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# MFA WORKBOOK

WRITING TIPS FROM MASTER OF FINE ARTS PROGRAMS AND CANDIDATES

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## THE ART OF FEEDBACK-GIVING FOR WRITERS

BY MARY MANGUAL

I would estimate, conservatively, that two insightful peer criticisms I received in my workshop course last fall saved me two to three months of wrestling with the novel manuscript I plan to use as my MFA thesis. Without external feedback (and not for lack of trying), it takes me about a month between writing and revising to come to clear-minded conclusions about the state of a draft on my own.

Two to three months is a lot of acceleration for the relatively short amount of time it takes to write a feedback letter. That level of progress was only possible, however, because all the writers involved were conscientious about their role in creating and maintaining a respectful and supportive feedback-giving environment.

Writing well and giving good feedback are two different maneuvers; they shouldn't be functions of the same proverbial muscle. When you write feedback for a writers' group-type setting, you enter your voice simultaneously into two intimate spaces: one where your words influence the chemistry of the group, and another where your words enter directly into another writer's artistic process.

You could visualize the psychological landscape like a house with a living room and a private office connected by

a short hall. Your written feedback puts you in the office with the writer, interjecting your voice into their mid-project train of thought. What you say in that space has the potential to help them identify where they are in the course of their work and assess directions they might take next.

Whatever you say, your voice carries down the hall. When your words have a charged tone, intentional or not, those in the living room can hear you. Your feedback-giving style can have real consequences, positive and negative, for the net productivity of the group.

### "GOOD" FEEDBACK

The proof of good feedback is whether, when the author returns to their desk, they know what to do to move their work forward. "It's perfect, good job" doesn't help them do that. Neither will an exhaustive laundry list of every minor thing they did wrong.

### A TWO-STEP APPROACH FOR WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY

Sometimes you'll read drafts that just throw you for a loop. I recently stumbled into a two-step approach that's been working for me. Feel free to adopt or adapt; no method is one-size-fits-all.



Before I begin, I audit my qualifications as a reader: Is the author writing in a genre with which I'm less familiar? Am I the intended audience? If not, what damage could I do by speaking for them? Step one is to write what I think of as a "how to read this" paragraph that gives the author a brief outline of where I'm coming from and how my background as a reader and a person should affect the stock they place in my observations. As step two, instead of manufacturing opinions I'm not qualified to defend (but will stick in the author's head regardless), I offer a detailed account of what I read as the key tensions, priorities, and structural dynamics of the text.

In most manuscripts, there's an element of the style, storytelling, or structure that strikes me as an exceptional strength or source of potential that the author

has working to their advantage and may choose to emphasize in future drafts. Often as a Step 2A, I end my critique with a brief analysis of one of those elements. Pointing out moves someone made that other writers wouldn't have considered is a great way to remind someone they're writing a piece no one else can put on the page and reinforce the main takeaway: "Keep going."

### **IT'S EASY TO SAY, "CUT THE ALIENS." INSTEAD, ASK, "WHY THE ALIENS?"**

In critiques of my work, I've found that often, the most useful feedback provides a glimpse into what others read as the main features and themes of a draft. If I have a clear picture of what others read, I can compare what I set out to write to what I actually put on paper.

As a general rule, I don't suggest plot or character changes. I trust that the author's sense of what's essential to the text exists in some form, even if it is not yet evident in the draft itself. Telling an author to remove a character, alter a major plot point, or stop using a stylistic ploy assumes a more simplistic revision process than the one they'll actually face. Whatever your genre as a creative writer, the elements of craft are never isolated within a piece. Tipping one domino will make others fall, and, for all you know, preemptively removing a subpar element instead of engaging the author's reason for it could cause the manuscript to lose power it might've otherwise gained in later drafts.

So instead, try to describe what you noticed about the way all the interconnected parts came together. Contextualize your reservations about, say, the draft's smattering of overly flowery descriptions, within the effect that element had against the stronger aspects of the work. The logic behind the impulse to make a blunt suggestion often gives the author more to work with than the suggestion itself.

### **WRITING FEEDBACK MEANS WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE OF ONE**

Across various genres of poetry and prose, "the audience" is a plurality often connected by common interest, but inevitably differing in others. In your creative work, you may even find yourself going through a cost-benefit analysis to weigh whether including a certain character, poetic device, argument, etc. is worth rubbing a subset of your

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intended audience the wrong way. Audience-awareness is a critical skill and no less for the genre of feedback. Just as you wouldn't write to people who read fantasy novels the same way you would to people who read business books, you shouldn't address an audience of one the same way you would an audience of many.

Say you're in a writers group open to all skill levels. The kind of nit-picky advice that would be helpful and appropriate to give someone working on a third draft with a history of participation in writing conferences and prior workshops would be paralyzing for someone showing their work in a workshop-type setting for the first time. If you know where your feedback lands in the overall arc of the person's journey as a writer, it's OK to discuss the deliberations behind the advice you're offering. For example: "It wasn't entirely clear to me why you did [such and such], but I'm hesitant to ask you to focus on that now because my instinct is that once you do [such and which], you'll have a clear view of where [such and such] falls in the big picture."

As a fiction writer, I'm prone to novels. Novels, in turn, are prone to length and complexity. There's a lot of feeling it out and, as I've been told by creative writing instructors who've used the patterns they've noticed in their work to explain their feedback to me, a lot of variation from novel to novel. The process that enables you to write one may be completely unyielding when it comes to the next. Because I haven't developed the instinct to distinguish between, for example, when to enforce order and when to let the story take shape organically, the insights of writers who've experienced the different ways the novel-writing process unfolds, and sometimes folds altogether, are invaluable to me.

That's not to say that differentiating experience levels across a feedback circle will necessarily precipitate better outcomes. It's hard to keep competitive impulses from invading the already vulnerable and sometimes tense collaborative space. Though I realize it might sound extreme, I'd argue that ham-stringing an author with anxiety in a feedback-giving/feedback-receiving setting can function as a form of gatekeeping. When you're handling something as intimate and representative of a person as a draft in-progress, there's no room for "I don't care if you take this the wrong way." Your skill in the art of feedback is directly proportional to the extent to

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which you are humble about what you don't know and actively skeptical about what you think you do.

Being honest about your blind spots is especially important when someone's writing from a racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural background other than your own. Some readers have no trouble finding books that affirm and celebrate the communities, cultures, and geographies that surround their day-to-day lives. For others, insufficient representation in literature keeps reading from being as profound a communicative experience as it can be. As I'm sure is true of many of us, I was drawn to writing because of books that put words to experiences I'd have otherwise assumed were impossible to articulate. If I can be part of facilitating those moments for other readers, even if only by supporting another writer in their journey, it's worth the humility and effort.

In the moment, writing can feel like a lonely, even isolating activity. But the distance between the lonely act of writing and the identity of "being a writer" is the distance between the place where you write and the place where you share what you wrote. You might write alone, but the artistic value of writing is in what it communicates to others. For me, "being a writer" is an identity forged not only when I write, but when I seek community with fellow writers. An MFA program is one means to that end, but far from the only one. **WD**

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