

# **Graduate Student Writing Workshop**

## **What You Want, What You Get, and Rules of the Game**

**September 19 2013**

**Prepared by Jean E. Wallace**

### **“Rules of the Game”**

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# GRADUATE STUDENT WRITING WORKSHOP “RULES OF THE GAME”

September 19 2013

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Adapted from the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

## Responding to Other People’s Writing

Responding to other people’s writing can be difficult. Here are a few tips to get you started:

- **Say something positive about the piece.** Even if a piece of writing needs a lot of work, there is usually something good that can be pointed out—the seed of a great idea, a particularly well-turned phrase, the beginnings of a good organizational structure, or a thorough understanding of the material.
- **Critique the writing, not the writer.** Instead of saying, “You aren’t very good at conclusions,” say, “This conclusion didn’t really work for me.”
- **Speak from your own perspective,** using phrases like, “My reaction to this was...” or “I found this to be...” rather than “this part of the paper is...”. Acknowledge that there may be a variety of opinions about the piece of writing.
- **Remember that you are in a writing group to help one another improve.** It does not help the writer if you see problems with a piece of writing but don’t mention them because you’re afraid of hurting his/her feelings. Usually a writer would rather hear about a problem from the friendly, supportive members of his/her writing group than submit a finished draft with problems and receive a poor grade, have a journal article or grant proposal rejected, be criticized by an advisor, etc.
- **Talk about the way you responded as you were reading.** Sometimes it’s easier and more helpful to say, “When I read this sentence, I wasn’t sure if the paragraph was going to be about this or about that” than it is to say, “This sentence was confusing.” It can be helpful to have the whole group read the first paragraph and then predict the rest of the paper before reading further. It will help the writer to know what you expected when you began the paper and how those expectations changed as you read.
- **Be specific.** Instead of just saying, “The organization needs work,” try to figure out where and why the organization broke down. Perhaps you could suggest a different order for the ideas in the paper or think of the kind of transition that might help make the jumps between ideas more logical.
- **Whatever you say, imagine yourself on the receiving end of the comment.** If this were your work, what would be helpful to you? How would you want people to provide you with criticism?
- Prioritize and sort your comments for the writer. What interfered the most when you read the paper, or what was the hardest part of the paper to understand? Sometimes it is helpful to break down your comments into a list of “big things” and a list of “little things” that the writer could do to improve.
- **Tailor your comments to the writer and his/her needs.** Ask what kind of feedback would be helpful and try to provide that. Ask the writer what sections s/he is most worried about. Avoid suggesting hours and hours of revision for writing that you know must be submitted the same day as your meeting. You can still point out bigger problems, but focus on what can be done between the meeting and the due date.
- **Write out key points that you want to share with the writer.** This will help you remember them and also provide a written record of your feedback.

## What You Want: Requesting Feedback from the Group

It is sometimes helpful to let the group know specifically what you would like feedback on. By providing the group with such information it may help the writing group provide you with helpful feedback. Some ideas of possible pieces of information that you may write on a cover sheet for your piece of writing might be as follows:

- How much work have you done on this piece of writing already? Is this a first draft, second draft, etc.?
- What kind of feedback would be most helpful to you at this stage?
- What kind of feedback, if any, have you received from others about this project?
- Is there a specific part or parts of the paper that you would like the group to focus on?
- What do you think are the biggest strengths and weaknesses of this piece of writing right now?
- When do you need to turn this piece of writing in? How much time do you have to work on it between now and then?
- Do you want us to complete a review sheet for general, overall feedback?

## What You Get: Feedback from the Group

Sometimes it's hard to pull together your impressions of a piece of writing and present them in specific, constructive ways. Here are some ideas of what you can think about as you are reviewing someone's piece of writing:

- When I read the introduction (or first paragraph), I thought this piece would be about ...
- After reading this piece, I realized that your main point was ...
- After reading this piece, I still wondered about ...
- Did any part of this piece seem like it didn't fit, or like it was unnecessary "filler"?
- Did any part of this piece seem underdeveloped, or like it might need an example, explanation, or quotation to make the meaning more clear?
- Was there any part of the piece in which you felt a little lost? What might have helped you figure out what was going on?
- If this were your piece of writing, what would you do to change it?
- To me, the most interesting idea in this piece was ...
- To me, the best-written part of this piece was ...

In addition, you might find the "Making Sense of Research Articles" handout helpful in reading others' work as well as the "Manuscript Review Sheet".

## Reacting to Other People's Responses to Your Writing

Sometimes it is difficult to hear other people respond to your work, even if they have the best of intentions. Here are some tips that might help you react to other people's critiques in a positive way:

- **Remember that your writing group is trying to help you become a better writer.** Anything the group members say about your work is designed to help you make it stronger, more readable, and more effective.
- **Put yourself in the critic's shoes.** Remember when you've struggled to respond to someone else's work without hurting their feelings or being "too nice." Understand that this process is sometimes hard for both the reader and the writer.
- **Keep in mind that every reader is different.** What one reader finds confusing, another might find crystal clear. It is ultimately your writing, and you will have to decide which bits of feedback to act upon and which to ignore.
- **Try not to be defensive.** It's easy to think, "What do they know?" or "They just didn't get it," but keep in mind that while one reader's response may be the result of that reader's own misunderstanding, if several readers agree that a section is confusing or implies something you didn't intend, the problem probably lies with the writing and not with the readers.
- **Keep it in perspective.** Remember that a criticism of one piece of writing is not an indictment of you as a writer or scholar more generally, nor is it a critique of your worth as a person. It is simply a response to words that you wrote on one occasion.
- **Listen to praise** with the same intensity that you listen to criticism. Often, writers can obsess over critical comments and fail to hear all of the good things said about their writing. We can be our own worst critics and harshest detractors. Shut off that filter that says, "They don't really mean that," and accept sincere praise at face value.
- **Keep track of the kinds of feedback that you receive again and again.** Do readers often suggest changes in organization of your work or logic of your arguments? Do your conclusions usually seem to need work – do they simply summarize the results or do they take the findings to another level? Do people frequently tell you that they don't understand words that you use? Do readers often indicate that they find your sentences hard to follow? Do readers praise your clarity? Do they regularly tell you that your introductions are interesting? Use these observations to identify patterns of problems and strengths in your writing.

**MAKING SENSE OF RESEARCH ARTICLES**  
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- 1. RESEARCH QUESTION:** What is the research question to be addressed by this study? Is it clearly stated? It is presented early enough that you know what the paper is going to be about? Does the author seem to do what they say they will do in the remainder of the paper?
- 2. PLAN OF ATTACK:** How does the author propose to answer the research question? Usually, this is stated early on in the paper and then expanded upon later. Is it clear how they're going to do this? Is the argument and plan presented in a logical fashion? Does it seem to you that what they propose will actually answer their research question?
- 3. RELEVANCE:** How is this question related to other important issues? Is it sociologically important? Does it make an important contribution to the literature empirically and theoretically?
- 4. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE:** Does the review of the literature seem relevant and complete? Do you feel you've gained an adequate background of the area to understand the questions or hypotheses being posed? Does the author draw logical conclusions from the review (e.g., they often identify deficiencies or gaps they hope to address)?
- 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:** Is a theory or theories presented? How innovative or insightful are the ideas underlying the paper? Is the theory/theories stated in a testable form, that is do they explicitly state their hypotheses? If not explicitly stated, is it clear what their hypotheses are? Do they actually state the hypotheses they state or imply? Do they adequately test the theory being presented (i.e., is there a good fit between the theoretical framework they present and the empirical model they test or are there any missing links?)?
- 6. DATA AND METHODS:** Are the data and methods used in this study appropriate for testing the hypotheses? Is there a good fit between theory, methods and analyses?
  - Sample:** Is the source of the data clearly and completely described? Does the sample seem appropriate for answering the research question? Are there certain people who are included or excluded who should not be? Does the sample seem adequate for generalizations?
  - Data Collection:** What methods were used to collect the data? Does the data set include all of the variables needed to adequately test the theory and hypotheses? Are there specific variables included or excluded that should not be?
  - Measures:** Are the key concepts in the hypotheses measured? Is there evidence for the reliability and validity of the measured used?
  - Data Analysis:** Are the statistical procedures described? Do they seem appropriate for the hypotheses they want to test? Are there different types of analyses they should have done instead? Is the data analysis well done, thorough and clearly presented?
- 7. RESULTS:** What are the results of the analysis? Do the results actually test the hypotheses? Can you understand and read the tables?
- 8. DISCUSSION:** How do the results link to the author's research question, theory, hypotheses and findings? Does the author attempt to explain findings that are not consistent with their predictions?
- 9. CONCLUSIONS:** What are the major conclusions reached by the author? Do you agree with the author's conclusions or would you interpret the results differently?
- 10. LIMITATIONS:** Does the author offer limitations of the study or qualifications about the conclusions? Are there any others? Does the author discuss the implications of this study for future research? What are the implications (e.g., for theory, research design, the substantive area)?
- 11. "RICH BIT":** What is the "rich bit" of this article? What would you tell someone is the reason they should read this article? What is the one thing that you learned about this topic that you did not know before?
- 12. "FATAL FLAWS":** Are there any fatal flaws in this article? Is there any aspect of this paper that makes you seriously doubt the quality of this paper and/or research?

# Writing Workshop Reviewer Sheet

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When I read the introduction (or first paragraph), I thought this piece of writing would be about ...

After reading this piece, I realized that your main point was ...

After reading this piece, I still wondered about ...

To me, the most interesting idea in this piece was ...

To me, the best-written part of this piece was ...

Did any part of this piece seem like it didn't fit, or like it was unnecessary "filler"?

Did any part of this piece seem underdeveloped, or like it might need an example, explanation, or quotation to make the meaning more clear?

Was there any part of the piece in which you felt a little lost? What might have helped you figure out what was going on?

If this were your piece of writing, what would you do to change it?