make your guilt or discomfort their problem — we all make mistakes and can be ignorant to them unless they're pointed out. Take accountability for your actions, apologize if you can — without expecting to be forgiven — , and resolve to do better.

VII. Avoiding the (Scape)Goat

To avoid having a class scapegoat, you must *decide that you're* not *going to have one*. Then you must communicate with each other, be accepting of idiosyncrasies and forgiving of errors, and try to get to know everyone in your class, at least a little.

Scapegoating situations start when someone rubs others the wrong way, and the irritated people band together. Don't do this. Not only does it inflate someone into a target, but it begins a feedback loop that makes those banding together even more critical and annoyed until the situation is blown entirely out of proportion.

The odd person out is not necessarily the obvious person, or the person who in our larger society might be the odd person out. It might be someone older or younger or from a different social or political background. It might even be the instructor or a staff member rather than a student.

Scapegoating can be triggered in many ways. Sometimes a particular behavior annoys people, but often at the workshop, the targets are those whose critiques or styles of critiquing come off as superior, dismissive, or dogmatic. It might be that someone has a different understanding of political or social issues. It might be that someone is socially awkward, or not great at expressing

their comments in a way that doesn't come off as judgmental. Simply having a different take on a story or expressing an unpopular opinion can also turn someone into a target.

It is natural and normal to be irritated or disappointed sometimes. The action one takes in response to irritation, however, is crucial. A harsh response or retaliation only exacerbates a situation and divides the class. Acknowledgement of your response, followed by an honest and empathetic attempt to understand the source, is vital to maintaining a productive and congenial class. Be as understanding of individuals you encounter at the workshop as you want to be of the characters in your work.

Beware of feeling self-righteous or deciding that a particular person is clueless. Those are signs that the group may be heading in a bad direction. Try to interpret their actions, words, or writing in the best possible light.

If someone annoys you enough that you need to talk to someone about it, *do not* huddle with other class members to discuss it. Please talk to María, Jae, or Amy. Or talk directly with the person who's annoyed you. Be gentle and give them the benefit of the doubt. Try not to confront or accuse. Use words that describe your own feelings and don't assign blame ("I feel __________ when you ________.") If someone talks to you about how your behavior is bothering them, please consider how you can come to an accommodation with them. The key words here are *negotiation* and *compromise*.

Time at Clarion West is in short supply, so there will be occasions when you have to hurry over people's stories, or possibly even skip critiquing a story, but if you have established mutual respect, this will not be a problem. Everyone is in the same situation.

Respect is the key.

A final note: We are careful about who we invite into the workshop space (that goes for students, instructors, staff, and volunteers), and we go out of our way to ensure inclusivity across multiple spectra. However, we understand some of our students' lived realities are those in which they may be frequently forced to defend themselves or others, in which proactive defensive thinking is likely habitual. We do our best to make this space as safe as possible, with input from the entire class. Many students find they will get the most and learn the most by opening themselves up to any and every opportunity for dialogue that comes along, so long as they feel safe enough to engage.

VIII. Confidentiality at the Workshop — "The Cone of Silence"

One of the fundamentals of Clarion West is to create a safer critiquing space where writers can push their writing, take risks, make mistakes, and criticize each other's work in a constructive way. In order to maintain this environment, what happens inside the workshop must be confidential and stay within the group.

Students sometimes choose to post online about their workshop experience. Your instructors strongly recommend that you don't take up time that could be spent doing workshop writing and

critiquing with online writing, but if you feel the need to, please do it in a way that respects the confidentiality of both individuals and the group as a whole.

It's okay to talk about your own feelings: “I had a hard day. I struggled to make my intentions for my story clear in workshop.” “I had a great day. I learned so much from the instructor’s talk and my classmates’ crits today.” “I am feeling frustrated about my progress.” “I am elated — they loved my story!” Et cetera.

It is not okay to post about specific conversations that happen during workshopping — these conversations are confidential. It is not okay to post the details of other peoples’ stories — those are their stories, and it is their choice whether to share any details with the world via the internet, not yours. It is not okay to describe other students’ actions or words in any way that makes them identifiable without their explicit permission.

If you do these things, you make the workshop a place where others do not feel safe about learning in the group.

You are all adults. We expect you might experience frustration and anger at times — that’s part of this experience. However, we also expect you to handle your feelings appropriately, with respect to safety and confidentiality. Those things are non-negotiable.

People learn best in an environment of trust and mutual respect. We reserve the right to ask anyone — whether students, instructors, staff, or volunteers — whose actions disrespect the individual privacy and the confidentiality of the group to leave. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and sensitivity.

IX. General Workshop Suggestions

Open yourself to every instructor’s ideas, especially the ones most distant from your own interests. This is your time to experiment. Try anything. Don’t resist ideas. You will get out of the workshop what you put into it. You will learn more from a failed experiment than by showing off what you already know you can do.

If you know plot is one of your weaknesses, try writing a tightly plotted story. If you always write in third person, try a first-person point of view. If world-building is your strength, try setting a story in the real world.

Writing is serious business — but give yourself a chance to play with new tools and new ideas.

Take care of yourself. Ask for what you need. Reach out for help. Eat nourishing food regularly, exercise, and get enough sleep. If you start feeling unwell, please let a staff member know so we can help you seek medical or mental health treatment.

X. A Final Note: Line-Edits, “Corrections” and Happy Accidents

Yes, we all sometimes need help with minor line-edits involving spelling, grammar, and so on,

but very rarely should this be a topic of group conversation. Exceptions may include a passage that could be read multiple ways, or a punctuation mark that seems an important clue to meaning.

If the author specifically has asked for line-editing help, this most often can be given privately, via manuscript notes. A little goes a long way: Point out, say, a comma issue on the first few pages, then stop. You won't have time for line-by-line edits, anyhow, and such close attention may be misplaced on a first draft of a piece that is far from achieving even its final shape, much less its final wording. Someone may be paid to do those line-edits, long after Clarion West.

Keep in mind, too, that what seems to be an error might actually be a clue, an opportunity, a breadcrumb, a door left ajar. These are worth pointing out, if you can do so positively. *Coraline* began as a typo for "Caroline"; Neil Gaiman found himself wondering who this Coraline was, and what she was trying to tell him. Creativity is a series of happy accidents.

Good luck to all! Now, go help one another! Help build!

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