



CHAPTER 6

Workshopping a Draft

Writing is a communal act.

—NATALIE GOLDBERG

For most of us, the first stage of writing is a solitary struggle to produce a decent draft, something that interests us, something with potential. But what happens next, when we want to improve the draft? The struggle can remain a solitary one, or we can try to bring other views and voices into our writing by doing what is often called *workshopping a draft*.

Workshopping invites a group of “live” readers to tell us what they hear in our work-in-progress. Some groups are large, some are small; either way their purpose is to let the writer know what’s coming across in the writing, what each reader sees as strong, and what each senses might be missing. More and more writers, in classrooms, in libraries, or in living rooms, are discovering that this sort of response can mean the difference between producing a mediocre work and a strong one. Workshopping—if done well and with good spirit—can also turn writing into a social act that is surprisingly pleasurable, one that reinforces the writer’s energy, confidence, and insight. This chapter provides strategies to show you how.

Starting Out in a Writing Group

You are in a group with three other writers.¹ Everyone is working on a piece. Everyone has brought copies for each member of the group. You have 75 minutes. You divide up the time so that everyone gets an equal share.

¹We use a group of four here for illustration. But these practices can be readily used in any large or small group format, with partners, in trios, in class—or out.

You volunteer to go first and pass out copies of your draft. You are tempted to say, “This isn’t very good. I’m not happy with it,” but you suppress the urge, knowing that such disclaimers arise because you are trying to mask your nervousness. You tell yourself this is how everyone feels.

You read your piece out loud. It’s a slice of life about going to see the film *Dogville*. You’re not sure about the tone or the balance. Is the piece really about you or the movie? But you don’t say any of this yet. You just start reading.

You read slowly, tasting the words in your mouth, and by the second page, your voice is stronger. You are feeling a bit more sure of yourself. This isn’t so bad. When you finish reading, you look up. You want to hear the group’s reactions immediately, but you know it takes a minute or more for readers to figure out what to say. You wait quietly, expectantly.

You are in a group with new members and you have been instructed to use a technique called *active listening*. The task of your readers is to tell you what they hear in the piece. Not what they like or dislike, not what the piece makes them think of, not their good ideas for what you might do next, certainly not which words you misspelled: *No*. Their initial task is to listen carefully to the piece and then to *say back to you what they hear*.

A guy, let’s call him Tom, sitting to your right, begins: “You are writing about seeing *Dogville*, and how odd you found it, how beautiful Nicole Kidman is, and how she reminded you of an angel. I feel as if the piece is about your own desire to find something ... I don’t know, maybe redeeming in it? Or in yourself?”

You are excited. Tom has captured what you were trying to convey—and he’s done so in a questioning tone that invites you to think more about your intentions. “You’re right,” you say. “I was captivated by Kidman and, yet, in the end I left feeling cheated.” But you don’t want to say too much until you hear from the other readers. You make a note to return to this idea.

Another reader, Susan, responds: “What I hear in this piece is your anger. I see you wanting to defend the townspeople, and yet they all do such horrible things that you can’t like them. I hear you struggling for compassion.”

“Hmmm,” you say. “I *am* angry, but not at the people. Maybe that’s not clear enough yet.”

“What I hear,” says Alex, your third reader, “is you, the viewer, fantasizing about Nicole Kidman, and you the activist, wanting to change the world?”

“Maybe,” you respond. “I was unsettled by the film so I guess I am also trying to use it to make a social commentary.... But I want

to go back to the idea of being cheated. It's like everyone in the movie was cheated. Even the dog. It's about a morality that has failed.... Hey, it just hit me, *that's* what's important to me ... this idea of failed morality...." Smiling, you jot down some notes so you know where to pick up when you begin writing again.

Active Listening

Active listening sets a thoughtful tone, in which people listen carefully to each other's words. Most of us have heard about or experienced writing groups that don't work: when writers leave a session demoralized by negative comments and/or by advice that feels wrong for the piece. The experience can be so deflating that writers vow never to show their early work to anyone again. We offer a different approach: it begins with active listening. Here's why:

At the early draft stage, what we want to say is, more often than not, still unformed, often fragile. Key ideas and experiences may only be hinted at, lurking somewhere below the surface of the words. To coax them into the open, we need people who know how to listen generously and respond by giving back to us what they hear, sticking close to our texts. These responses, if delivered thoughtfully, are what often encourage us to keep going, to keep digging, to keep shaping.

The first step of active listening, then, is for readers to reflect back to the writer what they each hear in the piece. It sounds easy, but it can be quite hard because of the strong urge to judge and offer "good ideas." So if you are an active listener, simply say back to the writer what you hear—without adding anything extra. Keep in mind, though, that you are not a tape recorder. You don't have to memorize the text, just listen for the heart or the gist of the piece and give the writer your sense of what he or she is trying to say.

Your tone is crucial. If you respond in a series of flat, declarative sentences—"First you said this, then you said that ..." the writer will merely nod and say, "Yeah, that's right,"—leaving little room for insights in the making. But if you use a questioning tone, even raising your voice slightly at the end of your sentence—"So what I hear you saying is X ... ?"—you will be helping the writer reach new ground where thoughts and experiences may be reconsidered, modified, and extended. A questioning tone—not a direct question—invites the writer to pause, to take another look, and to say more. He or she might say, "Yes, that's right...*and*..." or "Well, no, that's not quite it What I *really* mean is" Either way, the writer will be off exploring explicitly what was, just a few moments ago, implicit but not expressed in the draft.

Helping the writer explore new ground is, in many ways, the point of this practice. Through active listening, writers confirm what is on the page *and* see the possibilities that lie beyond it. It's as if once we, as writers, have been heard, we are able to move on: able to see what is there and what needs to be there. We also discover what isn't there: where we didn't express what we intended and where we might need to take a new tack. The decision of what to do next is always ours. But now we have other readers' voices in our heads to accompany us as we revisit our drafts.

Beyond Active Listening

For some writers, having others pay close attention to their words is all they need to return to the piece and keep writing productively. Even seasoned writers are often surprised by how gratifying active listening can be. As a veteran of many writing workshops recently told us, "I've been in groups where people told me what to change or what they didn't like, but never before have people just told me, plain and simple, what they heard. I feel as if I've just received a gift."

Some groups use all of their time for active listening. But most writers, once they feel comfortable, value direct feedback about what works and what might need more work. This kind of feedback, called *critiquing*, is used when writers have the time, energy, and desire to revise. To include both kinds of responses in a group session, we suggest using about one third of your time for active listening and two thirds for critiquing—and to work in rounds:

Round 1: *Active Listening*: Readers "say back" the gist of one particular idea they hear in the piece. The writer responds briefly to each reader, using each comment to confirm where the piece is going and/or to extend it by elaborating on a new idea.

Round 2: *What Works Well*: Readers each identify something that works well for them in the piece. It may be a line, a series of images, an insight, a character, a point of view, to name just a few. The writer listens and takes notes but does not necessarily respond.

Round 3: *What Still Needs More Work*: Readers each point out one place in the text where they want to know more, or are confused, or lose interest, or find something that strikes them as off. Because the tendency is to jump to this place first, we recommend that you curb this impulse until this

round. The writer mostly takes notes and talks minimally, if at all.

Round 4: *Checking In*: The writer is asked if he or she needs anything else to move the piece forward before the group moves on.

In the beginning, most groups set up a structure that moves from one round to the next, keeping an eye on the clock to make sure there is enough time for each. Later on, as people come to know one another and to understand one another's work, some groups opt for a less formal structure with one round casually merging into the next. And, of course, depending on how developed a draft is, writers should be able to request the kind of response they think would be most useful.

A Writing Group at Work

What happens when writing groups move from active listening to critiquing? Let's listen as three college writers, Nina, Alison, and Michael, enrolled in their first class on creative nonfiction, work together. They have known one another for a month and are beginning to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Nina, a serious but inexperienced writer, passes out copies of her draft. It's the beginning of a personal essay about her cousin, written in segments that move back and forth in time. She has worked on it for days; there are parts she feels pretty good about—and others that just haven't jelled yet. As she reads aloud, Alison and Michael follow along with pens in their hands, marking places to talk about once Nina finishes reading:²

The Channel Four meteorologist proclaims it "a perfect day." The early July temperature is sixty-five at eight this morning. The sky is a blank blue slate, and the occasional breeze washes over my face with a cool flutter as I wait for my cousin Kate on the back porch of her newly renovated house. The honey-stained railing steadily props my feet, and the tilted mug of Mocha Java rests precariously on my knee. The trees have grown huge since my last visit.... A perfect day, the meteorologist claims, is what we've all been waiting for.

²Nina's draft originally ran to six pages. Due to the limits of space, we present here only the first few.

"Nini, hurry." Kate always called to me when we hiked up the tree-lined hill underneath the canopy of branches that led to Nana's house. Kate grabbed my arm as we dashed through the front door and into the kitchen where the thick aroma of boiling chickens mixed with the faint sweet smell of cinnamon-sugar, poppy seeds, and prunes filled the air. (It seems like a dream, gnawing on the soft succulent capon feet that Nana gave to us for a snack. Now the thought leaves me with a queasy lump in my throat.) The weekend preparations were always completed by sundown on Friday. The cookies were carefully packed in blue tins lined with waxed paper. The chicken wings, legs, and thighs were torn apart and added to the dilled soup broth, and the tender breasts, sprinkled with Hungarian paprika, were set out to cool in the screened back porch. Our grandmother was our only tie to the Sabbath—a tradition that our mothers let slip away.

"Morning, Nina," Kate half whispers.

"M-m-m-m, good morning." I watch my cousin float across the deck with a platter of fruits and homemade banana-blueberry breakfast bread. Kate always has something delectable waiting for me whenever I come to visit. "How'd you sleep?" I ask as she passes the platter while nibbling on a tender sweet strawberry that dribbles a deep-pink teardrop on the breast of her nightshirt. "I guess okay. A little restless," Kate answers coolly. My mind is flooded with memories, memories that I can't tell apart from my dreams....

After a pause, Alison begins, providing a response that combines active listening with what works: "I'm really impressed with the rich detail you have, especially the food descriptions and the relationships—you and your cousin, your grandmother, the sense that the old ways are not carried on any longer but something has certainly been passed down."

Nina nods. At this point she knows she just wants to listen and take notes, gathering as many responses as she can.

"I agree," responds Michael. "From the Mocha Java to the boiling chickens with all those spices, the cinnamon and the paprika, and that strawberry, well, you are making my mouth water. But, you know, underneath the pretty picture, the 'perfect day' announced by the meteorologist, I sense some foreboding. As if something is about to go wrong."

"I had a similar thought," says Alison. "It's as if you are hoping for a perfect day for some reason. And when you ask Kate how she slept and she says 'a little restless,' I sense something is wrong with

her, especially when the strawberry juice makes a pink stain on her nightshirt. I can see it spreading out across her breast.”

Nina looks delighted. “It’s not too forced?” she asks. “Too obvious?”

“Not for me,” says Alison. “But I do get lost sometimes in all of your long sentences. I’m not sure a breeze can wash your face with a flutter or even if the railing can actually prop your feet up. I can feel that it’s one of those wonderful, warm, breezy days at the beginning of summer, but for me there is too much clutter in the sentences. Sometimes I get sensory overload, maybe even in the strawberry image.”

“Yeah,” says Michael. “A sweet strawberry dripping onto a nightshirt without the teardrop would be enough for me.”

Nina puts a check mark on that line.

“I’m also not sure of the time sequence,” Michael says. “I’m pretty sure you are starting in the present and then the italics are signaling the past when you and Kate were girls, but when you say in the middle of that passage that sucking on chicken feet makes you queasy today, I am jarred. The adult commentary takes me out of the past.”

“I’m also puzzled by one other thing,” says Alison. “I can’t tell how often you see Kate. You say the trees have grown huge since your last visit, which would mean, to me, it’s been years, but then you say that she always has something delicious waiting for you when you visit.”

Nina takes notes and then tells Michael and Alison that she and Kate are close, they talk on the phone all the time, but, no, they don’t see each other that often. Kate is ill. Nina does want the reader to sense the fear growing in both of them against the backdrop of their large family. And yes, food figures heavily in their lives, in the past and today.

In the memoir, Nina explains, the two women will soon get dressed and head into the city to see the doctor. Kate has asked Nina to accompany her. The piece will also address Nina’s anxiety that she won’t be strong enough to help her cousin.

“What’s this last line about memories and dreams?” asks Michael.

“Oh, yeah that—I’m not sure what I was trying to do there,” Nina muses. “My memories of our childhood are so vivid and yet they also seem like dreams to me—from another world. I don’t know if I should weave in another flashback here or if I should stay in the present, move into the day.”

“I think you’ve made a great start,” says Alison, “but soon I’ll want to know what’s wrong with Kate. You might want to give

more of a hint when you talk about the lump in your throat. I'd stay in the present more."

Michael adds, "I don't think you need to decide yet. If it's a long story, you can afford to linger in the past, but if this is going to be short, you may need to stay in the present. Mainly, I think you should just keep writing."

"Thanks," says Nina, smiling. "This has been really helpful."

Principles for Responding

There is no formula or sure-fire way to respond to writing. So much depends on the author's intentions and needs, the dynamics of the writing group, the amount of time available, and the experience of participants. It takes time to learn how to read a draft, to listen sensitively, to figure out what's strong, and to see what isn't there yet. It also takes time to develop a language for talking about writing. Specialized vocabulary—terms like pacing, foreshadowing, narrative arc, and back-story—will ultimately enrich group discussions, but to begin, we offer basic principles and guiding questions that make workshopping interesting, productive, and fun for writers at all levels.³

Work from Strength

Ask yourself, "What are the strengths of this piece?" Then tell the writer what you like best or what, in your eyes, is most effective, giving specific examples. Focus on what strikes you as particularly strong and interesting, using specific lines and images to make your case. Most important, explain why. Comments like "That's good!" tell the writer little. But if you say, "I can really picture that guy chugging his beer ..." or "I like the tension in the dialogue on page two ...", the writer learns a lot.

Be an Active Reader

Let the writer know how the draft affects you: What are you feeling, thinking, experiencing at various points in the text? Writing teacher Peter Elbow calls this providing "movies of your mind." It gives an ongoing account of your reactions as you move through the work.

³See "Twenty Ways to Talk about Writing" (pp. 71–74) for terms worth using in writing groups.

This technique is similar to active listening; only now you are focusing more on conveying your response and less on what you think the writer is trying to say, as in the following example:

Reader: "I am really with you here as you are sitting on the plane and wondering what awaits you when you get to California. I can feel your annoyance with all the announcements and the small TV screen in front of you that has boring shows on cooking. But then when you deplane, I don't quite see the scene. I know you are looking for your friends and you are worried that they won't show up—when you wipe the sweat from your neck, I can feel your anxiety—but I can't tell exactly where you are as you say this. I feel lost. Are you walking through the terminal? Are you at the luggage area?"

Help the Writer Delve Deeper

We've found the best way to do this is to ask yourself questions as you are reading. Your answers will help you figure out what to ask the writer so that he or she can flesh out what needs more developing.

Below is a long list to choose from, depending on the draft being workshopped. *Tip:* These questions are also worth asking when rereading your own drafts before revising.

Basic Questions:

- ✿ What are the strengths of this piece? What pulls me in and makes me want to know more? What isn't there yet? What needs connecting? What seems irrelevant right now? What, besides the plot, is this piece trying to be about? What is at stake here? Why did the writer want to write about this?

Detailed Questions for More In-Depth Response:

- ✿ *Listening for Voice:* What is the dominant voice of the piece? Is it angry, sad, ironic, humorous, scholarly? Does it pull me in? Why or why not? Is the voice consistent? Are there places where it becomes too formal or informal? If there is more than one voice, is each one distinct? How well do they work together?
- ✿ *Studying Scenes and Dialogue:* Where does a scene work—with or without dialogue? Where might dialogue be added?

Where does the dialogue sound flat, not like real people talking?

- ✿ *Focusing on Setting:* Can I picture the setting? Is more description of place needed to make me feel as if I am there? Where does the description go on too long?
- ✿ *Developing Characters:* Where are the characters well drawn? Where do I need to see and hear people more fully?
- ✿ *Developing an Argument:* Is an argument being made? What evidence is most convincing? What else might be added? Does the writer include the opposing point of view so that I know what others who may not agree think about this?
- ✿ *Looking for Tension:* What are the tension points in the piece? What tensions might be developed further?
- ✿ *Looking for Growth or Change:* What is the movement of the piece? How have characters changed from the beginning to the end? How has the author's understanding changed? How has my understanding changed?

Be Straightforward—and Sensitive

Let the writer know where you are confused or lost or bored or annoyed by pinpointing the areas that give you trouble. But be sure to use what we call *I-based comments* that tell the writer that this is how you—one reader—see the piece:

I am lost here....

I am not sure where you are going with this....

I can't picture the scene....

I want to know earlier that....

It would help me to see....

These comments are much more palatable than comments that condemn the piece, such as "That's confusing." "You ramble on." "Your characters are weak." Such pronouncements imply that "Any idiot in the world knows that!" and can be insulting, especially to the novice and the thin-skinned. (Aren't most of us?) Our experience is that the main thing writers learn from such comments is to risk little in this group.

When you make suggestions for change, also be aware of tone. Saying "You should do this ..." or "You should move that there ..."

makes it sound as if you have suddenly taken charge of the piece. It is much more effective to offer suggestions in a tentative way:

If I were writing this, I'd try....

What if you tried...?

Have you considered...?

Such phrases signal your recognition that the writer, not you, decides what to do next—that your job is to raise possibilities, not take over.

Avoid Using Group Time for Editing

It's easier to talk about commas and spelling than to figure out what works or doesn't work in a piece. So beware. If editing is needed, allot special group time for that, but first, focus on discovering, developing, and extending the writer's meaning using the methods and questions we have described above.

Check in with the Writer

Before moving on, make sure the writer getting feedback feels satisfied. Is there anything not yet addressed? What concerns, if any, does the writer still have about the piece? What still worries him or her? Does the writer have a sense of what to do next? If yes, you've done well. *Tip:* Watch the clock here and move on after a few minutes.

The Rhythm of a Writing Group

All groups find their own rhythms. Some move quickly; others slowly. Some laugh a lot; others remain serious. Some stay on task and finish promptly; others love getting sidetracked and extending their time. Three men in a writing group in one of Sondra's evening classes became so engrossed in each other's work that their animated discussion accompanied them down three flights of stairs and into the college parking lot, where they would continue talking for another hour or so, even on wintry nights. This group eventually dubbed themselves, "The Parking Lot Guys." Five years after the workshop, they are still writing and still meeting—generally indoors.

The size of a group also affects its rhythm. If your group of three or four meets regularly, responding to work on the spot, your pace will differ from that of a class of twenty, where the entire class responds to pieces they've read in advance. But regardless of the

setup—partners, small groups, or whole classes—there are standard moves that help all groups workshop effectively.

Setting Up the Group—Format and Agreements

- ✿ Whenever possible, group members should hand out copies of work. It is possible to provide good gut responses without having a copy of a draft in front of you, but for thoughtful, in-depth responses, copies are important. If the group is set up so people get a chance to read and comment beforehand, so much the better.
- ✿ Writers should prepare to read their work aloud to the group. Jotting down questions you'd like the group to address also helps. When you go home, you should have some answers.
- ✿ See how many people have brought work and how much overall time there is. Then divide up the time so that everyone gets an equal amount.
- ✿ Choose someone to serve as timekeeper and stick to the time limits.
- ✿ Agree that whatever is discussed in the group, including the content of the work and the responses to it, will remain in the group. No one wants personal stories or sensitive information revealed to those who weren't there.
- ✿ Decide on whether to formalize rounds—moving from active listening to what works to suggestions for revision to checking in with the writer—or whether you want to work more informally.
- ✿ Make sure all group members respond. Writers should feel free to ask questions of members who are quiet.
- ✿ Remember to keep the confidentiality agreement.
- ✿ Be kind.

When You Are the Writer

- ✿ Read your piece aloud, reminding yourself not to rush. No matter how slowly you think you are reading, you are probably going too fast. Slow down. *Tip:* If the group doesn't have copies, the piece is short, and there is sufficient time,

read it aloud twice: first, to orient your listeners; second, to allow them to collect and note their responses.

- ✿ After the reading, listen to your peers and take in what they have to say. During the active listening go-round, respond briefly to each reader, acknowledging if each one has managed to say back what you were intending to do. Feel free to say more, to rephrase, rethink, or extend your ideas. In the later go-rounds of critiquing, talk less and listen more. You already know what you think; you want to know what others think.
- ✿ Take notes as others speak. You think you'll remember, but you won't. You never know what will turn up as relevant or trigger a new thought when you are revising.
- ✿ Encourage group members—especially quiet ones—to elaborate on their responses by stating directly: “I’d love to know what you think about X,” or asking directly, “Can you tell me more about...?”
- ✿ Do not feel as if you have to agree with group members or take their advice. But don’t waste time quarrelling with them. We like Peter Elbow’s cardinal rule: “Listen; don’t defend.” You will go home and do what you think is best. *Tip:* If one person offers a suggestion, it may or may not be important. If many offer the same suggestion, you may want to take it more seriously.
- ✿ Realize that the best response may be the one you have secretly been worried about hearing. That’s where you will likely hit pay dirt.

When You Are a Responder

- ✿ Set aside the daily distractions and ready yourself to listen carefully, knowing you will be asked to say back what you hear.
- ✿ Jot down or underline words or phrases that catch your attention as the writer is reading. If you have the piece beforehand, you can do that at home. *Tip:* Ask questions in the margin, put checkmarks next to favorite spots, squiggly lines under what needs work. This kind of preparation makes it easier to be text-specific—and to work quickly.

The group can say more in less time. If you are giving the writer your written comments after the group session ends, be sure you include a key to your marks.

- ✿ In the first go-round, reflect back what you hear as the main point of the piece, its center of gravity, its tone, its tensions or whatever strikes you as what the author is trying to say.
- ✿ Give the author time to respond to your comments, even engaging in a short dialogue.
- ✿ Pay attention to group dynamics, making sure that no one reader dominates and that everyone gets a turn to respond with each new round.
- ✿ If it is relevant, make a brief connection to your own life (“I had the same thing happen to me on a bus to Chicago, same fear, same thoughts”), but suppress the urge to tell your story. Remember group time is dedicated to the writing, not to you.
- ✿ Do your best to be supportive, thinking of yourself more as a coach than a judge. Your aim is to help the writer with his or her work, not to grade it.
- ✿ In rounds two and three, beware of a tendency to take over the piece. If you see a problem in the piece, say so, but realize that it is not your job to figure out the solution.
- ✿ Be sure to speak your mind, especially if you disagree with comments made by the group. You may be onto something that others are overlooking.
- ✿ Ultimately, look to answer this question: What do I, as a reader, still need so I feel satisfied reading this piece?

After Three or Four Meetings

Over time, your role in a group—both as writer and as responder—will become more familiar. If you workshop your drafts with the same people, you come to know whom to count on for what. Some readers are great at finding themes; others, at developing characters; still others, at focusing on language. As a responder, you begin to recognize strengths and weaknesses of drafts more quickly.

If you work with the same people, you'll learn who usually needs to add detail, who gets lost in too much detail, whose voice lapses into stiffness, who needs help with endings.

Aside from the help we get and give, workshoping has one final perk: it helps us read our own drafts more effectively. What we admire in others' work—a great image, a lively voice, an innovative form—we now look for in our own writing. And what we suggest that others consider—"How about more detail here?" "How about cutting this? It doesn't serve the story." "Why not try some dialogue?"—rings in our own ears as we read our own drafts with the aim to make them better.

Editing Groups

If you are in a writing course that includes editing sessions to focus on grammar and punctuation, consider these two strategies which, we have found, go a long way in helping writers clean up their drafts.

- ✿ *Read your work aloud.* If you are working with a partner or a small group, pass out copies of your draft and then read it out loud as others listen. Ask your peers to notice when there is a mismatch between what you read aloud and what is on the page. Often we "read in" the word we want and don't notice that we have written something else. Slowing down, paying attention to the words and word endings, helps to clean up a draft.
- ✿ *Look for patterns of errors.* Errors tend to fall into patterns. An analysis of a paper with fifty marked errors will likely reveal five different errors each repeated ten times. If you are often told to "Proofread your work," see if you can determine which types of errors you make. What category do they fall under: verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, homonyms, fragments, run-ons? If you can identify the kinds of errors you make, you can proofread looking specifically for—and then correcting—one type at a time.

If editing and proofreading give you trouble as a writer, we recommend working with a friend or a colleague whose ear for language you trust. If you have access to a college writing center, work with a tutor there on grammar and punctuation. Most important,

invest in one of the excellent handbooks currently on the market.⁴ Once you have a draft you care about, finding the correct form matters if you want others to care. We liken it to wearing a knock-out shirt or dress with a stain on it. Leave it there, and the only thing people will notice is the stain.

Variations on Group Work

- ✿ If your group will be meeting weekly, you can set up a writing and response schedule that works for each member, deciding ahead of time who will bring work on which dates.
- ✿ When you are working on pieces that extend beyond four or five pages, consider giving drafts to group members a day or two before the group meeting, via e-mail if possible. Then when the group meets, you can choose just a few pages to read aloud, assuming that your group members have already had a chance to read the entire draft.
- ✿ If you are well into your work and you have specific questions about it, you can begin by describing your concerns and telling the group what kind of response you would like.
- ✿ If you have time to respond in writing before the group meets, here are several ways to write comments that the writer will find helpful to read:

Margin Notes: These let you ask questions, point out what works, suggest where to cut or add, right where the suggestion occurs to you. You can use a highlighter to indicate what you like best. Or you can use a series of codes: a smiley face or a straight line in the margin to indicate something you like; a wavy line to indicate an area that leaves you confused or feels awkward. Be sure to let the writer know your code.

End Note: This lets you give an overview that margin notes cannot. We suggest writing a letter, starting with “Dear _____,” and ending with your signature. Begin with what you think the piece is about, move on to what touches you about the piece, what you see as

⁴We recommend Diane Hacker and Nancy Sommers, *A Pocket Style Manual*, Sixth Edition, Bedford Books, 2011.

its strengths, and what you think the writer should keep in mind when rewriting.

Using Online Tools: Some writers, using Microsoft Word, take advantage of “Comment” or “Track Changes” as tools for giving and receiving feedback. Comments allow you to “talk” directly to the writer, similar to margin notes described above. Track changes enable you to edit (adding or deleting words, lines, punctuation, etc.) without permanently altering the original text. They are emailed back to the author who can then accept or reject the suggestions.

Caveat: Wherever and whenever you respond, on paper or online, remember to use I-based comments: “I suggest....” or “I might....” instead of “You should....” or “This is wrong!”

Responding as a Social Act

Writing groups bring others into our work. They end the isolation of writing and embed it within a lively, social context, full of engaging talk and collaboration. When groups work, they enliven us—bringing others into our lives and bringing us into theirs—all through the language we use and the stories we tell. Eventually, as drafts turn into finished pieces, it’s both rewarding and fun to share them again with the group. After all, these fellow writers, like midwives, assisted in the birth of a new work—and are often understandably proud to see what has grown from their efforts.

Even the best writing group won’t solve all the problems in our drafts. But when groups work well, when the members workshop the drafts so that writers see them freshly, everyone goes home with new energy and creativity for revision—the subject of the next chapter.

Ways In ...

1. To practice active listening, try it with one partner. Take turns saying back what you hear on a draft and then discuss what was helpful and what wasn’t. Be sure to use a questioning tone, as in, “So what you are writing about is ... ?”
2. After working in a writing group for several sessions, discuss—orally or in writing—how the group is working. Consider: What

has worked? What hasn't? What do you wish could happen? This is a useful way to make adjustments to improve the group.

3. Find a piece of published writing and ask yourself, "If this writer were in my writing group, what would I say about what I like, where I'd like more information, where I am confused, annoyed, overwhelmed?" Write a letter to that writer and send it—or not. Either way, this is a great way to practice becoming a better, more articulate reader.
4. Go over "Twenty Ways to Talk about Writing" (pp. 71–74). By yourself or as a group, see how many examples of these terms you can find in one reading in the anthology. Or go through your own work—in a notebook or an essay—and see how many of these terms apply. Share your observations with another writer.
5. For teachers or large group facilitators: Early in the semester set up a "fishbowl of four" to demonstrate, and then discuss, the dynamics of workshopping. Ask one writer to bring copies for the entire class and three others to serve as the writing group. The four move their chairs into the middle of the room (they are in the fishbowl) and workshop one piece using the rounds we discussed early in the chapter. After the group has finished, the onlookers discuss what they noticed, which responses seemed to work well, and which suggestions for improvement they had. Be sure to invite "the fish" to comment on what this experience was like for them. One additional option is for the writing teacher to share his or her draft in the fishbowl, swimming along with the other fish in school.