

Third Street Writer's Workshop Guidelines and Procedures:

As part of our mission, Third Street Writers offers a writing workshop on Mondays in the Game Room of the Susi Q Center.

This workshop is free and open to the public. Therefore, there will always be a fluctuating number of people in attendance who are working on different projects and who come to writing from diverse backgrounds.

To respect these differences, we ask that everyone show courtesy to one another and follow these guidelines:

Leading the Workshop:

1. We ask that people sign up to lead the workshop. It is voluntary, but participation is always welcome.
2. If possible, please bring your laptop so you can join to our zoom and screenshare the files being reviewed that day. You also can arrange for someone else attending to bring their laptop and share files. If there are new people, a small round of introductions is a nice gesture. Ensure new people provide contact information (send to Amy at amy@thirdstreetwriters.org to add to the email list). There are folders with paper, pens and copies of this document in the cabinet to give them.
3. You are responsible for providing a writing prompt or prompts. It can be anything, so get creative. You can ask people to share the work generated from the prompt, but it is voluntary, and some may choose to pass.
4. During critique time, try to keep everyone within the guidelines set out below. Please ask each writer: 1) what they want the group to focus on when giving feedback (see our Critique Questionnaire); and 2) how they will use their 25 minutes (e.g., read a short slice of a piece to allow more time for feedback vs. read a longer piece with less feedback time). You may have to referee and/or remind participants of our guidelines. Ask questions to keep the conversation moving. An excellent starting point is to ask the group members *what is this story about? who is the narrator? where and when is it happening?* or other general questions to ensure that everyone is grounded and ready to follow through.
5. You also must monitor the time. Typically, our two-hour session is organized as follows:
 - 5-10 minutes – introductions, housekeeping/organization announcements
 - 20 minutes – prompt writing and sharing (this can be adjusted depending on how many people are signed up to share)
 - 25 minutes each for three writers to share their work and receive feedback
 - If we move ahead of schedule, one or more wait-list writers may have time to share.

Writers Sharing Work:

1. You have 25 minutes. You may choose how this time is used. For example:

- Read aloud your entire piece and then receive feedback.
 - Read a portion of the piece aloud and have more time for feedback.
 - Ask people to read in advance and only receive feedback.
2. Please keep the work or excerpt of work you are sharing to approx. 1,000 words (3-4 pages). If you share a longer work, you may ask readers to read the whole thing in advance and read aloud a portion in the workshop.
 3. Please sign up to share on our OneDrive sign-up calendar.
 4. **Upload your work (Word doc or PDF) and the Critique Questionnaire to our Work for Sharing folder one week in advance.** This is of the utmost importance - in order to give people time to read, evaluate and provide insightful criticism and commentary, you need to give them time. If you are unable to do so, you can opt for a "first listen" session of your piece, which will not be in-depth, or sign up to have your work considered at a later date.
 5. If you are unable to distribute your work with OneDrive, then your option is to send it to the entire group as an email attachment.
 6. For those of you who prefer paper copies of your work to be distributed to the in-person group meeting, that is certainly an option. We recommend 10-12 copies. You also may request via email or on your Critique Questionnaire that attendees print and bring their own copies if you do not have printing capabilities.

Receiving Comments:

1. **You can set the terms for the input you are looking for.** For example, if you are still determining dialogue use, state that upfront so people can focus their commentary.
2. **Please listen while people are commenting.** *Refrain from responding until everyone has finished.*
3. **Write down notes of what each person says.** Sometimes, it takes effort to remember exactly what people say. You will want to review them later.
4. **Ask the reader for clarification if you do not understand a comment.** Ask the reader if there was anything in your piece that needed to be clarified or that they needed to understand that led to their comments. Remember to address the question specifically – this leads to helpful discussion.
5. **Do not defend yourself.** Be sure to thank people for their time and opinions. If someone's notes were constructive, let them know. If someone's comments are not so helpful, ignore them.

Giving Comments:

In general, **be kind and generous and always start with something positive** about the piece of writing you are talking about. Here are some general ways to think about the type of commentary you are giving:

- **Reactive:**

Reactive comments like: “This paragraph is very moving,” “I have some trouble with the dialogue,” and “The restaurant scene was funny” can be a good starting point but can also be frustrating for the writer if nothing more specific can be teased out of them. It is a first reaction to the writing and should be followed up with what exactly made the paragraph moving, is troubling about the dialogue, or makes the scene funny.

- **Descriptive:**

Descriptive feedback describes whether the writer is doing well: “The dialogue reflects the inner lives of the characters” or “I can't figure out when the flashbacks are taking place.” It is up to the writer (or another reader) to work through what to do about this. Is there a better way to signal when a flashback is taking place?

- **Prescriptive:**

Prescriptive feedback offers concrete suggestions for change. The descriptive comment “You have too many characters” might be followed with “Get rid of the cousin and combine the two brothers.” If a passage is too long, suggest specific words or phrases the writer might consider deleting or tightening. Prescriptive feedback can also be about addition. “I tried to stop him” could become showing HOW the hero tried to stop him (actions, words, violence, etc.), creating a scene that can better tell the story. Prescription can also suggest a structural change. Is the story better in a third-person point of view instead of first-person? Would the present tense be more forceful than the past?

- **No feedback:**

If you cannot connect with a piece, do not strain for comments because you should say something. Sometimes, you cannot find a foothold in a piece of writing, so perhaps you could amplify something someone else said or refrain from commenting altogether.

The Specifics of Commenting (or what to notice when you read):

Please respect the work the writer has put into the piece you are reading. Have the critique questionnaire in mind as you read through and treat the piece of writing as a discrete item. The best practice is to **pretend you do not know who wrote it**.

- **Get inside.** Read it through more than once if you must. You should be able to describe it to someone who has never read it.
- **Who's Talking and When?** Make a note of the point of view and verb tenses. Are these the best choices for this story?
- **“Linguistic Cardiogram”** Think about the pacing. Rising tension. Skipped Beats. Code blue. Find those points in the manuscript - do they link properly?

- **“In and Out”** What phrases or sentences take you inside the piece? Which ones take you out of it - they seem implausible. Are some scenes too long or too short?
- **Questions.** How can the stakes be raised to make the piece more powerful?
- **Research Possibilities:** Would the piece benefit from research on a specific topic?
- **Story and Plot.** STORY can be considered a narrative involving one or more characters, and PLOT is the selection, sequencing, and lengths of scenes used to tell the story. Does this work together? If you summarize the STORY to someone, would it sound better than it reads? If true, consider how to adjust the plot to align with the narrative.
- **Genre Confusion.** Is the piece the wrong genre? Would a personal essay work better than fiction?
- **Top and Bottom.** Pay attention to beginnings and endings. Does the work start or end too soon or too late? Is something promised to the reader yet to be delivered?
- **Movement.** Does the story move directly or meander? What is used to cue the movement - chronology, association, memory, thematic connections - and see if something breaks that flow. Do you need that flashback at that point in the story?
- **Mechanics.** Is the piece optimally broken up into paragraphs? Would a different structure (no paragraphs or more fragmentation) work better to tell the story?
- **Title:** Is this the best one?
- **Character Development.** Look at how and why characters change. Is it abrupt or gradual? Are there enough precipitating circumstances for this change? If it is a straw breaking the camel's back, is it a big enough straw?
- **Hide and Seek.** Is there another story hiding in this one, peeking through this narrative? Is it something you, the reader, would want to hear?
- **Problems and Opportunities:** You could suggest cutting something to strengthen the piece, but you should also present it as an opportunity. If a scene is unrealistic, do you take it out or turn it into a dream or fantasy?
- **Huzzah:** Pick sentences or images that you love, make you swoon, or walloped you. Let the writer know.

SOME THOUGHTS ON PERSONAL WRITING AND GENRE:

Writing or Therapy?

Writing is therapy when it is cathartic for the writer; literature occurs when the piece is cathartic for the reader. What happens when you read a piece that does not go beyond the writer's needs? Then, bring this up as a comment. You will get two reactions:

- One, *what would I need to do to engage the reader in this experience?* Address this as directly as you can with examples from the manuscript.
- Two, *I don't care. It means something to me.* Then, the only fair response is to ask that it not be brought to a workshop where we do care if it works for anyone else.

Genre:

Genre fiction gets a bad reputation because it is labeled as superficial and derivative, great for diversion or light entertainment with no aspiration to literary quality. Does this genre piece transcend the stereotype? Are the characters fully developed and multi-dimensional (rather than caricatures playing preordained roles)? Is the plot an actual story or just the standard issue formula? If yes, treat it the same way you would any piece of writing. If no, then enjoy it as a reader looking for a quick read and use that as the basis for your comments.

General tips:

Writing is a solitary endeavor. However, having people willing to spend time reading your work and commenting on it is a great advantage. Please make use of it. But remember that it is your work, and only you can decide how the final product represents your unique voice and personal vision.

Our workshop is voluntary. We rely not only on participation from our members but also welcome and encourage thoughts and comments on making it a better vehicle for them. Please never hesitate to speak up.