

MAKING THE MOST OF WRITING WORKSHOPS

BY CAMILLE DUNGY

WHAT can workshop participants do to create an open, equitable, encouraging, and positively challenging workshop experience for themselves? Our time in writing communities is important. The past few years have made that abundantly clear. If we have the opportunity to work together (in person or virtually), we should be conscientious about how to best use that precious time. Here are some of my tips on how to do this:

Have fun! Prepare to enjoy the experience of your workshop. Search for moments of joy, grace, and humor in the conversation. Let these buoy you through the more challenging parts. Ask your fellow writers where *they* find moments of joy, beauty, humor, gratitude, pleasure in your work. Too often we focus on the difficult and painful, on the parts that “could use some work” or that cause frustration. Help yourself and your cohort communicate pleasure as frequently—perhaps even more frequently—than

they communicate pain. Last night I watched *The Tragedy of Macbeth* starring Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand. *Tragedy* is in the title. It’s not supposed to be a barrel of laughs. But sometimes I found myself smiling or laughing out loud. Shakespeare is great at that kind of emotional layering, and the film added texture to the play’s tonal and sensual variations. What a joy it was—and how instructive—to look for joy even in one of the canon’s darkest texts. Find ways to have fun. Notice your own pleasure and the pleasure of others, and you will be well on your way to becoming a stronger, more compassionate writer, critic, and human being.

If your workshop experience will surround you with new faces, don’t be nervous about saying hi to people—even the famous writers—and don’t be afraid to ask questions. We are all humans. All of us, even the famous writers, have moments of staring at the blank page, not knowing what to do next. The workshop environment is a space to help people who value this craft. If we’ve chosen to devote our time to such an experience, it’s highly likely that we are invested in this fundamental project. Be nice. Initiate conversations. Get the books signed by the writers you admire. People are sometimes too afraid to ask a question that feels elemental, and they risk missing the opportunity to hear the guidance they most need. Remember: Every piece we write requires new approaches to

elemental questions. In a workshop environment you have an opportunity to crowdsource solutions that might take you years to discover on your own. If a question pops into your head and you think *that’s too simple*, ask it anyway: “What do you mean when you say these line breaks are working well?” “Can you give an example of what you mean by cliché?” “Why am I the only person turning in poems that are centered on the page?” You may be surprised at how exciting the seemingly simple questions can be to explore.

Push past the small talk and into the nitty gritty. Workshops are intimate spaces where we come to better understand the ways others think and feel. Not just *what* they think and feel, but also *why* they think this way and *how* you have (or have not yet) constructed your piece to bring them to this place. So if someone says, “I think this line is great. Don’t lose it,” follow up. Ask them *why* they think this and what is happening inside and around that line that helps them connect. If you want a few specific questions to encourage your readers to move speedily into these deeper lines of inquiry, here are a few I’ve found helpful:

Can you describe the voice or tone of this piece and how it functions?

What are the ways the form/structure of this piece are aiding the work it attempts, and what do you think that work is?

What are some things this author repeats and why?

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How can/does the piece play with shifts between active and passive voice?

What does the title teach you?

Can you picture the colors used in this piece, and how did the use of color influence how you read these pages?

Are there other sensory details you would suggest the author consider in revision?

What is or what can this piece be doing with punctuation?

You can ask questions like these at the beginning of a workshop session to help guide discussion toward concerns you might be having about your writing. They are also great follow-up questions to help you can receive more in-depth responses to your writing. There are workshop models in which writers are encouraged to stay silent the whole time. One reason for this mode of workshoping is so that writers can make the space to absorb feedback rather than working up responses in the moment. Another reason is so that writers can experience the sort of responses their readers might have encountering work in a bookstore or submission pile, without authorial mediation and explanation. But remember that this is your workshop. This is your opportunity to understand both your own work and people's responses to it. Even if it means pulling someone aside to ask a follow-up question after the formal discussion has concluded, I stand behind my suggestion that you should make space to seek the kind of information you need.

Be as specific as you can with your questions. Specific questions allow for more grounded responses. As with most things in good writing, the universal is most often accessed through the specific rather than the other way around. If the group talks about punctuation strategies for one piece, you and everyone in the group will have learned things about punctuation that can be applied and reframed in many other circumstances. If you never broach the issue of punctuation, you will have missed the opportunity to learn about

how punctuation informs the pacing, legibility, tone, style, and appearance of the piece being critiqued as well as any other piece to which similar questions might apply. If it makes sense to do so, ask specific follow-up questions about things said to other people too: "I love what's been said so far about how this poem's em dashes guide the pace of reading. I wonder if we could discuss the line breaks as well." This can mean that you can have access to answers that more than one person will be able to apply to their own work.

Remember that advice to others may not feel immediately applicable to you but may become useful one day. Always listen deeply and empathetically. Fundamentally, writing well is about communicating well. There are a lot of different ways we can do this, and it never hurts to learn from others' styles. You can even learn something from the person in the workshop who never seems to be answering the same question you asked (or who answers the questions in ways that put you off). Perhaps what they can teach you is what kind of reader you are not interested in accommodating. In some ways the point of the workshop is to teach you how to internalize the insights of other readers so that eventually you can ask yourself a series of questions, intuit a variety of possible responses, and construct the solutions that works best for you. This works best if you have a wide range of feedback. You don't want everyone in your workshop to be a yes-person. You don't want everyone in your workshop to love everything you write. And you don't want to love everything about what everyone else writes. Rather than asking how to please everyone (you can't!) or worrying about universal "relatability," find ways to understand what it means for some readers to be more accommodated by a text than others. Sometimes formulating your answer to why you don't want to accommodate one reader's suggestions is the push you need to help you learn what you *do* want your work

to accomplish. Learning and growing happens as much from when we are challenged as from when we are praised. It is important to experience both in your workshop and to learn what to digest and what to dismiss and why.

Set out to make at least two connections that might last beyond the workshop. Have you seen *Top Gun: Maverick* yet? One of the moments of joy I gleaned from that movie was a lifelong connection that becomes fundamental to the success of a key character. This community of writers is surprisingly small, and it is a wonderful thing to connect with people who will challenge you and encourage you during the time you are in workshop and for many years after. It's a lot easier to find these people if you are open to building community from the start.

Drink lots of water. I'm serious. It's important to stay healthy when you want to be part of a healthy environment. In many workshop settings, particularly the endurance feats of conferences or summer retreats but also for less formal gatherings with fellow writers, we can be overwhelmed by stimulation and triggers. For some of us this means drinking more caffeine or alcohol as a coping mechanism. For others, we forget to hydrate, or we don't eat the kinds or quantities of foods that truly nourish us (anyone want some potato chips?). Then we end up in workshop with a headache, a foggy brain, a fluttery heart, and a sense of anxiety and discomfort that gets in the way of listening and participating fully. Pause to drink water throughout the day and throughout your workshop. Keep healthy snacks like fruit nearby. Our bodies and our minds are directly connected. Be kind to one and you are often well on the way to being kind to the other.

Above all, in your workshops make it a point to take risks, to be willing to advocate for and nurture yourself, and to truly and carefully listen to yourself and to your fellow writers. Doing these things will continually reward you on the page as well as in your life. ∞