

WORKSHOPS: PAPER 1

A critic can only review the book he has read, not the one which the writer wrote. — Mignon McLaughlin

We will be conducting in-class workshops on selected student drafts. If your draft is one of those selected, I will post your draft on our website, and every other class member will read your draft and write you a Reader's Letter (details below) before the workshop class meeting. Then during the workshop, you will have the opportunity to talk with a crucial part of your audience who will offer feedback, discuss strategies for revision, talk through ideas, and help reflect on the material and assignment.

In academe, when you submit a proposal for funding, or an essay for publication, that piece of writing is assigned to a particular reviewer or editor. That individual is then responsible for presenting your writing and ideas to other reviewers/editors for discussion and feedback. Again, this is part of how research is made public! To mirror that approach in our class, we will have a student “moderators” who will run the draft workshops. The moderators are responsible for opening the class discussion and helping elicit classmates' feedback. I will take a backseat in the workshop. Though I'll offer comments, the moderators will be directing the discussion.

HOW IT WORKS:

Once your drafts are turned in, I'll choose two drafts from your class for us to workshop. If you absolutely do not want your draft to be workshopped, please note that in your cover letter—but remember, workshops are a great place to get additional feedback. I will choose drafts that I think show particularly representative strengths and weaknesses on the assignment. The authors of the two selected drafts will serve as moderators for one another.

GUIDELINES FOR WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION:

Before the workshop, everyone will read the drafts to be workshopped and write a Reader's Letter to each of the authors. You will post these on our course website for the authors to download. Please bring print outs of the drafts to be workshopped, as well as the Reader's Letters to class to guide the discussion. If you are a moderator, you don't need to do a Reader's Letter for your own draft, but you should still do one for the other draft.

In class, we'll want to follow some protocols to ensure a friendly, collaborative—not harsh—atmosphere. It's a scary thing to put your work out there for others to see, especially when it's not yet a finished product, so please be conscious of that as you respond to your peers' work. That said, being overly nice and so not providing critical feedback is totally unhelpful. Try to cultivate the following habits:

- Offer criticisms as reader-responses, not judgments. Rather than, “This is hopelessly confused,” say, “I got lost here”; rather than, “This is just plain wrong,” say, “I'm not yet persuaded here because...”
- Whenever possible, use the language of the assignment prompt or those from our class work so we can continue to establish a vocabulary for talking about writing together (i.e., analytical question, thesis, evidence, significance, value claims, etc.).
- Don't offer a general, all-encompassing criticism, but point to particular places in the draft where you feel the problem occurring. Be as specific as possible.
- Try to judge the weaker parts of the draft by the standard of the stronger parts (“The paper does X well here, but comparatively less well here...”)
- ***Address your comments in class to the author and to the moderator, not to me***, even though we'll agree that the author won't respond in the first 10 minutes of the workshop.

IF YOUR DRAFT IS BEING WORKSHOPPED:

Prepare for the workshop by sketching out the kind of feedback you'd most benefit from. Are there things you want to ask your readers? Specific elements in your paper that you want to discuss? These may be the same things you indicated in your draft cover letter, or they may be new questions. In the workshop, just listen for the first several minutes of discussion, rather than responding to each comment right away. This allows you to absorb feedback without interference, and to really hear what's being said. Your moderator will invite you into the discussion after about 10 minutes. At this point, you can ask questions of the class, pitch possible revisions, or ask what your classmates have done to resolve challenges in their own papers.

IF YOU'RE MODERATING THE WORKSHOP:

Each draft will receive ~20 minutes of discussion time. This is a very low-key job. Your job isn't to "teach," or to be the dominant speaker about the draft, but to facilitate the conversation—soliciting feedback from the rest of the class, asking questions to enable the discussion. (Basically, you're just helping to keep things moving, so that I can recede into the background a little bit.) One strategy would be to address specific elements—evidence, analytical question, thesis, etc.—and ask the class how they're working, what they have to say to the writer about the elements etc. Another strategy might be to guide the discussion using the format of the Reader's Letter.

Open the discussion on a positive note—ask the class what they admired or appreciated most about the paper, what they thought worked especially well, and why. That's not to be "nice," but to sincerely show the writer what s/he is doing well, and to give him/her a solid sense of the foundation s/he will be building from through revision. This is *crucial*. Next, ask some class members to recount what they found as the focus question and thesis. Is there general agreement on this? Invite the author into the discussion after about 10 minutes. The rest of the workshop can be a dialogue between the writer and the rest of the class.

READER'S LETTER INSTRUCTIONS PAPER 1:

Print out each draft. As you read, please mark comments and highlights on the draft itself. Bring this to class for discussion. Write a Reader's Letter to each author and post to the class website; if it would be helpful to the author, also attach a scan of the draft with your notes. Bring copies of the materials to class for discussion.

Type a Reader's Letter (~1 page, single-spaced; **see Style Guide**) for each draft addressed to the author in which you discuss the following points or questions. In your letter, point to specific sentences and paragraphs (which will be numbered) whenever possible; at a *minimum*, you should have at least 4 specific references to spots in the essay.

- 1) **Focus Question/Thesis:** First, in your own words, say what you think this paper is about. (What is its topic, analytical question, argument, thesis?)
 - i) Where specifically is it first stated/implied (e.g., P2 third sentence and P3 first sentence)?
 - ii) Is the thesis arguable?
 - iii) Does the draft suggest how readers might disagree with the argument?
 - iv) Are there sources that provide counterevidence?
 - v) How might the thesis be clarified/focused for readers?
- 2) **Motive:** In your own words, say what you think the author's motive is.
 - i) How does the writer establish the significance/motive/value of this paper? Is there a specific place in the text (e.g., P2 third sentence and P3 first sentence)?
 - ii) Does the paper feel like an end in itself or does it generate (or have the potential to generate) a larger insight?
- 3) **Assumptions/claims/definitions:** Are there any terms or ideas which are not yet fully explained in the essay (e.g., virulence, malaria, bednets, symptoms, adaptation, etc) that are needed to understand the argument?
- 4) **Evidence/Analysis:** How effectively does the author handle the elements of evidence and analysis?

- i) Any suggestion for the author on which evidence needs more analysis?
 - ii) Where more evidence (and which could strengthen the argument)?
 - iii) Are there sources that provide counterevidence?
- 5) **The Fine Print:** are there any required pieces of the assignment that are missing, or format that is not meeting the assignment guidelines? Briefly note these for the author. Because this is a draft, it may be that the author simply hasn't polished the paper—and that's okay. But just in case the author has forgotten an aspect, this is a chance to point it out before the revision.

A **helpful** Reader's Letter will be specific in its discussion (again, refer to particular paragraphs, claims, sentences; make concrete suggestions) and constructive in its tone. An **unhelpful** Reader's Letter will be either harsh in its tone ("I totally disagree with your argument; it's unclear and I don't think you know what you're talking about") or really short and superficial ("This is a great draft and with a little bit of polishing you'll have a great paper!"). **You will get more out of the workshop as a respondent**—and so will the authors who get your letters —if you put effort into this exercise.

SAMPLE READER'S LETTER #1: This example is not a good reader's letter. It's far too short and non-specific to actually provide the author with any guidance.

Dear Stewie,

This is awesome. I think you pretty much nailed it. You look at the text and find all the quotes that show your best points. You used sources and did a good job with them. They back up your points and help you with your motive. I like your transitions. Maybe work on the flow so the readers see where you're going with your argument.

Peter

SAMPLE READER'S LETTER #2: This example is rather short, but has many qualities of a good reader's letter. Giving useful feedback to a piece of writing is not dependent on the field of study!

Dear Agent Gibbs,

The ideas you present in your draft about the necessity of murder ballads in society to serve as outlets for people's own murderous thoughts are very interesting. In particular, your analysis of "Knoxville Girl" in ¶3, wherein you connect the reference to Sunday as a reference to God and use it to argue that therefore murder is "not only a crime against society, but a crime against God himself" is written clearly, logically, and analytically. In my opinion, it is easily the strongest paragraph in your essay.

I feel that your main problem is in maintaining unity among the various ideas you approach in your explication. Your motive is apparent early -- you wished to explore why Eminem is so controversial. I found several statements that each seem to serve as theses; in some sense, the way you approach the comparative analysis, by focusing closely on so many songs, lends the impression that each paragraph has its own independent thesis. I eventually decided that, since you begin and end your essay with Eminem, your thesis revolves around him using his music as a vent, which is in turn misunderstood by readers (as stated in sentences 5 and 6 of the 1st ¶). If you make this stronger and clearer in the introduction, throughout the body, and in the conclusion, you're well on your way to a good paper.

You're at your best in your individual analysis of ideas. Now if you can draw connections between the ideas in each paragraph, linking them together with transitions and a stronger thesis, the impression generated by the paper as a whole will be much more powerful. In addition, focus more on Eminem -- you're clearly much more interested in his work than in the other songs.

Hope this helps,
Ziva

SAMPLE READER'S LETTER #3: This is an example of a good reader's letter. If you received a letter like this, can you see what sorts of changes you could make?

Dear Rusty-

I think you've done a good job getting to a specific focus question and then really digging into the research to try to find an answer. As I understand it, you are asking why, in industrialized countries, urban centers have a higher incidence of TB in comparison to the overall national TB rate. I can see why you saw the apparent contradiction of high levels of TB in Westernized countries (by the way, did you look at the US, Netherlands, and France?), so it made sense to me that your paper would attempt to look for a specific cause unique to urban areas. I think you answer this question by concluding that the major factor is immigrants coming into cities with undetected positive PPDs, but that there are other issues, such as crowding and poverty, that also play into the increased rate of TB. You've done a good job outlining the question and thesis in your paper, but it would be helpful to the reader for you to make them really clear in your abstract as well; you've stated your question but not the thesis.

One thing that I noticed was that your writing was centered especially on the evidence; you didn't have a lot of analysis (see paragraphs 4-8 especially). Your paper would be strengthened if you could spell out your conclusions and utilize the evidence to back up your argument, not compose it. One way to do this is by linking conclusions from articles. For example, "*paraphrase from article X*" helps depict why "*paraphrase from article Y*" hold true, then you go on with your analysis. I think analysis is a lot easier when you are comparing, rather than when you are analyzing one singular piece of evidence. I think it would be helpful to the reader if you were able to relate the raw data that the other researchers obtained back to your own argument.

In your introduction, while you give a good general background of what TB is, I think it would be clearer if you fine-tuned your introduction to how TB directly relates to your paper. The fact that it is contagious, and other basic facts, can thus be explained at the same time you are getting more specific in your paper, from TB to your thesis. Throughout, it would be helpful if you added some more "roadmap" indicators at the beginning of paragraphs, to give the reader a flow of ideas. Like between paragraphs 3 and 4, you're trying to show some contrast, right? Similarly, it would help to be more detailed with phrases like "their treatment and resources within urban areas" from paragraph 5, or "if many improvements" from paragraph 8. For the latter, you mentioned two specific procedures like "proper screening and diagnostic tests", but I feel like the most appropriate place to mention "many improvements", and then to go into detail, would be a paragraph in the conclusion. These ideas could also be mentioned in your abstract to help you with organization.

I think you establish the significance by the implication that we should understand the cause of inequalities within industrialized nations; could you make that value claim more explicit? For example, in paragraph [3], you implied the significance of your paper through the statistics. However, the more efficient, powerful way to show WHY your paper is worth reading is if you state it directly in your own words. This way, you can be speaking about your paper and not just be summarizing what others have said before. In paragraph 7 you had a good line about possible future research directions. You could foreshadow that suggestion at that point, and then really state the idea of future research stemming from this paper towards the end, when you're concluding and making value claims. This is the place where you should make recommendations and (conservative) generalizations. I felt that your paper ended on a very objective note, which is good, but doesn't leave the reader wondering "what now?".

Best of luck!
-David Bowie