

# A Pattern Language for Writers' Workshops

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Writing is one of the craziest things to do—it's hard, and often what's written surprises the writer. After the hard job getting a draft, the writer is elated and the result reads great—a masterpiece in the making and a life of fame and accolades; the writer can do anything. Then the Writers' Workshop.

For many people the expectation of their first Writers' Workshop is that it will be a glorious affirmation of their talent and skill as writers and thinkers, but that is not what a Writers' Workshop is for—it is for helping Authors improve their works in progress.

This pattern language helps build good Writers' Workshops.

## 1 Writers' Workshops

The Writers' Workshop has been in use for decades by fiction writers, poets, and writers of creative nonfiction. In 1994 the Writers' Workshop had a rebirth—in another field, with entirely new participants, and in a setting where it flourished. Since 1994 the Writers' Workshop format has been in use by the software patterns community as an alternative to presentations and standard scientific workshops: a way to improve patterns and pattern languages, a way to share knowledge and experience, and a way to convey beauty, quality, and craftsmanship in all kinds of design / build contexts. And after that, the Writers' Workshop has been used by several software-related conferences and workshops. The Writers' Workshop proved so useful to people at software patterns conferences that some of those conferences expanded their scopes to workshop papers in all sorts of domains, and written in a variety of genres.

The patterns community experienced the Writers' Workshop mojo right away, but the important news is that this particular community, perhaps like few others, has the habit and practice of trying to understand and articulate why beautiful things are beautiful and why comfortable things give comfort. The workshop—something wildly new and unconventional to them—was studied and its nuances captured; this pattern language is one result of that.

What makes the Writers' Workshop tick is roughly what makes large open-source software projects tick, where sometimes hundreds or thousands of programmers are working with shared source code. We see it in creative brainstorming sessions where a diverse group is brought together in fast-communication situations. We can also see it in the swarming behavior of all sorts of groups where order emerges where there once was chaos.

But knowing how and why a thing works when it works is different from being able to make it work any given time. The Writers' Workshop works through sociology and psychology; it is only as good as its participants; its direction depends on the work at hand and the order that work is read; but it usually brings out the best in us.

## 2 Dramatis Personae

A Writers' Workshop is a partially formal process in a particular context with several different roles. The roles are as follows:

**Author:** The person or people who wrote or created the work that is being reviewed by the workshop.

**Reviewer:** A person who is reviewing the work being reviewed by the workshop. In a Writers' Workshop, the set of Reviewers is typically the set of Authors whose works are being reviewed, but sometimes others are included.

**Moderator:** (also *workshop leader*) The person who directs the workshop through its sections. The Moderator keeps track of time and explicitly conducts the workshop from each phase to the next. A Moderator can be either a *Traffic Cop* or a *Teacher*—or someone in between.

**Traffic Cop:** A Moderator who only directs the workshop through its defined stages. A Traffic Cop embodies the minimal moderator role.

**Teacher:** A Moderator who conducts the workshop through its stages and also is the teacher of the workshop—as if it were a seminar.

**The Work:** The artifact created by the Author and reviewed in the workshop. Also called *piece* or *manuscript*.

**Note:** This document uses the gender pronouns *they/them/theirs*.

### 3 The Context: Works in Progress

A Writer' Workshop is for *works in progress*; it engages peers to combine their knowledge, skills, and talent to help an Author improve the piece being created. A traditional *peer review* considers a completed work to either make a decision about inclusion or pass judgment on it—Reviewers are referees. A Writers' Workshop is not peer review.

Most refereeing processes use anonymity to protect Authors, Reviewers, and the integrity of the process. When the identity of the Author is known to a Reviewer, that Reviewer might include the Author's fame and reputation—or lack thereof—in their judgment of the work. When the identity of a Reviewer is known to the Author, that Author might seek some kind of retaliation after a harsh review. When the identity of Reviewers is known by all Reviewers, one Reviewer's judgment might be influenced by how their review is perceived by the others. These are called “single blind review,” “double blind review,” and “triple blind review”; the idea is that blindness best protects the integrity of the process by providing a safe context for Reviewers to express honest opinions about the work—it is an inherently closed process.

A Writer' Workshop, on the other hand, is an inherently open process in which all the Authors and Reviewers are known to each other and, moreover, are sitting right there available for discussion. Because the goal is to improve the piece and not to judge it, harshly worded comments have no place, nor do criticisms without constructive suggestions for improvement.

This pattern language is for building a Writers' Workshop to review communications of all kinds and genres—from poems to essays to technical & scientific papers to patterns to presentations to performances. All that's required is a situated thing that can be perceived.

### 4 The Context: Time Scale

For this pattern language I have assumed that a Writers' Workshop consists of about 5–10 Authors gathered over a period of 2–5 days during which all the papers will be reviewed. This implies that such things as preparing for review takes place before the workshop members gather. However, many Writers' Workshops operate by reviewing one or two papers at a time with a gap of days or weeks between sessions. In this case, a Reviewer needs to prepare only for a single paper or two in the days leading up to the session for that or those papers.

When a Writers' Workshop stretches over weeks, months, or even years, there are many community building activities that should take place to ensure a safe and trustworthy atmosphere for review. None of these are covered in this pattern language.

## 5 The Context: Virtual or Terrestrial

Only since the turn of the century has virtual conferencing been capable of sustaining something like a Writers' Workshop. And since the pandemic began in 2020, the use of virtual meeting rooms has become standard practice. In general it's possible to run good Writers' Workshops using such technologies (in 2022) as Skype and Zoom. And in general all the patterns here work mostly the same way for virtual Writers' Workshops as terrestrial ones. Differences and suggestions for virtual workshops appear in the patterns where needed.

## 6 Assembling Writers' Workshops Given A Pool

You might need to partition a pool of submitted pieces into groups before running any Writers' Workshops. Some conferences such as **Pattern Languages of Programs, Programs, People & Practices** (PLoP) and **Programming Experience** (PX) run Writers' Workshops as their main activity; Authors submit papers to these conferences, and accepted submissions must be partitioned into workshop groups. This task has several variables; here are some concerns to help you navigate.

**Domain:** Collecting pieces addressing the same or nearby topics or domains can improve the relevance of content-related comments, especially in Writers' Workshops for technical or scientific works; this is because the Authors have similar knowledge and backgrounds and so can have more targeted and deeper discussions. However, the range of comments might be limited if the Authors are too closely aligned; this is because shared assumptions might interfere with critical observations.

**Stage of Maturity:** Collecting only early drafts into a single group can demoralize the Authors—"will we ever be able to improve?" Likewise, collecting mostly mature, nearly finished pieces with only a few pieces by newcomers can be intimidating to the newcomers.

**Language Skills:** An Author whose first language is not the language of the workshop papers can feel frozen out especially when their maturity level in the workshop language is fragile; such an Author might not be able to follow the discussion well and might hesitate to speak up. However, grouping all secondary-language Authors in a single group can seem condescending. Consider pairing such Authors with fluent peers.

**Length / Complexity:** A group of mostly long or complex papers can discourage novices and Authors with short papers. Diversity of length and complexity might help.

**Diversity:** A group of people with a variety of backgrounds and expertises can improve the range of comments unless the domain of partitioned pieces is extremely narrow and deep. Authors writing papers suitable for a Writers' Workshop should be able to follow much of the discussion of a paper in a different domain from theirs and bring their off-center knowledge to bear: if they prepare well in advance by reading the papers and exploring their domains, and if they listen closely to the remarks of domain experts in the workshop, such outsiders can bring unexpected and therefore valuable ideas to the discussion.

**Experience:** Every workshop should have a good balance of Writers' Workshop experience levels including several members with extensive experience and strong reviewing skills; the experienced help newcomers absorb the process. Having strong members is important when the Moderator is one of the Authors. Ensuring that each workshop has ample commenting strength is the most important aspect of partitioning—it is more important than grouping by domain.

**Cohorts:** If several members of a single group—such as a research group or lab—have submitted to the same pool of papers, you should split them up into separate workshops; otherwise, they might as well stay home and comment on each others' papers. This is a counter force to grouping according to domain, putting a premium on member diversity and experience.

When Authors from the same cohort submit multiple papers, you might have to keep those papers together.

**Shepherd Notes:** In many cases, shepherds can identify what papers need. Grouping by need can help as long as the other factors are taken into account.

Here is a possible procedure for creating workshop groups:

- (1) Sort papers by primary topic
- (2) Adjust for uniform paper count or to enforce group time requirements
- (3) Consider the above concerns & scan for diversity: move papers to mitigate issues and avoid monocultures
- (4) Assign workshop leaders (ideally outside teachers or at least Authors experienced in Writers' Workshops)
- (5) Announce groups early so participants—both Authors and leaders—can prepare properly
- (6) Avoid last-minute switches; stability helps participants prepare

## 7 The Essential Forces

The entire process of a Writers' Workshop is bound up in resolving several essential tensions that arise from an Author's pride of accomplishment and a Reviewer's relentless search for problems.

An Author puts in a lengthy and difficult stretch of effort to create a work, and it is natural for an Author to feel that the work is a representation or surrogate for its creator. This entails an urge to defend, explain, or apologize for the work when it is criticized, and criticism is taken as an attack—on the piece directly and on the Author by implication.

A Reviewer presented with a work to be discussed naturally takes on the role of referee or critic; This entails finding problems and succumbing to an urge to display deep intellect and insight—sometimes enthusiastically. Many Reviewers new to the Writers' Workshop have experience with academic-style peer reviews, where uncovering weaknesses is essential to a final judgment.

To prevent an Author from defending, explaining, and apologizing, that Author needs to remain silent during their review. To make that seem fair, the Author needs to be able to interact at least a little with the Reviewers, and the Reviewers should be in the same set of circumstances—that is, Reviewers should also be Authors in the same Writers' Workshop.

To prevent Reviewers from harshly digging into a piece, they need to be converted into Coauthors. This also helps the Author by making the entire workshop about improving the work and not simply judging it. The piece also must be clearly a work in progress. By having the Author present and visible during the review, Reviewers's enthusiasm for pointing out problems is dampened. When the comments are thus throttled back, the Author can feel that a group of friendly collaborators is discussing the work, not criticizing it.

An Author who has delicate feelings about the piece needs to be put into a receptive mood instead of a defensive one. The order and nature of the comments must be regulated to accomplish that, and a Moderator is needed to both teach the process and direct the discussion.

Because the Writers' Workshop creates a community of Coauthors for each manuscript, there is the possibility that the actual Author, in taking into account all the comments and suggestions made by Reviewers, will create a sort of "averaged out" piece, one that lacks the sharp individuality of the original. In the creative writing community, this effect is called the "workshop story." There can be a kind of colonization latent in the way that many workshops smooth over differences between audiences, between reading individuals, by seeking to reach a critical consensus on a given piece of writing. We want to avoid homogenized, over-workshopped writing that is overly influenced by the values and experiences of workshop members.

These tensions require condensed and rapid community building.

## 8 The Patterns

The patterns in this pattern language include the following:

- (1) *Dangerous Waterhole*: How to create a safe and effective forum, one that provides the best help for Authors—the best advice and the best chance for discovery and new ideas.
- (2) *Open Review*: How to provide a forum for dialogue that is more effective than anonymous referee reviews.
- (3) *Safe Setting*: How to make feedback more open and effective by raising the comfort level, particularly for the Author.
- (4) *Workshop of Authors*: How to deal with feelings of mistrust toward outsiders, toward those who don't have skin in the game, those who might throw stones at the work.
- (5) *Community of Trust*: How to help Authors feel that the experience will help them, rather than tear them down.
- (6) *Authors are Authors*: How to balance assessment of content and expression in a work.
- (7) *Reviewers Serve the Work*: How to balance supporting the Author and improving the manuscript.
- (8) *Moderator Guides the Workshop*: How to keep things moving and ensure that the rules are followed.
- (9) *Traffic Cop*: How to provide minimal Workshop Moderation.
- (10) *Teacher Directs the Workshop*: How to make the workshop a classroom.
- (11) *Sitting in a Circle*: How to build a sense of identity, community, and openness in the group.
- (12) *Authors' Circle*: How to recognize the peer group that builds the *Community of Trust*.
- (13) *Prepare Early*: How a Reviewer should prepare for the workshop.
- (14) *Deep Preparation*: How a teacher should prepare for the workshop.
- (15) *Reading Just Before Reviewing*: How a Reviewer should prepare immediately before the workshop.
- (16) *Lay of the Land*: What Reviewers need to know before reviewing the work, what stage the work is in, and what feedback is requested.
- (17) *Author Reads Selection*: How to bring focus to the workshop and recognize the humanity behind the work.
- (18) *Fly on the Wall*: How to keep the Author in the activity without becoming a disruptive presence.
- (19) *Summarize the Work*: How to bring focus to the reviewing activity; how to give the Author feedback on whether the work is effective in telling its story.
- (20) *Positive Feedback First*: How to give the gathering a supportive tone and put the Author in a receptive mood.
- (21) *Suggestions for Improvement*: How to communicate improvements to the work without attacking the Author or the work.
- (22) *Author Asks for Clarification*: How to give the Author an opportunity to solicit more refined feedback without appearing to rebut the feedback that was provided.
- (23) *Thank the Author*: How to help the Author remember the workshop as a positive experience.
- (24) *Clearing the Palate*: How to give a sense of closure to the workshop.
- (25) *Selective Changes*: How the Author deals with a lack of consensus in the feedback.
- (26) *The Strangeness of Others*: How a collection of Author-strangers can amplify the workshop.
- (27) *Reviewers Learn the Most*: How Reviewers can learn more from the discussion of others' work than their own.

## 8.1 Dangerous Waterhole (1) ★ ★ ★

... Authors have created manuscripts and could benefit from help with revision; Reviewers could provide help but Authors and Reviewers rarely congregate when manuscripts are reviewed. Such a meeting place is a Dangerous Waterhole. **What kind of place can safely accommodate Authors and Reviewers while supporting dialogue and limiting vulnerability and bad feelings?**

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**Authors fear harsh criticism that is ambiguously about the manuscripts and themselves; Reviewers fear being honest in front of those who might retaliate.** Participants may experience a lack of trust because they apparently have different goals: Authors have pride in their work, and Reviewers relentlessly seek out problems. When Authors and Reviewers are together during review and there are no guardrails, it's possible for arguments to break out and hard feelings to arise.

However, good Reviewers can help an Author improve the work, and Reviewers can learn a lot about how to write by participating in open reviews. When Reviewers are Authors, everyone is in the same situation, and the waterhole becomes necessary.

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In nature, a waterhole in an otherwise dry countryside provides essential water to all animals within travel distance. It is a commons, but a commons to predator and prey alike. In Kenya, for example, elephants, hippos, giraffes, Grevy's zebras, gazelles, crocodiles, leopards, and many other species gather at waterholes to take a drink or have a quick dip. Predators know prey must visit; prey know predators must visit. It is dangerous.

In reviewing a manuscript, isolated one-to-one interaction—especially face-to-face—can provide high bandwidth feedback and discussion which is likely cordial and polite. However, for each such interaction the Author will receive comments from one perspective, one background, and one level of maturity. Gathering several such reviews requires the Author integrate the comments. When Reviewers with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and maturity levels gather in one place at one time and discuss a manuscript in real time, not only can the diversity be more readily integrated but each participant might adapt to the views presented, thereby creating a community of discovery as well as cooperation. This works because a widely diverse gathering presents opportunities for *defamiliarization*, the technique of presenting common things in an unfamiliar or strange way so participants can gain new perspectives and see the material differently—it is a technique that opens up minds and thereby nourishes creativity and discovery, one of the hidden gems of Writers' Workshops.

**Therefore:**

**Make the waterhole (a little) less dangerous: Transform Reviewers into Coauthors; open the waterhole to a variety of participants of different backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences; establish rules and practices that make it safe for Authors and Reviewers to cooperate; make the water cool and sweet.** Recognize that Authors provide their works in progress as gifts, Reviewers provide comments as gifts, and when Reviewers are also Authors being reviewed, the gifts reinforce each other.

Achieving these requires a Moderator who guides the process and perhaps acts as a Teacher to the group.

When the work of the workshop is to focus on the manuscript and how to make it better, many adversarial temptations dissipate. Making this happen is not easy, but not impossible.

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The waterhole must, however, remain dangerous. Risky discussions and the possibility of failure must remain ingredients. This can be achieved while avoiding insult and degradation—this is what is meant by SAFE SETTING [3]. As the writer Peter Turchi writes:

*... creation is a voyage into the unknown. In our own eyes, we are off the map. The excitement of potential discovery is accompanied by anxiety, despair, caution, perhaps, perhaps boldness, and, always, the risk of failure. Failure can take the form of our becoming hopelessly lost, or pointlessly lost, or not finding what we came for (though that last is sometimes happily accompanied by the discovery of something we didn't anticipate, couldn't even imagine before we found it). We strike out for what we believe to be uncharted waters, only to find ourselves sailing in someone else's bathtub. Those are the days it seems there is nothing new to discover but the limitations of our own experience and understanding.*

—Peter Turchi, "Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer," Trinity University Press, 2004

More poetically, Christopher Alexander said:

*All of the Japanese arts recognize that, finally, you have to meet the fear of death in order to do anything—landscape painting, flower arrangements, and so on.*

—Stephen Grabow "Christopher Alexander: The Evolution of a New Paradigm in Architecture,"  
Routledge, London, 1983

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The following patterns in this pattern language convert a Dangerous Waterhole to a safe place: SAFE SETTING [3], COMMUNITY OF TRUST [5], WORKSHOP OF AUTHORS [4], MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8], SITTING IN A CIRCLE [11], AUTHORS' CIRCLE [12], POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20], and THANK THE AUTHOR [23].

## 8.2 Open Review (2) ★ ★

...a successful revision process depends on cooperation between an Author and a group of peers who review the work. The immediate goal of the process is to help Authors improve their manuscripts; the ultimate goal is to expand the body of literature in a particular community while protecting the integrity of the work produced by that community. **What kind of review forum supports the most effective communication between Authors and Reviewers, supporting dialogue, yet limiting vulnerability and bad feelings?**

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**A review process is subject to several types of visibility and coincidence: *blindness* and *co-location*.**

In general, an Author might or might not know the identity of each Reviewer; a Reviewer might or might not know the identity of the Author; a Reviewer might or might not know the identities of other Reviewers. An Author might or might not be co-present (at the same place at the same time). Some of the combinations don't make sense; here are some that do.

When the Author is unknown to Reviewers, Reviewers are unknown to the Author, and communication is written or mediated, a standard *peer review* is taking place. Such a review is essentially anonymous and non-interactive. What can be acted on is only what is apparent in the written or mediated communication. Such a review is primarily a *judgment*; it is essentially refereeing.

When judgment is the goal—when the purpose of review is to select a paper for presentation, publication, or celebration—blindness and distance provide a degree of fairness. Being fair is always good, but a Writers' Workshop is primarily for helping.

When an Author interacts openly with one Reviewer at a time, there is opportunity for improving the manuscript, but this is typically called *shepherding*.

When Reviewers don't know the identities of other Reviewers, there is no opportunity for mutually reinforcing discussion and therefore no opportunity for discovery (or at least, not an easily obtained opportunity). That is, a group of isolated Reviewers cannot come to a deeper understanding of a manuscript through discussion, and therefore the review comments might be less helpful to the Author.

The best chance for improving the manuscript, mentoring the Author, and perhaps discovery is for a diverse group of Reviewers to be at the same place at the same time with the Author. This provides opportunities for learning and improvement, community building, and explored skepticism. Participants may have different backgrounds, knowledge in general, knowledge of each others' topics, experiences, maturity levels, culture, etc. Defamiliarization is possible, thereby opening minds to new ideas.

To optimize such gatherings, Reviewers should also be Authors of manuscripts to be reviewed.

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**Because any sort of face-to-face peer-like review is an intensely human process, it is important to consider human concerns.** A painful or onerous process would discourage participants not used to peer-based reviews. Yet an overly permissive and accommodating process doesn't serve the goal of sustained high quality.

**Most refereeing processes are judgment based.** Typically, peer-review is used to select pieces for publication or inclusion in a conference, symposium, or workshop. Because selection implies scarcity—because selection implies rejection—the process can be harsh.

However, not all reviews are occasions for judgment; some are occasions for improvement. Reviews for improvement can be hindered when Reviewers adopt standard peer-review practices. But for those accustomed to traditional academic-style peer reviews, the switch to collaboration

can be difficult because peer review does not make much room for caring about the work and the Author, for exposing the Reviewers' experience and background, nor for conversations aimed at insight and progress in a work.

**But open dialogue leaves the Reviewers and Authors exposed, bereft of the protection afforded by an anonymous review process.**

**Therefore:**

**Provide a place and time for a diverse group of Authors and Reviewers to gather and review manuscripts through open and visible discussion and interaction.** Create structures and practices to protect the dignity of both the Authors and the Reviewers, making a SAFE SETTING [3] and a COMMUNITY OF TRUST [5] for both. Control negative Author engagement with MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8], FLY ON THE WALL [18], and AUTHOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION [22]. Make the Author feel welcome with POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20]. Develop personal engagement with SITTING IN A CIRCLE [11], AUTHORS' CIRCLE [12], and THANK THE AUTHOR [23].

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A Writers' Workshop format is a real-time, face-to-face, open process (either terrestrial or virtual); it supports the dialogue necessary for effective multi-way communication. It improves on the one-way feedback in refereed forums. The feedback has a short delay, which avoids the frustration and coordination problems of long feedback cycles. Diversity improves the scope and quality of review because not only can an Author learn from the discussion, so can Reviewers learn from each other, thereby honing their comments and possibly expanding them.

### 8.3 Safe Setting (3) ★ ★ ★

...a community that strives to develop a high quality body of literature that improves human well being is best served when Authors can benefit from the feedback of peers and colleagues. An open, face-to-face process creates opportunities for effective feedback to an Author, but also for Reviewers to show off their critical skills. **How do you establish a Safe Setting to provide free-flowing input to Authors while preserving their dignity?**

★ ★ ★

There are few things that satisfy Authors more than seeing their work published and widely read (and applied, if appropriate). For works published without a critical review process, Authors receive their first feedback from the readers they aim to please or influence, which may provide a harsh awakening for the Authors.

**On the other hand, peer-like review can be frightening and demoralizing, because the Author is open to criticism from peers who might know both the material and the Author well.**

Familiarity with the material makes it possible for Reviewers to provide lots of valuable feedback; familiarity with the Author makes it possible for Reviewers to “push the Author’s buttons” in the review process. Moreover, an easy role for a Reviewer to adopt is critic, and any remark made by a Reviewer can be aimed not only to the Author whose manuscript is under review but also to other Reviewers—for the purpose of showing off or “scoring points.”

**Yet such review is important.**

**Therefore:**

**Create rules and practices within which the Author can receive useful, expert feedback directed at the work rather than at the Author, with the goal of preserving the dignity of the Author.** This is a process of community building.

★ ★ ★

An Author will feel at home when the Reviewers assume the role of Coauthor rather than critic, and this setting can be reinforced by a strong workshop leader and a gentle staging of comments. The following patterns can establish such a setting: WORKSHOP OF AUTHORS [4] and AUTHORS’ CIRCLE [12], which help provide a peer setting with opportunity for reciprocation; MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8] and TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10], which prevent the workshop dynamics from getting out of hand; POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20], which bolsters the Author’s sense of contribution and self worth; SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21], which defines the tone of constructive feedback; and THANK THE AUTHOR [23], where the community formally recognizes the Author’s contribution. The thrust of this pattern language is to create an effective and safe DANGEROUS WATERHOLE [1].

#### 8.4 Workshop of Authors (4) ★ ★

... the goals of a writing community can best be achieved when Authors are given feedback useful for evolving their work while preserving their dignity (SAFE SETTING [3]). **How should the workshop maintain dignity and openness in the face of strangers who might throw stones at the work?**

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The best feedback comes from expert sources, and most review settings elicit expert feedback in an judgment-based setting, such as peer review for publication. This posture can contribute to a feeling that critics are not accountable for what they say, and that leaves the Author in a disadvantaged position. Authors feel uncomfortable in this position.

An Author trusts Reviewers on the basis of their reputation and what they say.

Trust based on subject matter reputation creates a hierarchy in the review community; trust based on what is said depends on how it is said—the stance of the Reviewer. A Reviewer who is lecturing an Author can fall into the trap of bolstering their own feelings of self-worth and importance by diminishing the one lectured.

This hierarchy breaks down the sense of community and leaves the Author vulnerable to feelings of inferiority. Moreover, if a Reviewer is able to express criticism and walk away, there is less motivation to speak gently and be helpful.

Even though expert feedback is important, an Author might be writing for an audience for whom the most nitty-gritty technical details of a subject are not yet relevant, and clarity of or approach to explanation might be more important.

**What workshop structure can best improve the work?**

**Therefore:**

**Assemble the workshop membership from Authors who are bringing work to be reviewed by the workshop. These members will share the goal of improving work, and are therefore likely to give feedback as they'd like to receive it.**

Each Reviewer in a Writers' Workshop is an Author whose manuscript will be reviewed as the workshop proceeds. To be clear, every person in the workshop will be both an Author (at some point) and a Reviewer (at all other times). This requirement can be relaxed, however.

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A circle of Authors breaks down the hierarchy because every participant will eventually receive comments. The workshop Moderator (MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8]) can ensure the discussion is polite, but it helps that harsh comments in one direction could very well be reflected back later—this is part of human nature.

For a workshop focused on a particular subject but with few Authors with work to review, additional members with subject matter knowledge may be invited; such additional members should be worked into the conversation slowly (MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8]) so that they learn the style and nature of the discussion before jumping in.

In advanced Writers' Workshops, people with extensive workshop experience can be invited to participate.

In some cases an outer circle of observers—a *gallery*—can be invited, but only if the Authors all agree (AUTHORS' CIRCLE [12]).

## 8.5 Community of Trust (5) ★ ★ ★

... a group of Authors and a workshop leader are assembled to review a manuscript. The Author is bringing a work in progress for review and seeks help refining the work. This group will develop into a *community of trust* that can serve several Authors. There are many papers to review. **How do you best utilize this group, and give the Author confidence that the group will build up the work rather than tear it down?**

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**An effective Writers' Workshop is built on a community of trust.** Trust is a key ingredient in a SAFE SETTING [3] for reviews. One important objective of the Writers' Workshop is to guarantee a community of trust, so the Author's dignity is retained.

Each Author is willing to release unpolished work for review in this setting; because everyone knows that it is unfinished work, a review perspective is created that is different from peer-review where judgment and selection are essential.

However, the review of a single work rarely takes longer than an hour or so, which is not enough time to cement long-term relationships.

A group of people can develop trust only through many shared experiences. If a Writers' Workshop is to provide a community of trust, it must remain together for a period of time.

Sometimes a workshop group can engage in community-trust-building exercises before the Writers' Workshop begins; this is rare.

### Therefore:

**Organize Writers' Workshops by areas of interest that tie together the works of the Authors involved. The Authors, Reviewers, and gallery should remain with the same workshop for the duration of the reviews of all Authors' works.**

A WORKSHOP OF AUTHORS [4] which stays together for all the reviews and focuses on common areas of interest best builds a community of trust.

Manuscripts are not published outside the workshops in which they are reviewed until the Authors have refined their works and offer them for wide publication.

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Some Writers' Workshops begin the workshopping process by assigning a *shepherd* to each manuscript to be reviewed. The shepherd works as a sort of editor to help the Author revise the paper before it is workshopped.

A shepherd brings fresh eyes to a manuscript, objective eyes. At one end of the spectrum, a shepherd helps with this:

*... pruning, shaping, clarifying, tidying inconsistencies of tense and pronouns and location and tone, noticing all the sentences that could be read in two different ways, dividing awkward long sentences into short ones, putting the writer back on the main road if he has strayed down a side path, building bridges where the writer has lost the reader by not paying attention to his transitions, questioning matters of judgment and taste. A [shepherd's] hand must also be invisible. Whatever he adds in his own words shouldn't sound like his own words; they should sound like the writer's words.*

—William Zinsser, "On Writing Well," Harper Collins, New York, 2006

The other end is exemplified by Tay Hohoff, an editor at J. P. Lippincott. In the 1950s the writer Harper Lee was writing about her father, whom she loved and admired but who was a "gentleman bigot" in the South. Her first attempt at fictionalizing him was called "Go Set a Watchman" (which

was eventually published in 2015<sup>1</sup>). It has been described as “full of stilted exchanges between a benighted father and his more enlightened daughter. It wasn’t only bad storytelling; it was the sort of story that editors didn’t want to tell about the South.” The manuscript was rejected everywhere except at J. P. Lippincott where Tay Hohoff

*... decided to take a chance on Lee, but encouraged her to abandon the didactic, abrasive scenes between adults and focus on the manuscript’s endearing childhood scenes. For two years, Hohoff helped Lee create “To Kill a Mockingbird”: a coming-of-age story in which the protagonist and narrator, Scout—along with Jem and their summer sidekick, Dill—learns that she has misjudged the local outcast, Boo Radley, even as others in the town misjudge Tom Robinson.*

—Casey Cep, “The Contested Legacy of Atticus Finch,” *The New Yorker*, December 10, 2018

Not all shepherds work this hard on a manuscript, but shepherding can be extensive and intense.

Shepherding done well begins the process of building a community of trust by demonstrating to the Author that the attention is on improving the manuscript and not criticizing it.

---

<sup>1</sup>That “Watchman” was written before “Mockingbird” was a bit of shock to the literary world.

## 8.6 Authors are Authors (6) ★ ★

...a community building a body of literature to capture expertise is particularly interested in practices and techniques that are not intuitive to inexperienced practitioners. **How do you balance assessment of content and expression in the work?**

\* \* \*

**Any piece with factual content must be well-understood by its Author and well-written for its readers.** Any Author brings to a work in progress a particular level of experience and expertise as well as a particular level of writing and presentation skills; other members of the Writer's Workshop do as well. A Reviewer with strong content-related knowledge and experience may bring information that is valuable to the Author, while a Reviewer with weaker knowledge or less experience might not. Similarly, some Reviewers will be stronger or weaker than others in explaining and writing about the material in the piece.

Fiction and essays, naturally, may have content whose veracity can be checked. An example would be a story of a road trip driving from Boston to Los Angeles passing through the fewest number of states. Glancing at a map, the answer seems straightforward: it requires ten states—Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. However, the border between Kentucky and Missouri is the Mississippi River. The only “bridge” connecting Kentucky and Missouri passes through a sliver of Illinois—actually, it's two bridges: the Cairo Ohio River Bridge, a stretch of Illinois, and then the Cairo Mississippi River Bridge. An Author casually describing the trip might mention crossing a bridge over the wide Mississippi from Kentucky to Missouri, but an attentive Reviewer might ask where that bridge is. Can you drive directly from Kentucky to Missouri? The answer—with some research easier to do now than fifty years ago (when I first heard this puzzle from John McCarthy)—is yes: the Dorena-Hickman Ferry connects KY 1354 at Hickman, Kentucky, with Missouri Route A and Route 77 near Dorena, Missouri.

It is easy for nonliterary Reviewers to dwell on content-related details and miss the aesthetic and holistic impact of a piece. It is also easy for Reviewers less familiar with the topic to dwell on the presentation of the material.

We are taught—as part of good, polite communication skills—never to say “you’re wrong” or even “I disagree” to any statement of the form: “I feel that . . .” People own their feelings. Feelings should not be challenged; to do so would violate the SAFE SETTING [3].

Yet Authors can improve their work; they can benefit from the knowledge, sensibilities, and experiences of others, for content, exposition, and literary quality.

### Therefore:

**View Authors as content peers in the material they present and as literary peers in how they present it.** In the end, the Author is the Author of the piece being reviewed, and the Author will decide which suggestions and comments to address in the piece. This is true for Authors of technical pieces and Authors of essays and literary works: the Author is the Author.

Feedback pointing out problems with the content of the piece suggests that it might not yet be ready for presentation; feedback pointing out problems with the presentation of the material suggests that it might not be understood well enough for presentation.

However, REVIEWERS SERVE THE WORK [7], not the Author. Reviewers focus on making the piece as strong as it can be; an Author may pay attention to the remarks of Reviewers knowing they are serving the work—or the Author might not.

\* \* \*

Of course, a Writers' Workshop is a good place to explore relationships between different topical arenas, to help weave the piece under review into a broader collection of literature. For example in a Writer' Workshop on patterns, a Reviewer may know of other solutions to the same problem addressed by the patterns being reviewed. By comparing related patterns, Authors can refine the context and forces of their own patterns.

## 8.7 Reviewers Serve the Work (7) ★ ★

... a community building a body of literature is interested in creating good work. Especially when the purpose is to capture expertise about practices and techniques that are not intuitive, each manuscript brought to a Writers' Workshop should be accurate, informative, and well written.

**How do you balance helping the Author and improving the manuscript.**

\* \* \*

An Author has brought a manuscript to the workshop; it is a work in progress. Reviewers have prepared by reading the manuscript (PREPARE EARLY [13], DEEP PREPARATION [14], and READING JUST BEFORE REVIEWING [15]). The Reviewers have an idea what the Author is aiming for as provided at the start of the Author's workshop session (LAY OF THE LAND [16]). Some Reviewers might know the Author well, but perhaps most do not.

If a manuscript has already been worked over thoroughly by the Author, the Author might believe the manuscript is nearly finished. But the Reviewers have read it and can fathom how it stands.

**Therefore:**

**Work to make the manuscript the best it can be regardless of how finished the Author believes it is.** If the subject matter seems not treated well and with accuracy or perhaps not understood well by the Author, point that out (gently); if the presentation is not understandable to readers, point that out. The Author will hear what the Reviewers say and will take that into account (AUTHORS ARE AUTHORS [6]). It is not the job of Reviewers to intuit what the Author intends and to move the piece in that direction. The piece speaks for itself.

By serving the work, Reviewers serve the Author.

\* \* \*

In a creative writing workshop, one hears comments like these: "what is this piece trying to be?" and "what is the heart of this work?" These comments are made assuming the piece exists on its own, and the Reviewers are trying to get at its essence and make the best of whatever it is. The poet T. S. Eliot explained how poets work as follows:

*[A poet] does not know what he has to say until he has said it; and in the effort to say it he is not concerned in making other people understand anything. He is not concerned, at this stage, with other people at all: only with finding the right words or, anyhow, the least wrong words.*

—T. S. Eliot, "On Poetry and Poets," Faber and Faber, London, 1957

An Author strives to create a first draft—be it a creative piece, a scientific piece, a nonfiction piece, or a technical piece—which then becomes the focus of the process of revision; this process can include not only copyedit-level changes but significant rewrites and elisions. In a sense, the work in progress acts as a sort of collaborator for the Author.

In a Writer's Workshop, the Reviewers acting as temporary Coauthors also rely on the manuscript being a collaborator. Here is how Eliot described the role of Ezra Pound in the creation of Eliot's masterpiece "The Waste Land":

*It was in 1922 that I placed before [Ezra Pound] in Paris the manuscript of a sprawling, chaotic poem called The Waste Land which left his hands, reduced to about half its size, in the form in which it appears in print. I should like to think that the manuscript, with the suppressed passages, had disappeared irrecoverably: yet on the other hand, I should wish the blue penciling on it to be preserved as irrefutable evidence of Pound's critical genius.*

—T. S. Eliot, "Ezra Pound," Poetry 68, 1946

Donald A. Schön wrote the following about "conversation with the materials of situation":

*... the designer may take account of unintended changes he has made in the situation by forming new appreciations and understandings and by making new moves. He shapes the situation in accordance with his initial appreciation of it, the situation "talks back" and he responds to the situation's back talk.*

—Donald A. Schön, "The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action,"

Basic Books, 1984

\* \* \*

Every possible change to the manuscript mentioned in workshop discussion helps the Author and Reviewers perceive differently the manuscript and what it is aiming to achieve—every change & sometimes ever so slightly. And in the revision, the work also reshapes our perceptions—as Authors, as communicators, as thinkers.

Asking a Reviewer to become Coauthor in the space of an hour's review is asking a lot. Each Reviewer should begin that transformation while preparing beforehand for the workshop. Serving the work requires letting go of one's own ego or solution to the perceived problems in the manuscript—having opinions, but holding them lightly. The magic is in the conversation during the review.

## 8.8 Moderator Guides the Workshop (8) ★ ★ ★

...a set of well-meaning people (WORKSHOP OF AUTHORS [4]) has gathered with an Author to review a manuscript. **How do you keep things moving and ensure that Writers' Workshop guidelines are appropriately followed?**

★ ★ ★

A Writers' Workshop uses a set of specific practices to ensure each Author receives useful feedback and suggestions. A diverse group of people likely does not know those practices, and unless there is guidance, it's possible some dignity safeguards will be violated.

Someone needs to make sure everyone is given a chance to speak, and that egos are kept in check. In general, someone should act as an authority to represent the interests of the workshop as a whole, and in particular, to represent the interests of the Author who is kept silent (FLY ON THE WALL [18]) throughout the review proper.

### Therefore:

**Each session is led by an experienced Moderator, who guides (and sometimes directs) the discussion.** The Moderator is responsible to see that all runs smoothly. In general the workshop works best when the Moderator is not one of the Authors.

The Moderator has many tasks and needs many skills. There are many different moderation styles ranging from TRAFFIC COP [9] to TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10].

Some Moderators call on reticent participants to speak; most Moderators are more hands-off. Each workshop session needs at least 30 minutes and generally no more than two hours.

★ ★ ★

The Moderator initially welcomes the Author and asks the Author to describe what a reader is supposed to know before reading the manuscript, say what stage of preparation the manuscript is in (e.g., first draft, third revision, ...), and tell the workshop what specific feedback the Author is looking for (these comprise LAY OF THE LAND [16]). The Moderator then invites the Author to read a selection from the work (AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17]). Finally the Moderator thanks the Author who becomes a FLY ON THE WALL [18].

In general, the order of review is to first SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19], then state what works well in the manuscript (POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20]), and finally make SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21]. This order creates a gradient of comments starting with simply saying what the Reviewers read then positive comments then improvements. However, these parts of the workshop protocol need not follow a waterfall-like procession: one part of the manuscript can be summarized, praised, and then suggestions made for improvement before those three steps are taken with another part. Some workshop Moderators—the ones who are more like teachers (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10])—will seem to stay on the summarize-the-work step while steering the Reviewers toward the other steps through questions about what has been understood.

Finally the Moderator brings that session to a close, and welcomes the Author back into the inner circle, encouraging that Author to ask questions of clarification (AUTHOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION [22]). The Moderator leads the THANK THE AUTHOR [23] ceremony, and invites CLEARING THE PALATE [24].

### Moderator Tools

A Moderator uses the following tools to guide the workshop:

- (1) Controlling the use of time allotted for each manuscript.
- (2) Determining who speaks next.

- (3) Warning Reviewers to not address the Author.
- (4) Asking questions. Traffic Cops (TRAFFIC COP [9]) will typically ask only basic questions which signal SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19], POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20], SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21], and AUTHOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION [22]. For example, “can someone summarize the paper,” “what did you like about the paper,” and “does anyone have suggestions for improvement.” A teacher (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10]) might ask questions to help Reviewers uncover ideas for improving the manuscript, using a Socratic questioning technique. Asking questions is the primary tool a Moderator has.
- (5) Making statements. A Moderator can add to the discussion the same way Reviewers can. This is more relevant for teachers (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10]) than Traffic Cops (TRAFFIC COP [9]).

\* \* \*

A Moderator or a teacher (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10]) may guide Authors or Reviewers toward becoming at least Traffic Cops (TRAFFIC COP [9]) through direct instruction or by coaching.

## 8.9 Traffic Cop (9) ★ ★

... a group of Authors (WORKSHOP OF AUTHORS [4]) has gathered to review a manuscript. **What is the minimal set of tasks a Moderator needs to perform to guide the workshop (MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8])?**

\* \* \*

Finding the ideal Moderator / workshop leader / workshop teacher for a particular manuscript is nearly impossible. And even finding someone merely extraordinary usually requires (good) luck.

However, once a group of dedicated Authors is gathered, each with a decently workable manuscript, the bulk of the hard work of creating a successful Writers' Workshop has been accomplished. With such a group in hand, all that's needed is for the process to hold together. An adequate Moderator who can guide a successful Writers' Workshop is easy to find.

### Therefore:

**Assign a Traffic Cop to moderate the workshop session.** All a workshop Traffic Cop needs to do is make sure the steps are followed in order, that everyone with something to say has time to speak, that each Author's dignity is preserved, that the time budget is observed, and that the process feels fairly executed. Anyone able to read this pattern language is (likely) able to be an adequate Traffic Cop. Moreover, such a Traffic Cop can be chosen from among the gathered Authors.

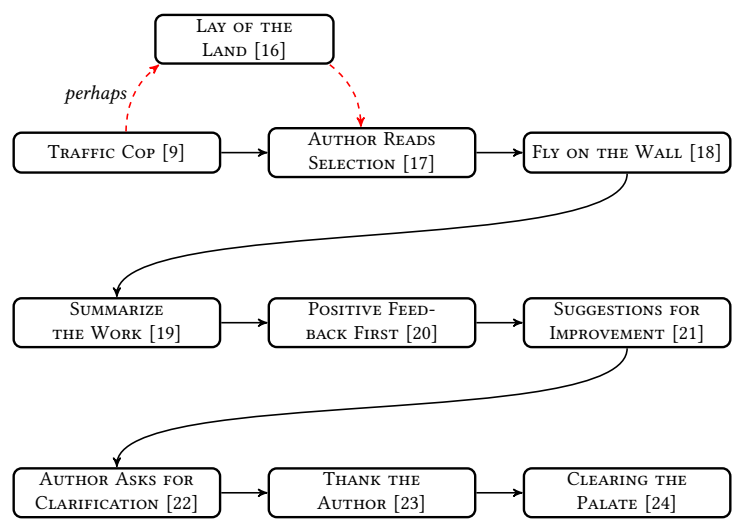
\* \* \*

A Traffic Cop need not prepare in any special way to direct the Writers' Workshop—if they are a Reviewer, they can prepare only as a normal Reviewer would (PREPARE EARLY [13] and perhaps READING JUST BEFORE REVIEWING [15]). A Traffic Cop will typically follow this sequence:

- (1) Minimal or no LAY OF THE LAND [16]. An introduction of the Author and the title of the manuscript are the only things courtesy requires. Perhaps the Traffic Cop can ask what the Reviewers need to know before starting.
- (2) AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17]. The Traffic Cop asks the Author to read a very short selection from the manuscript. The Author chooses the selection.
- (3) FLY ON THE WALL [18]. The Traffic Cop reminds the Reviewers that the Author is now a Fly on the Wall and cannot speak; that Reviewers must not speak directly to the Author but only to the Traffic Cop or to other Reviewers; that Reviewers must not refer to the Author by using the pronoun "you"; and that Reviewers should avoid saying the Author's name. It's to be as if the Author is absent.
- (4) SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19]. The Traffic Cop may ask one or several Reviewers to summarize the piece, and most Traffic Cops will invoke all summary statements before moving on to the next step.
- (5) POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20]. The Traffic Cop will ask Reviewers to state what they liked about the manuscript or what worked well. Generally, the Traffic Cop will recognize potential speakers from those indicating they have something to say. Most Traffic Cops will invoke all such positive statements before moving on to the next step.
- (6) SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21]. The Traffic Cop will ask Reviewers to state concrete suggestions for improvements. This step generally requires more from the Traffic Cop than calling on Reviewers. If a suggestion implies that some Reviewers might not have understood part of the manuscript, the Traffic Cop can ask the Author to clarify those parts so that the Author can see that those parts were not understood as presented, and so that Reviewers don't repeat the same or similar suggestions based on incorrect understanding.

Sometimes a Reviewer can become overtly critical of the manuscript or even the Author, and the Traffic Cop must step in and curb such behavior. This could require explicitly calling out the Reviewer, and in very, very rare cases, the Traffic Cop might have to expel the offending Reviewer.

- (7) **AUTHOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION [22]**. The Traffic Cop invites the Author off the wall to ask for clarifications of what has been discussed. The Traffic Cop must not allow the Author to explain or defend the manuscript.
- (8) **THANK THE AUTHOR [23]**. The Traffic Cop leads the ceremony of thanking the Author.
- (9) **CLEARING THE PALATE [24]**. The Traffic Cop leads the ceremony of clearing the palate.



**Traffic Cop Sequence**

|                         |                              |                                  |                                    |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| TRAFFIC COP [9]         | LAY OF THE LAND [16]         | AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17]      | FLY ON THE WALL [18]               |
| SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19] | POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20] | SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21] | AUTHOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION [22] |
| THANK THE AUTHOR [23]   | CLEARING THE PALATE [24]     |                                  |                                    |

\* \* \*

This minimal mode of moderation—essentially a waterfall-like process—might seem oversimplified, but the role requires judgment and sensitivity. Moreover, having a Traffic Cop as Moderator is common in many Writers' Workshops in the software patterns community, and some prefer this lightweight moderation to more elaborate variants. A Traffic Cop is able to adequately guide any Writers' Workshop: the bulk of useful comments comes from the Reviewers who are the other Authors in the workshop. Having a teacher (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10]), though, can be a welcome luxury.

## 8.10 Teacher Directs the Workshop (10) ★ ★

...a group of Authors (WORKSHOP OF AUTHORS [4]) has gathered to review a manuscript. **How do you turn the Writers' Workshop into a classroom as well as a workshop (MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8])?**

★ ★ ★

Writers' Workshops at creative writing conferences and at MFA programs generally are led by established writers in the appropriate genre who are also good teachers. The Authors in those workshops are actual students of one form or another, and therefore a teacher experienced in writing and teaching is important. **It is hard to find a similar teacher / practitioner willing to attend a Writers' Workshop in some technical fields, and therefore it is unlikely that an ideal workshop teacher / Moderator will be found.**

When a potential teacher is available, the workshop may be significantly more effective, but that teacher might have to adapt their approach to the workshop at hand.

### Therefore:

**Tune your expertise and teaching approach to the needs of the work in front of you.** Avoid any temptation to bend the workshop to your prior style of teaching, but allow the workshop dynamics to guide you while you guide the workshop.

★ ★ ★

A teacher prepares for each Author's workshop thoroughly well before the workshop convenes (PREPARE EARLY [13] & DEEP PREPARATION [14]). Regardless of what sorts of teaching points occur to the teacher, a good workshop teacher should look for places where the manuscript and the Reviewers' comments on it can provide ideas to improve the work. In addition to being a teacher, the workshop leader must also be a TRAFFIC COP [9]—because the Reviewers are also teachers of a sort, the Moderator / teacher should not hog the teaching role; because the structure of a Writers' Workshop works best when its gift-based culture is honored, the Moderator / teacher must enforce the guidelines.

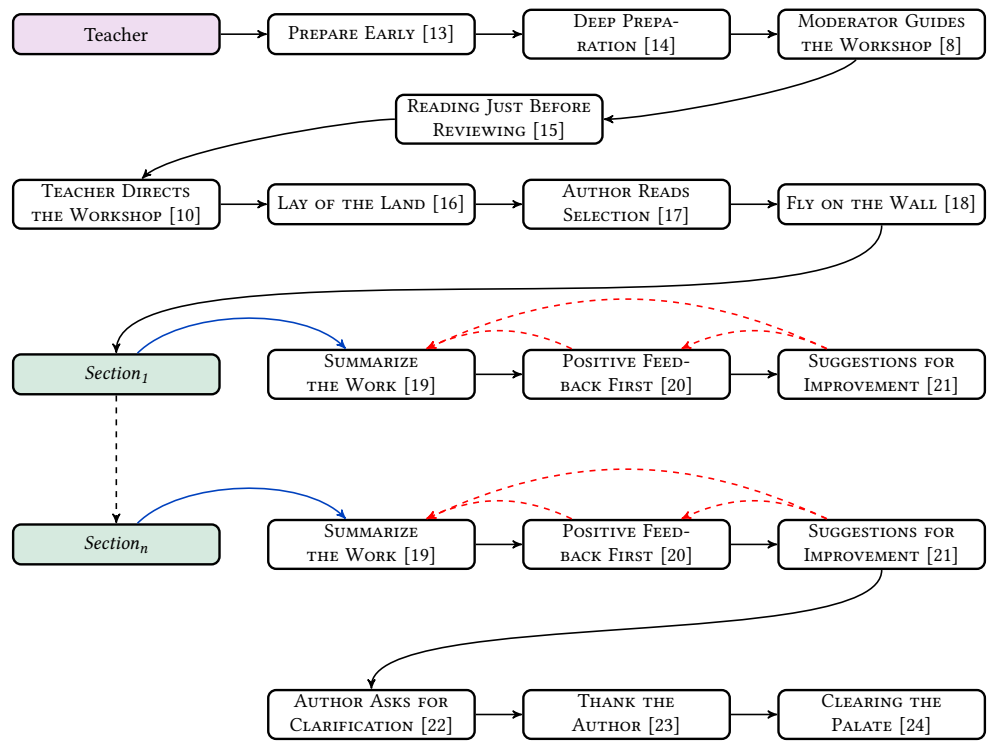
★ ★ ★

A workshop teacher should prepare thoroughly for the workshop and then execute the regular Writers' Workshop sequence with an eye toward teaching and directing as follows—a teacher can sometimes break some of the established rules for Writers' Workshops, as we'll see:

- (1) The teacher must PREPARE EARLY [13] and thoroughly (DEEP PREPARATION [14]) well before the workshop. It helps to refresh memory right before the workshop (READING JUST BEFORE REVIEWING [15]).
- (2) The Author's statements during gathering the LAY OF THE LAND [16] can serve as valuable directions of approach and indicators of guardrails against wasted effort. The teacher can understand the state of the work-in-progress well from this.
- (3) AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17]. The teacher can choose the selection to be read with an eye toward setting the stage for the most fruitful directions for comment. The selection might set up an important tension to be explored, or it might hint at an otherwise hard-to-find heart of the piece.
- (4) FLY ON THE WALL [18]. Normally the Author under review is required to remain silent, but the teacher can invite the Author to speak and interact when doing so would advance improvement of the work. REVIEWERS SERVE THE WORK [7], and so should the teacher: the Author is not the primary benefactor from a Writers' Workshop, the work is. The extent of

Author participation in the workshop depends on the teacher's assessment of the maturity of the workshop members.

- (5) SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19]. Many times the underlying problems with a manuscript arise from places where readers can misunderstand or fail to notice important information. The teacher—during preparation and more importantly while listening to Reviewers summarize parts of the manuscript—can identify or gather hints about where these places are, and then direct further summarization to uncover problems. If it seems that time could be wasted by misunderstandings or unnoticed information, the teacher might ask the Author to clarify.
- (6) POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20]. The teacher digging into part of the work during summarization might ask the Reviewers to describe what works well there, and then what improvements can be made to that part (SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21]).
- (7) SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21]. The teacher might ask for suggestions for improvement at any time and for any particular part of the manuscript, but the teacher should keep an eye on the Author to make sure dignity and confidence are maintained.
- (8) AUTHOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION [22]. The teacher might ask the Author about what else should be explored if specific topics were left out of the normal process.
- (9) THANK THE AUTHOR [23]. The Moderator leads the ceremony of thanking the Author.
- (10) CLEARING THE PALATE [24]. The Moderator leads the ceremony of clearing the palate.



Teacher Directs the Workshop Sequence

|                                    |                              |                                  |                                    |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8]  | TRAFFIC COP [9]              | PREPARE EARLY [13]               | DEEP PREPARATION [14]              |
| READING JUST BEFORE REVIEWING [15] | LAY OF THE LAND [16]         | AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17]      | FLY ON THE WALL [18]               |
| SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19]            | POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20] | SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21] | AUTHOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION [22] |
| THANK THE AUTHOR [23]              | CLEARING THE PALATE [24]     |                                  |                                    |

This sequence looks complex because of the feedback loops, which indicate that the Moderator is able to move fluidly between summarizing, positive feedback, and suggestions for improvement. The diagram shows discussion flowing from particular sections, portions, or aspects of the manuscript—such aspects might not be physically compartmentalized in the manuscript, but can be themes or traces that course through it.

This dense sequence flow may not work for all Authors, but those with significant workshop experience can benefit from this more adaptive treatment of the work.

\* \* \*

The teacher directs the workshop in two ways: 1) by determining whom to call on and 2) by suggesting new avenues of exploration. **The teacher must continually tune and adapt such direction based on what the Reviewers bring up or notice.** The Reviewers bring many eyes, brains, and sets of experiences beyond what the Author and the teacher have done; the teacher must use these resources to be a good workshop leader.

Unexpected observations can trigger new, different, and sometimes better-than-usual observations about the manuscript. These unexpected things arise from *THE STRANGENESS OF OTHERS* [26].

Along the way, the teacher can bring up points about the subject matter, presentation, writing, and anything else the teacher's experience and expertise can provide (*DEEP PREPARATION* [14]). **The teacher should take some time to teach the entire group (relevant) things that they seem to not know or could generally benefit from.** The best teaching situations come when the same teacher prepares for all the manuscripts in the workshop.

**A good teacher imparts a satisfying lesson; a great teacher unsettles, bequeaths disquiet, and invites argument.**

### 8.11 Sitting in a Circle (11) ★ ★ ★

... Authors are assembled to review the work of colleagues. Just as the geometry of an office space or set of buildings can thwart or support what happens there, so can the simple organization of room furniture. **How should a Writers' Workshop room be laid out to facilitate good patterns of communication, to create the right sense of community?**

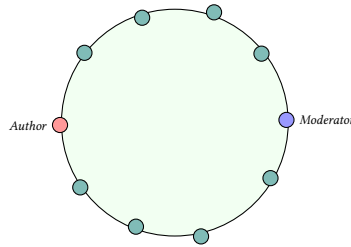
★ ★ ★

**A Writers' Workshop is a COMMUNITY OF TRUST [5] and support—the room structure should reflect that.** Most meeting rooms are set up with tables and chairs. Tables help people take notes, provide a place for beverages, and support those who sag as the meeting drags on.

**However, tables also provide a shield to hide behind.** In a Writers' Workshop, we want the Author to feel comfortable, not as if the Reviewers are attacking from behind defended bulwarks.

**Therefore:**

**Seat the Reviewers in a circle.** Both the Author and Moderator are part of the circle; the structure is fully symmetric and therefore egalitarian. Avoid tables: all participants should present an equally vulnerable (or supportive) face to the circle as a whole.



Sitting in a Circle can be achieved in a virtual setting by having the virtual gathering in the same virtual conference with cameras on (if bandwidth permits) and microphones on when speaking. The typical arrangements of people possible in a virtual conference adequately approximate the nonhierarchical structure of a circle.

Beverages can go on the floor. The Author (taking notes) and the Reviewers (adding comments to their copies of the manuscript) can use clipboards.

The essence of SITTING IN A CIRCLE [11] is to break away from a hierarchical geometry; this is most important at the outset of a Writers' Workshop, and relaxing the rule is permissible once the culture of the workshop has been established.

Some venues provide other ways to accomplish the same thing: a room in a lodge with comfortable couches and armchairs can establish a strong sense of informality, which breaks down any hierarchy. A Moderator who chooses to sit in the least favorable place can help.

In a workshop with experienced members, tables formed into a boundary (not all facing forward)—a metaphorical circle—can provide useful note-taking surfaces.

★ ★ ★

Physical comfort is important. If the chairs are uncomfortable, or, worse yet, you decide to sit in a circle in an odd location (such as under a tree), some people will be uncomfortable—because of physical limitations, age, etc. Comfort puts everyone at ease, and demonstrating concern of all types for members of the workshop can help dispel hierarchy and privilege.

★ ★ ★

The Author may simply stand up for AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17], or may move to the center of the circle. During the review proper, when the Author is a FLY ON THE WALL [18], the Author may move outside the circle. Because authors form a COMMUNITY OF TRUST [5], they might form their own AUTHORS' CIRCLE [12] inside a circle of observers, in fishbowl style.



### 8.12 Authors' Circle (12) ★ ★

...the Reviewers are assembled SITTING IN A CIRCLE [11], ready for the review process. The circle brings the full community in direct contact with the Author and with each other. **When observers are invited to a Writers' Workshop, where do they sit?**

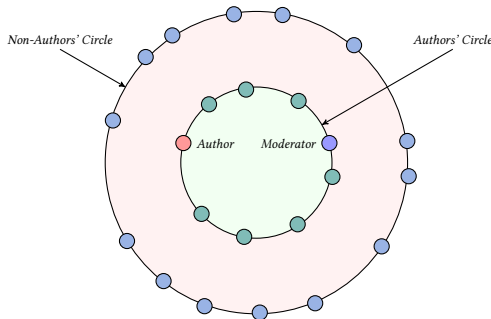
\* \* \*

**Bringing non-authors into the literal and figurative inner circle might cause discomfort for the Author, and can be contrary to a SAFE SETTING [3].** On the other hand, a Writers' Workshop can be a good learning opportunity, and sometimes others should be welcome.

**But just because they are in the room doesn't mean that they are part of the COMMUNITY OF TRUST [5].** If they are made part of the circle, they will feel like participating; yet they might not (yet) know the conventions for effective / allowable participation. Excluding them altogether is disengaging.

**Therefore:**

**Arrange the room in two circles. The inner circle contains the Authors and the Moderator. The outer circle, or "gallery," is for non-authors.**



A gallery is a seating area that is beyond the circle within which Authors sit, and it is occupied by observers of the workshop. Notice that a gallery as pictured above introduces a level of geometric hierarchy.

A typical situation for permitting observers is when a number of other Writers' Workshops are being held at the same umbrella conference, such as a PLoP Conference (Pattern Languages of Programs). In this case, all potential observers are also Authors who are members of other Writers' Workshops, which means they are part of a slightly bigger community of trust and are familiar with how such workshops operate.

Furthermore, permitting observers should go hand in hand with having a strong, experienced Moderator. This pattern has been extensively used (hence the two stars), but it is dangerous (hence the dangerous bend marker).

\* \* \*

In a virtual workshop, observers in the gallery can be ordinary members of the virtual conference but with their cameras and microphones turned off. Because of the invisibility of the gallery, observers in a virtual workshop are possibly less disturbing to a Writers' Workshop than in a terrestrial one.

The Reviewers and Moderator should always keep their cameras and microphones on. An exception is the Author under review (FLY ON THE WALL [18]), who may or may not have their camera on, depending on how the direct connection is maintained between this Author and the Moderator who must monitor the Author's reactions in order to guide the discussion.

\* \* \*

Having a gallery can be unsettling for some Authors; the workshop leader should ask the workshop members whether a gallery is acceptable. When the Writers' Workshop is part of a conference or a gathering planned in advance, the organizers should warn potential Authors early about the possibility of a gallery.

Authors who wish to remove themselves from active participation could also remove themselves to the outer circle, rather than sitting passively in the inner circle: the Author being reviewed and the Moderator, representing the author's interests typically expect participation from all members of the inner circle.

In workshops with experienced members and experienced observers, the need for a physical outer circles diminishes, becoming figurative.

\* \* \*

This pattern strongly recalls WORKSHOP OF AUTHORS [4].

The circle makes it easy for everyone to be aware of the Author during AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17], SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19], and POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20], SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21], AUTHOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION [22], and THANK THE AUTHOR [23]. All the Reviewers can see each other during the dialog. The outer circle also provides a place for the FLY ON THE WALL [18] Author to retire to (behind the Authors' Circle) while the work is being reviewed.

### 8.13 Prepare Early (13) ★ ★ ★

... the panel of Reviewers is assembled, and the work to review has been sent to them. The goal of the Writers' Workshop is to improve that work. Reviewers come in good standing because it is a WORKSHOP OF AUTHORS [4], but Reviewers should become familiar with the work so their specific feedback is credible. **How does a Reviewer prepare for a workshop?**

\* \* \*

**Reviewers of technical papers accustomed to peer review tend to read a paper several times; look up and examine references; and prepare detailed critiques.** However, such review is aimed at completed manuscripts rather than works in progress. Moreover, such a review typically is looking into the novelty and contributions of the work.

**Reviewers of literary works tend to review for narrative structure and literary quality.** Again, such review might be aimed at completed manuscripts

Reading a paper under time pressure or too quickly might produce superficial, incorrect, and ultimately misleading comments for the Author (AUTHORS ARE AUTHORS [6]). Diving deeply into the material might produce overly detailed or, in some cases, incorrect comments because the Reviewer has uncovered more than the Author is trying to present.

A Reviewer who reads a paper too far in advance of the workshop might forget the work, and notes taken might not reveal important thoughts also forgotten. A Reviewer who reads a paper right before the workshop might read it too shallowly.

**Therefore:**

**Prepare well in advance, when you are able to read the paper in a relaxed setting. Prepare for each paper as you would wish others to prepare for yours.** But don't forget Goldilocks: don't overprepare; don't underprepare.

Send the manuscripts to be reviewed to the Authors in the same session well in advance—generally at least two weeks before the first workshop. An exception is when the Writers' Workshop is intended to be light with the only expected preparation being READING JUST BEFORE REVIEWING [15].

\* \* \*

Prepare for the workshop as follows:

- (1) Read the paper at least twice if possible. The first reading is to get the sense of the paper—what is it trying to be? When you reread, try to view the paper against what it is trying to be and not what you want it to be. After that, try to figure out in what ways the best version of the paper would be valuable and try to express those ways. Sometimes you need to let the paper sit in your mind before you read it a second time.
- (2) You as Reviewer represent the reader. You should always question what different readers know at every point in the manuscript, what should be explained next, and how much the Author should assume the reader knows in general. This does not mean that you should always aim to expand the pool of qualified readers by suggesting changes to accommodate them (perhaps with tutorial material), but you should try to develop a good understanding of the sweet spot of readership and aim to make the manuscript work well for them.
- (3) Dive as deeply as you wish, but be prepared to modulate your comments based on the flow of the discussion. Don't hesitate to present an unexpected but sublime insight that occurs during the review.

- (4) If you are a good writer, then you can suggest style or writing approaches to the Author. Sometimes you can suggest some rephrasings; however, this can be very dangerous—tread lightly here.
- (5) A difficult case is places where the manuscript is, essentially, incomprehensible to you. Sometimes you can provide a rewrite of a short, critical section. This might suggest to the Author the level of knowledge a prospective reader might have, as well as point out where the Author’s natural writing is not working. As with rephrasings, this can be very difficult territory.
- (6) Point out typos, ungrammatical sentences, spelling mistakes, punctuation issues, typesetting problems, etc. Most Authors like to see such problems noted, but not all revise them (AUTHORS ARE AUTHORS [6]).
- (7) Strive to retain the Author’s voice. By seeing how an Author explains things, we—and readers—can better understand the manuscript. The voice of the Author reveals itself in word choice, manner of speaking, punctuation, diction level, sentence complexity, musicality, and other aspects of the writing. Resist suggesting changes to voice: try to retain these qualities if the manuscript is understandable and not riddled with grammatical, punctuation, and other egregious errors.
- (8) Mark the manuscript with notes for yourself during the Workshop and with comments for the Author—at the end of the review you should give that marked-up manuscript to the Author. If you have done some rephrasings or rewrite suggestions, put them in a separate document to either hand or read to the Author.

\* \* \*

As useful as the above advice is, in the real world Reviewers might not have time to prepare as thoroughly as the advice suggests. We assume that each Reviewer will prepare for all the papers before coming to the Writers’ Workshop, and that there will be little time while the workshop sessions are taking place for deep preparation. The following are ways to plan preparation.

First look through all the papers. Then:

- (1) Put aside the ones you feel strongly you want to review carefully. These are the ones for which the above advice is most applicable.
- (2) Consider the pool of Authors in the group. If you can pair a paper with one or two Authors who seem likely to have a strong interest in it or who have expertise that makes them good Reviewers, then you can relax the diligence and time you put into reviewing it.
- (3) If a paper seems too hard to review—perhaps it requires expertise you don’t have—then consider simply scanning it during early preparation and again right before its workshop (READING JUST BEFORE REVIEWING [15]).

Keep in mind that the dynamic discussion during review will often take unexpected directions, and no amount of preparation will have prepared you for them. **Be ready with an open mind to join in such discussions when new ideas pop into your head.**



Be aware that some writers consider “content,” writing “style,” and even typesetting as a single endeavor—and this holds even for some writers of technical papers. It would be absurd to think of the subject of the painting as separate from the actual paint on the canvas and the brushwork—these aspects are all part of a unified work of art. Here are three examples in writing: one literary and two from a technical field.

Sometimes odd or missing punctuation is part of the point being made by the writer. In her essay "Poetry and Grammar" Gertrude Stein explores the concepts of prose, poetry, sentences, paragraphs, reading, and punctuation. Stein's works are hard to read, but over time a reader can learn her rhythms. The excerpt:

*What does a comma do.<sup>2</sup>*

*I have refused them so often and left them out so much and did without them so continually that I have come finally to be indifferent to them. I do not now care whether you put them in or not but for a long time I felt very definitely about them and would have nothing to do with them.*

*As I say commas are servile and they have no life of their own, and their use is not a use, it is a way of replacing one's own interest and I do decidedly like to like my own interest my own interest in what I am doing. A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it and to me for many years and I still do feel that way about it only now I do not pay as much attention to them, the use of them was positively degrading.*

—Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," 1935

Sometimes the main point of a piece can be exhibited by the piece itself, so that content and presentation merge. In his keynote at OOPSLA in 1998, the computer scientist Guy Steele explored the idea of growing a larger programming language from a small set of primitives. He was exploring the question "should a programming language be small or large?" To do this, he adopted a constraint on the English words he could use in the talk (and subsequent essay) to show what it was like to build up the vocabulary of a programming language; he was both talking about the idea and enacting it in the essay. The excerpt:<sup>3</sup>

*I think you know what a man is. A woman is more or less like a man, but not of the same sex. (This may seem like a strange thing for me to start with, but soon you will see why.)*

*Next, I shall say that a person is a woman or a man (young or old).*

*To keep things short, when I say "he" I mean "he or she," and when I say "his" I mean "his or her."*

*A machine is a thing that can do a task with no help, or not much help, from a person.*

*(As a rule, we can speak of two or more of a thing if we add an "s" or "z" sound to the end of a word that names it.)*

$\langle \text{noun} \rangle := \langle \text{noun that names one thing} \rangle \text{ "s"}$

$| \langle \text{noun that names one thing} \rangle \text{ "es"}$

*These are names of persons:* Alan Turing, Alonzo Church, Charles Kay Ogden, Christopher Alexander, Eric Raymond, Fred Brooks, John Horton Conway, James Gosling, Bill Joy, and Dick Gabriel.

*The word other means "not the same." The phrase other than means "not the same as."*

$\vdots$

*For this talk, I wanted to show you what it is like to use a language that is much too small. You have now had a good taste of it. I must next define a few more words.*

<sup>2</sup>She earlier explained why question marks are uninteresting.

<sup>3</sup>I included more of this quote than originally anticipated to make for a better page break; also, what's added is interesting.

*An example is some one thing, out of a set of things, that I put in front of you so that you can see how some part of that thing is in fact a part of each thing in the set.*

*A syllable is a bit of sound that a mouth and tongue can say all at one time, more or less, in a smooth way. Each word is made up of one or more syllables.*

*A primitive is a word for which we can take it for granted that we all know what it means.*

*For this talk, I chose to take as my primitives all the words of one syllable, and no more, from the language I use for most of my speech each day, which is called English. My firm rule for this talk is that if I need to use a word of two or more syllables, I must first define it. I can do this by defining one word at a time—and I have done so—or I can give a rule by which a new word can be made from some other known word, so that many new words can be defined at once—and I have done this as well.*

—Guy L. Steele Jr., “Growing a Language,” 1998

For many, writing is a waterfall-like process: 1) come up with the content; 2) write it down using words, sentences, and paragraphs; 3) typeset the result. The computer scientist Mary Shaw merges the process of writing the words with designing its appearance on the page. Her essay “Myths and Mythconceptions” is about creating software and is based on her keynote at the History of Programming Languages conference held in 2021. The excerpt:

*The myth of the Professional Programmer distracts programming language designers from opportunities to improve software overall by applying programming language design expertise to the notations and development processes so that they better match the needs of vernacular programmers.*

—Mary Shaw, “Myths and Mythconceptions,” 2021

Mary Shaw explained to me that the reason a gothic font was used “to set off the text of the myth names was so they would be self-identified as myths wherever they appeared in the text. Textual decorations would have been distracting. Color would have been even odder. The font also serves to associate some old-fashionedness and ugliness to them, so that readers are herded toward not liking the myths as they exist in the real world.”

She went on to describe her writing process as follows:

*I pay attention to the overall appearance of the text on the page as I write. Not, obviously, down to the character, but at least as the text blocks out on the page. I’ve rewritten introductions to conference papers to make them fit on the first page, for example.*

*If you read critically, you’ll see that the reasoning is tighter in some places than others. In some places I rewrote for terseness to avoid a page break, in other places I rambled a bit to fill space. I did this for the aesthetics of the layout, not because of someone else’s fixation on absolutely minimizing the page count... we can use white space to help the reader.*

—Mary Shaw, email to rpg, 2022

These are examples where it is important to look at the manuscript as a whole and not at the content, style, and typesetting as separable aspects.

\* \* \*

Some people say “content is all that matters.” They say that bad writing—the words, the style, and the things that constitute writing chops—is a barrier for readers to break through to get to

the valuable content; the writer shouldn't worry about it. Recall carefully what Thucydides said a really long time ago:

*A man who has the knowledge but lacks the power clearly to express it is no better off than if he never had any ideas at all.*

—Thucydides, "The Peloponnesian War," ~400 BCE, translated by Richard Crawley,  
Random House, New York, 1981

### 8.14 Deep Preparation (14) ★ ★

...the panel of Reviewers is assembled, the work to review has been sent to them, and the Moderator is a teacher (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10]). The goal of the Writers' Workshop is to improve the work. **How does a teacher prepare for a workshop?**

\* \* \*

**A teacher is more than a TRAFFIC COP [9] and needs to prepare specially for the workshop. The basic preparation is described in PREPARE EARLY [13], but there is more to do.** A teacher has responsibility to all the authors and Reviewers in the workshop. A teacher brings experience, knowledge, and wisdom to the group.

#### **Therefore:**

**Prepare a lesson plan for the group based on each manuscript to be reviewed.** A teacher should be prepared to carry the workshop if the Reviewers have few or lackluster comments; when this happens and the Moderator is a Traffic Cop, the Author of a manuscript is simply out of luck—not much help is given. When the Moderator is a teacher, that teacher should be able to provide good feedback to the Author.

\* \* \*

Deep preparation by a teacher includes the following (for each manuscript):

- (1) Determine the order of summaries (SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19]), starting with an overview and then dropping into specific parts.
- (2) Identify strong points of the piece and plan how to explain why they are strong.
- (3) Identify weak points and plan how to explain why they are weak, how to teach approaches to fixing such problems, and how to describe the best way to approach the particular cases at hand.
- (4) Prepare to teach craft-related techniques and ideas when their absence in the piece or their exemplary presence cry out.
- (5) Prepare notes and proposed revisions for the Author; hand them to the Author or email them after the workshop.
- (6) If you know related works, be ready to describe them; sometimes copies can be made for the workshop members.
- (7) Just before the actual workshop, go over the lesson plan so that it's fresh in mind.

### 8.15 Reading Just Before Reviewing (15) ★ ★

...you have dutifully prepared early (PREPARE EARLY [13]) for a review session, but that might have been long ago. **How do you warm up for the review session?**

\* \* \*

**You have read the paper well before the Workshop and have prepared comments and suggestions. But the manuscript and what you thought of it might have slipped your mind.** Nevertheless, the paper has been swirling in your subconscious, and a rereading might reveal new or different things. **Or you might have been lazy and not prepared well or at all.**

**Therefore:**

**(Re)read the manuscript just before reviewing it. The piece will be fresh in your mind; its emotional impact will remain with you during the review session.**

\* \* \*

Some Writers' Workshops provide reading periods right before reviewing sessions. Otherwise, reread the manuscript the night before or the morning of.

Planners of a series workshop sessions should keep in mind that reading time for two papers must be twice the reading time for one paper.

Some Writers' Workshops and some manuscripts work better with only light reviews—for example, when the Writers' Workshop has many first-time Authors or when the authors are looking for impressions and arcs of flow instead of a detailed and close reading.

## 8.16 Lay of the Land (16) ★ ★

... you have dutifully prepared early (PREPARE EARLY [13]) for a review session, primed the pump by reading right before reviewing (READING JUST BEFORE REVIEWING [15]), and the Author is queued up and ready to go. **How does the Moderator set the stage for the Reviewers and the Author?**

★ ★ ★

**All preparations have been completed and now it's time for the main part of the Writers' Workshop. For each Author, this is the transition from listening to discussions about other papers to hearing what the Reviewers have to say about theirs: it can be difficult for the Author.** Moreover, not every manuscript is in the same place in its lifecycle, and what one Author could use best might not be the same for the other Authors.

Perhaps the first draft of the manuscript has just been completed, and everything is open to comment; or perhaps the manuscript has been through several revisions and Writers' Workshops, and a tune-up is all that's needed. Moreover, the Author needs to start the transition to the wall (FLY ON THE WALL [18]).

### Therefore:

**Ask the Author to tell the Workshop the status of the manuscript and what sorts of comments would be most welcome.** Besides informing the Workshop where and how to focus, this provides the Author a chance to talk to the Reviewers and other Authors, thereby beginning or continuing the process of adding the Author into the emerging Workshop community. You can think of it as a useful distraction for the Author—serving to calm nerves—but it also starts to get everyone in a frame of mind to work on the manuscript together.

★ ★ ★

The *status* of a manuscript does not include anything about its content; it is only such things as how many revisions have been done or whether it has been in a Writers' Workshop before. The sorts of desired comments should stay away from describing content, at most only pointing to it: "is the proof of theorem 110 · 72 understandable? Is the character Maeve vivid?"

★ ★ ★

The Moderator may engage the Author in a discussion of the manuscript's place in its lifecycle: sometimes an Author needs some direction about what to say. Traffic Cops (TRAFFIC COP [9]) might not be able to serve this purpose well, but good teachers (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10]) can. An Author can not only describe where the manuscript is in the process, but what parts of it seem weak or caused difficulty while writing. Examples include the flow of the argument, transitions, level of detail in explanations, appropriate visual elements (graphs, charts, tables), wording choices, scope of background information, voice, tone, and understandability. However, in asking for such comments, the Author must not delve into details of the content, except perhaps in a workshop with participants with extensive Writers' Workshop experience.

**Sometimes an Author will (mis)use this stage as an opportunity to explain or describe their manuscript: don't let them do that. When the Author provides information a reader needs to understand or appreciate the manuscript but that information cannot be gleaned from it, the Reviewers might not be able to disentangle what they heard from what they read.** The Moderator should take care to limit the Author to manuscript status and points for attention by Reviewers.



When members of a Writers' Workshop are experienced, many of the guardrails can be ignored. For example, an Author can mark a submitted manuscript with instructions on what parts should be addressed. An example could be a full pattern language where all the patterns but one or two have been workshopped and extensively revised, leaving those one or two as the focus of attention. In a sense this is establishing the lay of the land before preparation time (PREPARE EARLY [13]).

In a similar manner, more detailed descriptions of the needs of an Author can be laid out during a lay of the land discussion. With advanced workshop members, a Writers' Workshop can seem like an informal discussion.

### 8.17 Author Reads Selection (17) ★ ★ ★

... you have dutifully prepared early (PREPARE EARLY [13]) for a review session, and gotten an idea what the Author has brought and wants to hear about (LAY OF THE LAND [16]). **How does the Workshop transition into the manuscript?**

\* \* \*

**The Author is about to assume the stance of a silent observer of a discussion of the manuscript (FLY ON THE WALL [18]). The words on the page were put there by the Author and so there is a connection between the voice of those words and the actual voice of the person.** Usually, sentences are written with the rhythms the Author knows and uses in their speaking.

**Therefore:**

**Ask the Author to read a short portion of their manuscript out loud. Hearing the words in the voice of the Author can be a way to enter the manuscript gracefully.** The Author and the manuscript become linked, which helps the Reviewers keep their comments polite and respectful. In some cases the Author's punctuation style can be understood by hearing how it informs spoken presentation. The reading should be short—taking up no more than a few minutes. Sometimes a long paragraph, a couple of short paragraphs, or a very short section can work.

The abstract is in many cases one of the worst portions to read—an abstract, especially for technical pieces, can be formulaic, and in most cases is tailored to present information rather than exhibit style. Sometimes an abstract is a good place for the Author to be lazy.

When there are several Authors of a manuscript, ask each one to read a portion, if time permits.

The inflection and other reading patterns the Author exhibits can sometimes give hints about how to improve the work. For example, if the stresses the Author puts in or the gestures they make turn out to be central to the experience of the piece, and those things are somehow absent from or contrary to the words on the page, the Author needs to know it.

\* \* \*

There are two approaches to deciding which portion of the text to read: Author selects or Moderator selects. When the Author selects, Reviewers can sometimes learn how the Author feels about the piece or what part is important to the Author. If the Author selects a very short passage, it could be that the Author is unsure about the piece. If the Author selects a passage about the context or the conclusion, then perhaps that is the most important aspect for the Author.

The Moderator might select a passage that exemplifies the best of the manuscript if overall a substantial revision of the manuscript is in order—this will show the Reviewers what can be achieved throughout the piece after revision. Or the Moderator might select a passage with some problems—this could show the Author that what is on the page is not quite what was intended. Decisions like this require an experienced teacher as Moderator (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10]).

### 8.18 Fly on the Wall (18) ★ ★ ★

...the Author has read a selection (AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17]), the Reviewers are seated in a circle (SITTING IN A CIRCLE [11]), ready to give feedback on the work. **What does the author do now? How do you keep the author engaged, yet at an objective distance?**

\* \* \*

**How can we get the best review of work while helping the author mature as a writer?** Many face-to-face reviews turn into discussions between the Author and the Reviewer when, for example, a comment by a Reviewer spurs an explanation by the Author, and sometimes these discussions turn into debates or arguments, with the Author defending the work and the Reviewers responding with justifications. Debates and arguments can easily drift from the page to personalities.

**A group discussing a work by an absent Author can display an honesty that might be hard to come by when the Author is there, but sometimes the comments turn harsh and become nonconstructive as Reviewers turn their attention to showing off their cleverness.** At one extreme we have the generosity created by the presence of the Author potentially undermined by arguments about the comments, while at the other, the honesty created by the Author's absence potentially undermined by the destructiveness of the comments.

**Therefore:**

**Ask the Author to step out of the Authors' circle (AUTHORS' CIRCLE [12]) and become a Fly on the Wall in a room where truthful but polite people are frankly discussing the work** (SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19]; POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20]; SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21]).

Take away the defensiveness of the Author when he or she speaks up for the work, and add the face and presence of the Author to remind the Reviewers that a real person is behind the work, a person who wants to make the work better and improve as a writer.

\* \* \*

Achieving this is the goal of the Writers' Workshop. This takes three ingredients. First, the gift-giving nature of the workshop needs to kick in at some point. The Reviewers and Authors need to believe that they are giving the gifts of early access to work and of constructive feedback. Next, the Authors must be and must feel that they are being protected by the Moderator and by the other Authors and audience members (SAFE SETTING [3]). Finally, the Author must seem to be not present while in fact they actually are.

While on the Wall, the Author must remain silent unless the Moderator engages the Author—a workshop teacher can invite the Author to speak and interact when doing so would advance improvement of the work. Reviewers should never directly address the Author, nor refer to the Author by name—they should say “the Author.” Similarly, the Author and Reviewers should avoid eye contact. Sometimes this is best achieved if the Author literally steps outside the AUTHORS' CIRCLE [12].

These steps help the Reviewers focus on the material by putting the Author out of sight, out of mind. The Author can still appreciate POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20], but is distanced from the personal impact of SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21].

\* \* \*

In a virtual workshop, the Author under review can turn off their camera and microphone to achieve a strong Fly on the Wall. However, unless the virtual conferencing system permits the

Moderator alone to see the Author under review, the Moderator will be unable to monitor the Author's reactions to gauge how to direct the discussion. Perhaps using a second channel from Author to Moderator can work. Another option is to establish a set of emotional signals via chat or IM the Author can use with the Moderator.

\* \* \*

The Moderator must be willing to step in and instruct the workshop on these points and insist on their being followed. For this reason, the Moderator must feel they have enough authority to do that. Sometimes it is a good idea to have an outside Moderator come in for a workshop.

Similarly, the Moderator must try to keep the comments positive and not antagonistic or insulting. This requires a fair degree of sensitivity because a comment can become personal very quickly. Sometimes simply reminding people of this at every transition in the workshop can be enough.

For the Moderator, the Author may be out of sight, but never out of mind.

\* \* \*

The Author should take notes during their workshop session. Sometimes this can be difficult either because the Author wants to pay attention to the comments or the experience is too emotional. In that case the Author can either ask a friend to take notes or record the session if the group agrees. Some workshop members might not want their spoken comments recorded. This applies to both terrestrial workshops and virtual ones.

### 8.19 Summarize the Work (19) ★ ★ ★

... the Reviewers are seated in a circle (SITTING IN A CIRCLE [11]), and the Author is a FLY ON THE WALL [18]. **What is the first bit of useful feedback?**

\* \* \*

**Many Authors believe their manuscripts are operating in particular ways for readers: the Author of a technical paper believes that facts, results, and arguments are clearly presented and making points; a fiction writer believes that the story and the characters with their yearnings are conveyed along with mood and atmosphere; a poet believes the condensed language on the page will trigger certain responses in its readers.** The first thing an Author wants to know is whether the manuscript is working (at all).

#### Therefore:

**Ask Reviewers to summarize the work.** Review starts with the most basic feedback: what did people actually get from the work? The Author then can see any gaps between what the Author put on the page and what readers take off the page. Large gaps can mean that the reader had the wrong or not enough knowledge, or that the words were not guiding the reader well enough.

Summaries can be general—summing up the entire piece—or the Moderator can ask for summaries of particular parts. Summaries should be stated in neutral, observational language. Depending on the nature of the manuscript, a summary can include the effect it had on the summarizer.

For technical and many non-fiction pieces, the information conveyed is paramount—did the content, as it were, come across? For fiction, poetry, and some essays, the overall effect of the writing is important—mood, attitude, rhythm, pacing, the noise of words, and associations & connotations are important (sometimes as important, sometimes more important than the content<sup>4</sup>).

**These summaries are the first place the Author can get surprised: by misreadings, distractions, and puzzlement.** Important things the Author knows but has not written down can confuse and confound readers.

\* \* \*

The Moderator has many options here. The Moderator can ask for several people to summarize the entire piece; the Moderator can dig down into specific sections, especially when the Moderator's preparation has uncovered different readings.

When the Moderator chooses to dig into individual sections, it's possible to fold in the other two major review pieces: POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20] and SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21]. In this way the workshop becomes less like an assembly line and more like its own creative process. If the Moderator knows some of the Reviewers—or as they become known—the Moderator can direct the discussion as a Socratic-style teacher might.

\* \* \*

**The Moderator has two major problems to contend with: how to know when to cut off summaries, and what to do if it is clear no one really knows what the piece—or part of it—is about.**

It's important to keep the returns from diminishing and to resist going too deeply into narrow topics or issues, unless those topics and issues are central to the work itself. When progress is slow

<sup>4</sup>The poet and critic James Longenbach suggests that poems convey knowledge only inasmuch as they refuse to be vehicles for the efficient transmission of knowledge—that this self-resistance is the source of the reader's pleasure: we read poetry not to escape difficulty but to embrace it.

or going in circles, the Moderator can start asking directed questions if there are summary points not yet made.

If some part of a piece is confusing the workshop, the Moderator should decide quickly how to handle it. In most cases, the right approach is simply to point out that this part of the piece is confusing and move on. Confusion during summary can become a teaching opportunity and perhaps good feedback for the Author when Reviewers state why they thought what they did about the piece. Or the Moderator can ask the Author to supply enough information so that the rest of the review can work well.

\* \* \*

When the Moderator is not a teacher (TRAFFIC COP [9]), the Summarize the Work section is typically brief, with sometimes only one or two summarizers. Such Moderators might ask others to pitch in only if the summary seems incomplete or a little off. Sometimes the off-by-a-little summaries provide some of the most important information to the Author. I don't recommend brief summary—it's too important for the Author to know what the workshop members thought they read in order to gauge the Reviewers' further reactions. Almost everyone should contribute to the summary. If a workshop member agrees with someone else's summary, they should say so quickly—perhaps saying “gush” or indicating +1.

## 8.20 Positive Feedback First (20) ★ ★ ★

...the Reviewers are seated in a circle (SITTING IN A CIRCLE [11]), the Author is a FLY ON THE WALL [18], and the manuscript or a particular portion has been summarized (SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19]). The Reviewers are ready to provide critical feedback to the Author. **How do Reviewers provide feedback so it has the best chance of being successful, and of setting the proper tone?**

\* \* \*

**Whenever we read, there are parts that we enjoy, and parts we'd like to improve.** Yet most review settings dwell on the improvements, since the parts that we like need no work, and therefore need no mention.

Many Reviewers aim to find and solve problems; they are good at finding *misfits*. Quality is more than the lack of misfits, but most criticism focuses on the negatives, leaving the positives unmentioned.

This problem-solving approach leaves doubt in the mind of the Author about the value of the parts and characteristics of the piece that were left unmentioned. Did the Reviewers leave them out because they ran out of time? Because they were less offensive than the problems they mentioned? This approach leaves the Author feeling insecure, with the positive side of their manuscript left unrecognized.

Later on, an Author may also become confused and remove a well-done part to address feedback that should be dealt with elsewhere.

### Therefore:

**Begin the review by pointing out positives: what works, what is good, what the Author should leave unchanged in the next draft.** The overall thrust of a Writers' Workshop is to improve both the pieces being reviewed and the skills of the participants. This usually is taken to mean pointing out and fixing problems: the less good parts will be the focus of attention, and therefore the overall tone will be negative. But as with many populations, a manuscript will have worse parts, middling parts, and better parts. Positive Feedback provides pointers to those better parts so that the Author can not only retain them but also try to do in other places what they did there. Positive feedback should be specific—point to the places, words, and ideas that are strong and working well.

Positive Feedback contains the seeds of a technique called *positive deviance*. Positive deviance—a group improvement process—is based on the observation that in every group of people engaged in some activity, most are doing the activity at the same, middle level, some are worse than that, and some excel. The idea is to spread the techniques of those who excel to the others. When the Authors and Reviewers in a writers' workshop can see what works well in each others' manuscripts, those good techniques can spread.

\* \* \*

**A Writers' Workshop is effective if it is like a *gift economy*.** In a gift economy, gifts are exchanged, forming a bond based on mutual obligation: in the simplest form of gift exchange, when one person gives a gift to another, the receiver becomes obligated to the giver, but not in a purely mercenary way—rather, the recipient becomes very much like a member of the giver's family where mutual obligations are many, varied, and long lasting. More sophisticated forms involve more than two parties. A person may give a gift with the realistic expectation that someday a gift of equal or greater use value will be received, or that the recipient will pass on a further gift. Sacrifices and many religious ceremonies are gift-economy based. In an open-source project, the

gift of source code is reciprocated by suggestions, bug reports, debugging, hard work, praise, and more source code. To form a gift economy, there must be a kind of shared ownership supported by a positive tone. Finding only fault does not help.

**Not to be ignored is that Positive Feedback can trigger a cascade of positive comments, which helps balance the review and provides useful pointers to the Author and to the Reviewers.**

\* \* \*

If the Moderator is iterating the basic steps of the review process by applying them to individual sections or portions of the manuscript, it is still important for Positive Feedback on each part to precede SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21].

### 8.21 Suggestions for Improvement (21) ★ ★ ★

... the Reviewers have given POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20], but still need to tell the Author what can be improved during the next round of editing. **How do you point out problems without appearing to attack the Author?**

\* \* \*

**The primary goal of a Writers' Workshop is to improve a manuscript (REVIEWERS SERVE THE WORK [7]). This cannot be accomplished with only praise. At some point Reviewers need to point out what needs to be added, what needs to be removed, and what needs to be changed.** Pointing out what needs to be added is criticizing what an Author did not do, not what an Author did; such a criticism is generally easy to accept. But the other kinds—and this one as well—pose the possibility of the Author taking criticism of their creation as criticism of themselves.

**Therefore:**

**Endeavor to provide criticism only when it is accompanied with concrete suggestions for improvement.** Whenever possible, a Reviewer should not simply point out a problem, but also should say what to do to correct or mitigate it. Suggestions should be as specific as they can be. Point to the place or places to revise. Try to word each suggestion as an opinion you have and not an objective fact. The Moderator should watch for suggestions that ramble, perhaps truncating them once the value of the suggestion diminishes too much—this is a judgment.

Reviewers should remember that the Author has the final say on the piece (AUTHORS ARE AUTHORS [6]). For both technical pieces and creative ones, glaring factual errors should be pointed out, but politely and perhaps as questions: “didn’t Peter Deutsch and Danny Bobrow work on reference counting garbage collectors back in 1976?” or “didn’t they use computers to generate crowd scenes for Roman gladiator movies starting in the late 1990s?” The purpose of the workshop is to make the piece the best it can be, to make it more of what it is, not to change it into something else, especially not what Reviewers want it to be.

Each comment in this phase of the process should be either a direct suggestion for improvement or a statement of a problem along with a suggestion for how to address it. Each suggestion needs to be concrete and something that the Author can use, not a general suggestion like “fix it somehow.” Instead of “your chili is rich, deep, and spicy [POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20]], but it’s not balanced,” add—if you know this—“try adding a sweet ingredient, perhaps diced carrots, or even brown sugar.”

\* \* \*

**Concrete suggestions are not always within a Reviewer’s grasp.** In these cases the Reviewer should strive to word the observation simply and without noticeable judgment—sometimes as a question or with ways to start figuring out the approach. Enlisting the other Reviewers can work.

In the best workshops, this phase of commentary turns into an upward spiral of reinforcing comments with better and better approaches to the weaknesses. This not only provides ideas for the Author but demonstrates that there are lots of ways to approach revision and not simply a particular right answer that the Author stupidly missed. It will be obvious to the Author from such reinforcing positive discussions that the workshop members want to help and that there isn’t some deep flaw in the Author’s personality that prevents them from doing good writing—good writing is simply hard to do. Such behavior also demonstrates a feeling of temporary co-ownership that is a hallmark of the best workshops.

## 8.22 Author Asks for Clarification (22) ★ ★ ★

...at the end of the formal review portion of a Writers' Workshop, the Author may be anxious about some of the things that were said. Until now, the Author has been a FLY ON THE WALL [18], but there can't be a SAFE SETTING [3] unless the Author is given a chance to speak (beyond just LAY OF THE LAND [16] and AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17]). **How do we give the Author a chance to speak without starting a debate?**

★ ★ ★

**Reviewers comments might not stand alone.** During the reviewing period, Reviewers are typically speaking on-the-fly. Reviewers' comments might go by faster than the Author can note them. **Reviewer comments can be ambiguous, confusing, or unclear.** The Author and the piece are best served when Reviewers' comments are clearly understood and written down by the Author or a note-taking helper.

### Therefore:

**The Author may ask for clarification after the Moderator calls an end to the formal comments and Reviewer discussion.** The Moderator must clearly signal the end of the formal comments and explicitly invite the Author back into the circle to ask for clarifications. The Author at this time may ask questions, request clarifications, or, depending on the culture developed within this particular workshop, ask for comments about specific passages or aspects of the piece. Almost always, this part of the workshop is quite short—most of the time only a few minutes are reserved for it. Though the ethos of the workshop is still in force, the clarifications phase is where one of its fundamental preconditions is dropped: the Author and Reviewers may interact directly.

★ ★ ★

A typical request for clarification is a request to repeat a poorly heard comment or to explain what was meant by a certain suggestion; sometimes it can be in the form of a question about whether an unmentioned approach to solve a problem with the work seems like it could work.

The Author still must not defend the piece nor explain what they were trying to do except insofar as this is in pursuit of a suggestion of how to improve the work. The Author does not need to apologize or defend the piece—it stands on its own as what it is, perfect or imperfect as it may be.

Typically the Author takes this opportunity to thank the Reviewers and workshop. If the review has run well, it always seems to be the natural thing to do at this stage.

★ ★ ★

This brings the review to an end and ties up all the formal loose ends. THANK THE AUTHOR [23] can provide a more complete emotional closure. The author can now take the feedback and revise the piece, making SELECTIVE CHANGES [25].

### 8.23 Thank the Author (23) ★ ★ ★

...Authors invest much time and invite risk by putting their intellectual achievement—their manuscript—out for criticism. By doing so, they can contribute richly to the body of literature. The Authors deserve our gratitude. **How do we convey our gratitude so that the Author leaves the workshop encouraged?**

\* \* \*

**The work of the workshop is done—all the comments that should have been made have been made; there has been a balance of comments; helpful feedback has been offered and received; no one has visibly become upset; decorum has dwelt in the circle for about an hour. But beneath the surface, emotions have perhaps been less settled.**

The players have confronted one another where the tender edges of self-confidence and self-doubt rub up against each other. The emotional arc is possibly unbalanced—the Author's freshest memories are likely about the shortcomings of the piece, and that discussion is also likely to have been the most animated, with the most give and take between members of the workshop. The positive comments came first (POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20]), as they needed to in order to lay the groundwork for the suggestions (SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21]) to be heard—otherwise the first experience for the Author would be an ear-shutting firehose of negativity.

To almost any Author, the order has been this: good followed by bad. We need to have something positive to close the process for the Author so that the emotional arc is more balanced—something that is tied more directly to the Author than a thank you or another highly formal, pro forma closing.

**Therefore:**

**End the Writers' Workshop with a display of gratitude for the Author. Make a distinctive positive comment about the piece.** Make sure that thanking the Author does not feel like an insincere formality.

\* \* \*

The Moderator should make a positive comment or ask someone else to do so—something about the work that could encourage the Author to continue with the work. The remark can be small, but preferably it should be large (though not lengthy) or about something distinctive about the work, something that makes it unique and valuable or enjoyable or deserving to be in the world's literature, as well as something that implies that the Author's unique position, skills, and talents are required to bring this work to its best form. In short, a small dose of both acceptance and approval.

Though this is a small upturn at the end of the process, it is significant because it echoes the positive comments made at the outset, reminding the Author of them, of their genuineness, and of the fact that the suggestions for improvement were made about a work the group sees as valuable. If the entire workshop is a gift, then this last bit of positive feedback is the beautiful ribbon which in itself is a gift that can be reused on another package later.

\* \* \*

This brings the ceremony to closure; this ending helps Authors let down their guard and fully recognize that the people around them are there to support and refine the work; it demonstrates that the Reviewers appreciate the Author.

When a workshop is running well, this closing note of gratitude might not be strictly necessary. If it is clear that the piece is appreciated, a simple round of (standing) applause for the (seated) Author might be enough.

## 8.24 Clearing the Palate (24) ★

... after the work of a Writers' Workshop is done, peoples' heads are full & emotions run strong (both high and low). Along with a sense of closure there are, perhaps, feelings of exhaustion. Different people experience each workshop differently. **How do you clear peoples' heads, preparing them for what comes next?**

\* \* \*

**A steady stream of workshop sessions can be draining.** People invest a lot—emotionally, intellectually, even spiritually—in a Writers' Workshop. The experience can leave some participants unfocused and off-center as the workshop's issues race around in their minds.

**A distraction can bring the group back to its center.** By shifting the ground beneath their feet, or by focusing them on something entirely irrelevant, the group might be able to clear away the aftermath of the workshop and move on to what follows.

**Therefore:**

**At the close of each review, ask a volunteer to say or do something strange.** ... a joke, an anecdote, a short story, a puzzle—anything unrelated to the prevailing topic of the workshop. In cooking, a palate cleanser is a neutral-flavored food or drink that clears the mouth, helping one to more accurately assess a new flavor.

\* \* \*

**This is a form of *defamiliarization*,** a technique used by artists to help them break into new territory, to be receptive to new ideas, to become more creative, and to help their audience do the same. We can use it here.

Viktor Shklovsky in "Art as Technique" wrote:

*The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception....*

—Viktor Shklovsky, *Art as Technique*, "Modern Criticism and Theory," 1988

Aristotle wrote something similar:

*The perfection of Diction is for it to be clear and not mean [lacking distinction; dull]. The clearest indeed is that made up of ordinary words for things, but it is mean.... On the other hand diction becomes distinguished and non-prosaic by the use of unfamiliar terms, i.e. strange words, metaphors, lengthened forms, and everything that deviates from the ordinary modes of speech.*

—Aristotle, *De Poetica*, "Basic Works of Aristotle," 2001

\* \* \*

Do something strange—as a pause, as a break, as an interlude, as an interspersion.

## 8.25 Selective Changes (25) ★ ★ ★

...the workshop is done, the Author has received SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21], and is revising their manuscript. **How should the Author incorporate workshop feedback into the work?**

\* \* \*

**Once the workshop is over and people have gone home, the next step is for the Author to revise the work.** If the workshop has worked as well as it can, the Author has extensive notes taken at the workshop, additional extensive notes taken by a friend who shared the burden of note-taking, and marked-up copies of the work from each of the workshop members—there may be less than this, but this is the best case. The premise of the workshop is that the group is going to assume temporarily group ownership of the piece and offer SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21].

Now things are different.

### Therefore:

**Make only the changes that feel right**, the ones you, the Author, wish you had thought of yourself... earlier. In the end, AUTHORS ARE AUTHORS [6], so the revisions you make should be the ones you choose.

This is the process of revision. A revision can go as far as a total rewrite of the piece or as near as fixing commas. A Writers' Workshop provides a set of suggestions, some generated by the Reviewers and others from ideas triggered by the Reviewers' discussion.

The Author should consider this set of suggestions with deliberation and revise the piece according to the Author's best judgment.

\* \* \*

The Writers' Workshop serves to provide raw material for the Author to consider; suggestions made by Reviewers can be pruned—they are not sacrosanct. In the end the Author should revise based on their own choices.

The Author sat through a number of reviews at the workshop, heard the sorts of comments each Reviewer made, and was able to judge the abilities and style of each Reviewer. It would be unusual for the Author to conclude that they all had the same abilities and approached pieces with enough similarity of purpose that each should be afforded the same credibility. Some members of the workshop are more like the intended audience for the piece than others. Some members are more experienced as writers and readers than others. The Author may respect some more than others. Maybe one Reviewer is good for style, another for content, a third for grammar, another for emotional vectors, and so on. Revision is a matter of preference, style, and experience of the Author. Don't make a change only because a Reviewer suggested it, make it because it's a good idea.

\* \* \*

For many writers, it helps to put some time between first encountering comments and acting on them. This is good advice regardless of where the comments come from. Authors: go over the comments soon after the workshop to make sure you have written them down clearly; read all the comments, then put them aside for a couple of days; react to the comments not only from your head, but also from your gut and heart.

\* \* \*

The reactions of Reviewers to the manuscript provides a glimpse at how distant readers might react to it. Sometimes a comment that seems to be way off base indicates that the Author did not write things well. These are reasons to consider Reviewer comments deliberately and dispassionately,

\* \* \*

Sometimes, a work has the benefit of feedback from multiple workshops. Issues ignored in one workshop may surface in another; good writers put their prejudices aside and heed these hints. Perhaps an Author's shepherd is willing to help.

\* \* \*

People who write a lot about difficult matters and ideas know that when the material they're writing about is complicated or convoluted, the resulting text will also be, and that therefore when the words on the page are just not coming together well, perhaps it's a material that is the problem. One way for an Author to notice this is by reflecting on the difficulties of revision, including how many revision passes are being expended. This is well known in the literary world as well, as the poet George Oppen writes:

*There is a mystery: the mystery is that the ear knows. If one revises and revises and revises—perhaps weeks and months and years and cannot revise, then there is something wrong with what you are trying to say. The ear knows, and I don't know why. . . .*

—George Oppen, "Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers,"

University of California Press, 2008

## 8.26 The Strangeness of Others (26) ★ ★

... the Author is revising their manuscript. **How should the Author think about the feedback?**

\* \* \*

**A Writers' Workshop works best when its participants are diverse.** If the workshop members were all supportive friends and family, most of the comments might be cheers and standing ovations; if the workshop members were all of the same background with similar or the same expertise, most of the comments might sound—and be—the same.

Because people can be fragile, an Author might be tempted to listen only to supportive comments made by Reviewers with sympathetic backgrounds and expertise. This is not why Authors attend Writers' Workshops.

**Therefore:**

**Pay the most attention to the strangest reactions to the piece. Embrace mystery.** All collaborative practices share reasons for their success with each other and with the Writers' Workshop. In each, groups get together and the group achieves more than an individual would. Something about human interaction is involved. Something about having the work in front of the group is crucial.

The most reliably operating reason for such practices to work is that it brings to bear many eyes and minds to a piece to find mistakes or errors, such as factual errors, grammatical errors, structural errors, lack of clarity, bugs in software, cultural missteps, illogic, typos, and so on. A motto in the open-source world is that every bug is trivial given sufficiently many eyes.

The second reason that these collaborative practices work is that they bring to bear enough different expertise to deepen the work in places where its maker is not as facile.

**A diverse set of Reviewers can bring many points of view, levels of experience, sets of expertise, tastes, styles, hobby horses, and peculiar ideas. Defamiliarization is a common technique among the most creative people—they pay attention to oddballs and the bizarre.** Even if the far out is not what an Author is comfortable with, there could be some wisdom or a useful trigger in a Reviewer's wacky comment.

An Author need not adopt a peculiar suggestion, but ignoring it is safe only after taking it seriously for a bit. You came to the workshop to learn about your manuscript; use its diversity.

\* \* \*

Not every Writers' Workshop works well for every manuscript: sometimes the feedback is not useful. Glean what you can from such circumstances.

## 8.27 Reviewers Learn the Most (27) ★ ★

...the Writer's Workshop is humming along. **Who learns the most?**

\* \* \*

**A Writer's Workshop is so obviously for the benefit of Authors that the temptation is overwhelming to measure its value solely in terms of how the reviews affected the manuscripts.** Look at the before; look at the after; measure the improvement (somehow). Reviewers—who are the Authors whose works are not being reviewed right then—seem to be providing their value directly to and only to the Author whose work is on the table. Benefits to Reviewers seem to be the benefits of gift giving.

**If you believe that, you are wrong.**

**Therefore:**

**Reviewers learn the most; listen to and remember what is said about all the manuscripts.** Reviewers learn by listening and contributing to discussions about other work, particularly work that is unlike what that Reviewer normally does. Their itch is to improve how they work, and they can do that by working for a time on someone else's piece, where they can look at the work without too much personal investment in the outcome—a Reviewer can't take personally any criticism of a piece that was made by someone else. That work is on its own and is not enmeshed in their identity; a Reviewer's interest is to improve that other work. When you are thinking about someone else's piece, you are learning how to think about your own.

**Another effect of listening to discussions about someone else's work is the extent to which the comments made about that other work can apply to one's own work.** When the workshop examines the difficulties in a particular other piece, a Reviewer can sometimes quite clearly see those difficulties in their own work.

**A Reviewer can more easily pay attention to comments about another piece than to their own manuscript.** Such a Reviewer doesn't have, for example, the distraction of their heart pounding in their ears to distract them when listening to comments about other work.

**Moreover, there are many sets of comments about all the others' manuscripts and only one about the Reviewer's.** And the range of topics and nature of the comments can be much wider.

\* \* \*

With a Moderator acting as a teacher (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10]), a Reviewer is in effect sitting in a master class, and the best thing to do is pay attention and learn.

\* \* \*

**Moderators learn a lot, too.**

## 9 Tips for Moderators

Moderators can range from Traffic Cops (TRAFFIC COP [9]) to full-blown Socratic-style teachers (TEACHER DIRECTS THE WORKSHOP [10]). Moderators more engaged than Traffic Cops have a toolbox consisting mostly of time management, attending to the dignity of the Author being workshopped, choosing who speaks, offering their own comments & occasional lectures, and asking questions to guide discussion. These tips are for these and more advanced Moderators.

### 9.1 Preparation

Read each manuscript well before the workshop convenes (PREPARE EARLY [13]). Focus on where readers might go astray and where improvements can be made. Mark up the manuscript, marking especially where to ask the group to explain or summarize. Note stylistic quirks and tendencies in the writing. Look for lessons to deliver to the workshop as a whole. (DEEP PREPARATION [14])

Reread each manuscript shortly before it is workshopped (READING JUST BEFORE REVIEWING [15]).

### 9.2 Focus on the Work and the Words

One can never be sure who the readers of a manuscript will be. Many speak of the Author's intended audience, but a writer is better focused on making the manuscript as readable as possible given their intention for it. Good feedback for an Author is to describe whom the actual manuscript addresses. Readers attracted to the early parts of a manuscript should not learn later on that they are not equipped to understand or appreciate the manuscript as it unfolds.

Sometimes a writer is so focused on the material that the words on the page read to them as conveying exactly and only the intended meaning. But words can be slippery. Stephen Dobyns—fiction writer, poet, and teacher—told the story of a student in one of his classes writing a poem about a group of soldiers being sent off to war:

*It was the last night of training and the soldiers sat on their cots sharing a couple of cigarettes, handing them back and forth. The writer used the line, "We passed our butts from mouth to mouth." So clearly did the writer hold his intended meaning in his mind that he failed to read what he had written.*

—Stephen Dobyns, "Best Words, Best Order," St. Martin's Press, 1996

It's the job of the the Writers' Workshop and the Moderator in particular to read the words and notice them. During the workshop, the Moderator should pay close attention to the Reviewers' comments, and if a comment seems off base, try to find where in the manuscript that misconception could have arisen: get used to asking "could you please point out where that is in the manuscript?" The words on the page are the only remnants of the Author to reach readers; study those words carefully.

### 9.3 Lead with Questions

Don't presume if you are acting as a teacher that you should only lecture the workshop. You might have superb comments and observations, but the Reviewers will bring other talents and blind spots to the workshop—their comments and observations might not be as keen as yours, but all of them taken together are likely to be more thorough.

While preparing before the workshop, gather questions and mark places to ask about. Instead of simply asking the group to "summarize the manuscript," ask them to summarize or explain the parts that seem problematic. This also has the effect of directing the group to the words on the page instead of their memories of the piece.

By the way, small doses of lecturing are ok: don't overdo, do it well. For some Writers' Workshops it helps to include a good writer or even a professional writer to teach writing skills. In many cases a writer's skills can improve quickly when the writer knows what to notice.

#### **9.4 Find the Beating Heart**

The entire manuscript—and many of its sections, if it has them—has something to say: its *beating heart*. Ask Reviewers at some point to articulate the heart of a section and the entire piece. For many Reviewers this will be an unexpected and difficult question to answer: make them answer it.

#### **9.5 Ask some Weird Questions**

If possible throw in some weird questions that force Reviewers to think on their feet. That is, use defamiliarization to amplify the process.

#### **9.6 Listen more than Speak**

In many cases the observations made by others will open your eyes to parts of the manuscript you thought you had understood thoroughly. When you hear an unexpected and surprising comment, think of ways to follow up on it. Don't rely only on your predetermined questions but instead try to investigate slowly dawning insights.

#### **9.7 Engage the Author when Necessary**

The pattern FLY ON THE WALL [18] seems to forbid the Author speaking; but if the workshop members need to know something about the manuscript to get unstuck, ask the Author. This works best after the workshop has a few reviews behind it, but it can be used whenever needed.

#### **9.8 Lecture when Needed**

Sometimes the composition of the workshop is such that a particular paper has no one able to comment on it very much. It is rare but it happens. In this case the Moderator should be prepared to "lecture" on the entire manuscript, engaging the Reviewers when possible, and even engaging the Author if it makes sense. I had to do this once when a workshop of miscellanea included a difficult philosophical paper that no other Reviewer could fathom; because its Author was a mature Writers' Workshopper, the entire session was a discussion between him and me.

#### **9.9 Protect the Author**

Watch the Author closely during the review. Make sure some encouraging and positive things are said about the manuscript. Just as you pay attention to the Reviewers to guide the workshop, observe the Author to see whether useful information is being unearthed. If need be, ask the Author.

In a virtual workshop, try to figure out a way to observe the Author (via a secondary one-to-one video link or feature) or at least establish a way for the Author to signal distress.

#### **9.10 Be Ready to use a Heavy Hand**

Every now and then a Reviewer will be disruptive or even attack (with words) the Author. If this happens, try to get that Reviewer under control. If a gentle approach isn't effective, don't be afraid to be harsh—hesitate to go that far, but be prepared to do so. One time I had to throw a Reviewer out of the workshop.

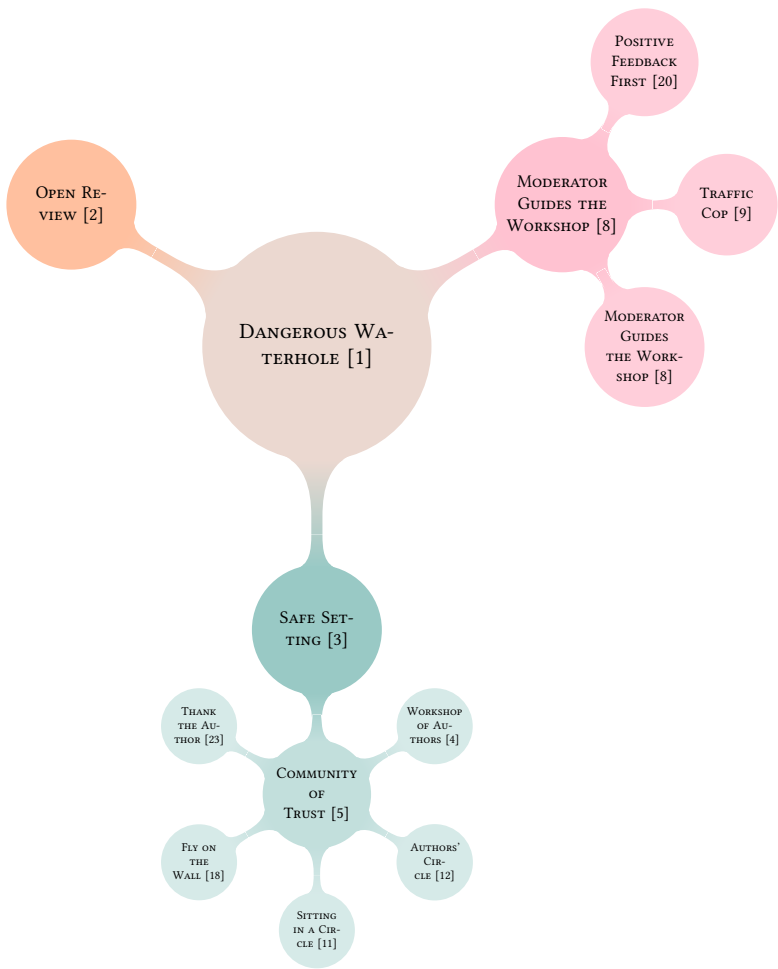
10 Writers' Workshop Mind Maps

This pattern language designs and builds a Writers' Workshop that helps Authors improve their manuscripts while safeguarding those Authors. The following sections contain mind maps for the aspects of the Writers' Workshops the patterns build.

These mind maps are constructed as generalizations of sequence diagrams or the pattern maps some use for pattern languages. Each blob is a pattern. Blobs and clusters coming off a pattern-blob are the patterns that help construct it. The colors gather together related patterns.

10.1 Dangerous Waterhole

The Writers' Workshop is a *Dangerous Waterhole* and its operation must protect the dignity and safety of each Author. Here are the patterns related to that.

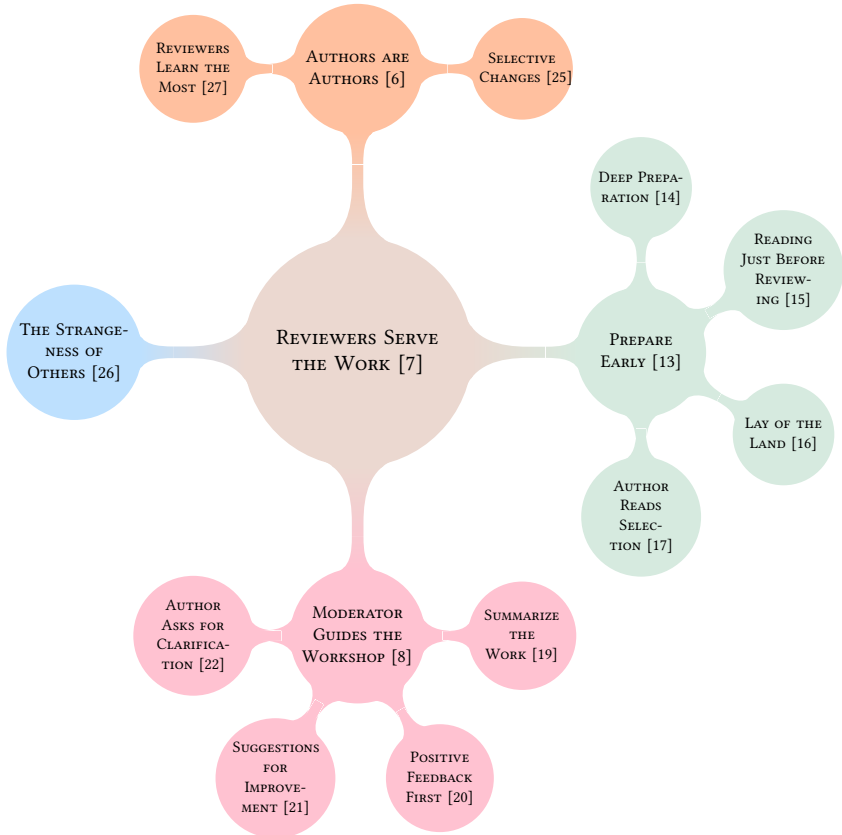


Dangerous Waterhole

|                          |                                   |                                   |                              |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| DANGEROUS WATERHOLE [1]  | OPEN REVIEW [2]                   | SAFE SETTING [3]                  | WORKSHOP OF AUTHORS [4]      |
| COMMUNITY OF TRUST [5]   | MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8] | MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8] | TRAFFIC COP [9]              |
| SITTING IN A CIRCLE [11] | AUTHORS' CIRCLE [12]              | FLY ON THE WALL [18]              | POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20] |
| THANK THE AUTHOR [23]    |                                   |                                   |                              |

10.2 Improving the Piece

The Writers' Workshop must help each Author improve their manuscript. Here are the patterns related to that.



Improving the Work

|                         |                                    |                                   |                                    |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| AUTHORS ARE AUTHORS [6] | REVIEWERS SERVE THE WORK [7]       | MODERATOR GUIDES THE WORKSHOP [8] | PREPARE EARLY [13]                 |
| DEEP PREPARATION [14]   | READING JUST BEFORE REVIEWING [15] | LAY OF THE LAND [16]              | AUTHOR READS SELECTION [17]        |
| SUMMARIZE THE WORK [19] | POSITIVE FEEDBACK FIRST [20]       | SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT [21]  | AUTHOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION [22] |
| SELECTIVE CHANGES [25]  | THE STRANGENESS OF OTHERS [26]     | REVIEWERS LEARN THE MOST [27]     |                                    |

## 11 A Tip for Everyone

One of the surprising things I learned when I entered the creative writing community was that the well-known or experienced writers who were our workshop leaders generally didn't use workshops or used them for limited purposes for specific problems. Most who didn't attend workshops said that they had friends or trusted colleagues who would read their work. In very advanced poetry workshops, I found that the author wasn't a fly on the wall, and that the workshop was more like a conversation among peers. No one was defensive; reasons for choices were discussed but never defensively. Suggestions for edits or revisions were easily passed along.

What I learned is that all the apparently heavy Writers' Workshop mechanisms were there simply to teach you how to be polite and help people.

—To Rebecca Wirfs-Brock, for shepherding this  
—For Ron Goldman, my best sideman and colleague:  
*Play It!*