

## **Advice on Setting Up/Working with a Peer Writing/Critique Group**

### **I. Have an organizational meeting or communicate by email –**

Start by sending out the writing/creative production inventory and personal goals questionnaire to get each group member thinking about their needs and goals. Folks can write about this on their own before you meet to share.

### **II. Get to know one another at the organizational meeting – don't just jump into the work**

1. *Use an Ice Breaker for getting to know each other* (if you don't already know each other): A simple one is to break up into pairs and interview each other. Then introduce the person you interviewed to the group. You can have prompts for what people should share, such as:
  - a. Talk about your favorite piece of writing or production – why do you like it?
  - b. Tell the group about the kind of writing or artistic production you are most comfortable doing and why it is so.
  - c. List 10 adjectives that describe you as a writer, artist, designer, etc; share them with the group.
2. *Set up goals for the group – consider:*
  - a. What does everyone want to get out of your group? (Refer to your personal goals/ inventory. See below.)
  - b. Decide on a set of goals for the semester and have one member of the group record and figure out how to share with the whole group (hand it out, email, create a sharable document, other?).
  - c. *Set the Logistics* – Consider how often, where, and for how long the group will meet. Decide how to communicate between meetings and how to circulate work for feedback (e-mail, handed out at prior meeting, Google drive, etc.). Set who will submit pieces first, second, etc. (Consider focusing on one project, segment, chapter, etc. at a time). Set aside at least an hour to workshop each person's piece. If the work is read or examined prior to the meeting, the group may be able to respond to two pieces per meeting. The time it takes may also fluctuate depending on the length and difficulty of the work and how "finished" it is.
  - d. Since you are working on long projects involving various stages and styles of research or production your group should decide what stage of the project the group is willing

to discuss. You might start with examining each other's proposals or some pilot work, or an articulation of the problem/issue you are addressing in your work. Think about whether you would find it helpful to submit research ideas, concept maps, outlines, etc. or would you rather discuss a more complete draft?

### **III. Guidelines for the Workshop**

- The writer/producer should circulate work ahead of time, and include the goals for the project and some questions and comments to guide readers/viewers in providing feedback. Let readers/viewers know how polished or rough the piece is and tell them what level/type of feedback you are looking for – is it at the idea level, the organizational level, the word level? Etc.
- Everyone should participate thoughtfully by reading/examining the work to be discussed ahead of time and making comments on the draft or in letter format. Group members should keep careful notes either on a paper or with page numbers/specific aspects of the work for the comments they want to make. If considering a written piece, it can be annotated electronically or on a print out. *For suggestions for how to make comments, see "Tips for Responding to Other People's Writing" below.*
- The person whose work is being discussed should set the agenda for the discussion and also spend some time talking about the goals of the project. *For suggestions see "Questions to Ponder While Evaluating Peer Writing" below.*
- The person whose work is being discussed should listen closely to recommendations, answering clarifying questions the group members may have. They should try not to be defensive. Instead, think about what is useful and what is not. Also, it works best if the author/artist saves their comments and questions until the end of the discussion. Keep in mind the participants of the group are offering *suggestions* and you do not have to take everyone's advice. If you don't agree with someone's advice, however, you should still listen and decide what you're going to do – you can keep thinking about it after the meeting is over. Resist the idea that you have to know on the spot what your next direction will be. You'll learn rather quickly which group members seem to have the best sense of what your project entails.

## Tips For Responding to Other People's Writing

1. **Say something positive.** It is just as important to know what we are doing well
2. as what we need to improve.
3. **Talk about your responses while reading/examining the work.**  
“When I read this sentence, I wondered if the paragraph was going to be about this topic.” Or “When I looked at this piece I wondered if you were inspired by X or trying to do Y.”
4. **Critique the work, not the writer or the piece not the artist.**  
Instead of telling someone they have trouble staying on topic, say something like, “This paragraph doesn’t seem to support your thesis.” Be sure to ask lots of questions of the writer. You can imagine what the correlate is in an artistic piece.
5. **Be specific.** If you make a statement, back it up with specific examples in the text or from the work.
6. **Prioritize your comments.** Start with bigger concerns—the quality of the argument, the thesis, and the structure of the paper, the form or overall effect of a piece—and then move to smaller issues like wordiness, grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.
7. **Give the writer/artist something to walk away with.** But don’t try to write the paper or change the project for the writer/artist by telling them what to say/do and how. Write out your key comments and suggestions on paper for the writer/artist to refer to later while revising.

## Questions to Consider When You Respond to Peer’s Work

*Practice peer editing/critiquing practices you learned in your classes and/or try these: Organize your comments into higher order and lower order concerns. Begin with higher order concerns. These are the large issues that may interfere with the overall meaning of the work and/or effectiveness of the work. Spend less time on lower order concerns because, though they may be distracting, these are things that typically can be caught later as work is revised.*

### Higher Order Concerns:

- What is the writer’s/artist’s position or purpose (thesis/main point/etc.)? Is it clearly communicated to the reader or observer? Point to places in the work where the position is articulated and argued or to aspects of the work that convey meaning.
- What evidence does the writer provide to support the position? Is it persuasive? Specific enough? Well-documented if from another source? Does the evidence match the points made? What aspects

of the work lead one to a particular interpretation or feeling?

- How is the piece organized? Does the writer follow a logical sequence to guide the reader through his/her reasoning? Are transitions needed? What about other organizational cues, like headings and subheadings if called for by the discipline?
- Think about the overall effectiveness of the piece. Do they accomplish their goals? If not, point to one or more areas where the writer should focus attention for the next revision or iteration.

### Lower Order Concerns:

- Are the “mechanics” correct, e.g. sentence structure, sentence syntax (the phrasing and word choice), grammar, punctuation, citations, and, of course, spelling?
- Are there stylistic problems you find annoying?

## Personal Inventory and Personal Goals Questionnaire

*These questions are meant to help you get a better sense of yourself as a writer or artist and the goals you have for your project.*

1. What are your greatest strengths as a writer or artist? What do other people normally praise about your style?
2. What is your favorite kind of writing or artistic creation to do?
3. What are your biggest challenges as a writer or artist? What kinds of critiques have you received from professors, friends, and others who have read or viewed your work?
4. In what contexts and for what audiences and purposes do you produce your best work? Are there some types of writing or work you’re more comfortable doing than others?
5. If you could change one thing about your writing, artistic skill, or your process, what would it be?
6. Have you changed as a writer or artist over the past five years? If so, how? And what helped bring about that change?
7. What are your goals as a writer or artist? (This answer can include the kinds of writing or art you would like to do, the kinds of audiences you would like to reach, the skills you would like to master, and so on.)
8. What kinds of things do you think a writing/peer critique group will help you do better?
9. How do you think you can help others in your group?
10. What, for you, would be the best possible outcome of your involvement with this group?

Adapted from The Writing Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.  
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>