

Developing Effective Writing Response Groups

(Adapted from Inside Out, Kirby, Kirby & Liner, 2004)

1. **The teacher's response to student writing establishes the ground rules for the responses of all others.** Your appropriate modeling is the key to effective response groups. Whether orally or in writing, how you handle the words of your students will signal to your student how they are to talk and respond to each others' writings.
2. **Establish a "No Hunting" rule for your responses and enforce that rule with students' responses to each others' work.** The rule basically means no cheap shots at writers as they try to express their ideas. Avoiding judgmental and unkind remarks toward writers must be a value in an effective response group or workshop situation. Similarly, gratuitous and insincere or inaccurate comments about students' writings are not helpful.
3. **Appropriate response generally begins by trying to understand what the writer is trying to say.** Summarizing the piece or restating the message or story lets the writer listen to what the audience has made of the piece. Talk about the piece as a whole. "I like the order of events," or "I like the way you wrap up this piece."
4. **Finding things to like in the piece is important.** Point very specifically to things in the piece that work: "I like this opening," or "I like this verb right here." Point to where you think the piece is going well: "I like the voice in this passage," or "Nice transition here."
5. **Making suggestions for how the writer can elaborate on what is already written is probably the most helpful response posture.** Rather than suggesting that the writer make changes or correct errors, find places in the piece that have potential for more development. Through a series of questions to the writer, draw out elaboration possibilities. "Is there any more to this story?" "What happens next?" "I'd like to hear more about this." "I'd like to see and hear more of this character."
6. **The reader's questions and voiced musings are also very helpful.** "I wonder..." "What if ...?" "If this were my piece, I might..." "I notice..."
7. **Question the writer about what he or she plans to do next with the piece.** "What will you work on next?" "Where do you see this piece going from here?" "Is this piece related to any other thing that you've written?"
8. **Give the writer the chance to ask the responder questions.** The writer will no doubt want to clarify response comments, ask advice, and seek counsel about what to do when returning to the piece.
9. **Always focus on the piece rather than on the writer.** It's easy to be sidetracked by the emotional content of the piece. Don't be tempted to become the writer's analyst, priest, or rabbi. Continue to focus on HOW the experience is rendered in writing rather than on the experience itself.