

## What is a draft workshop?

Peer feedback in the form of “draft workshops” is central to the philosophies behind the UNC Writing Program and this course. As I said on the first day, writing is very seldom done in a vacuum: virtually all professional communities write in more or less formal groups, giving feedback and offering suggestions both during the writing process and beyond, when the document is considered “finished” and distributed to its intended audience.

To a *writer*, in short, workshopping is an efficient and effective way of gathering valuable advice about how to improve a piece of writing. Since you and your peers are familiar with the assignment that began the writing process and have each generated a draft to satisfy the assignment, you are all very qualified reader and critics.

In addition, the skills that you will build as a *reader* in draft workshops will directly apply to your own writing. Can you suggest a change that will make a groupmate’s thesis clearer? Then you can point out moments of confusion in your own work, too. Can you point out weak organization? Then you can write with stronger organization. Being a good writer is being a good reader—looking at every word, at paragraph structures, at overall style and rhetoric.

## What goes on in a draft workshop?

DO NOT MISS CLASS on the days designated on the syllabus as “draft workshop” days. You have a responsibility to your classmates to give careful attention to their drafts.

This responsibility means also that you must not be “too nice” to be helpful. To be mercenary, grades are on the line, as well as writing skill and improvement. Believe it or not, “my group was too nice” is a much more common complaint than “my group was too hard.” “Hard” does *not* mean “mean,” however; workshops are based on a tacit agreement that we will all be thoughtful in our critiques and never use sarcasm or ridicule as rhetorical tools. Be honest, but be constructive and helpful.

The author has a share in this responsibility, too. Criticism isn’t always easy to take, but it almost always carries the potential for great improvement. As an author, strive to maintain a critical distance—a “thick skin”—from your writing and thus the critiques it spurs. You don’t have to do everything they say, but it shouldn’t hurt your feelings to listen and consider all the advice that is offered.

Finally, DON’T neglect to bring a draft. A draft is DUE, just as on any other due date. I will take points off for grossly incomplete or absent drafts.

The process goes like this: bring a copy of your paper and have access to a copy on disk. If you have specific questions—things you had trouble with, or places that are the most recently added—write them either at the end of the paper or on a workshop sheet I distribute (which will also feature the questions I think the readers should focus on). Trade papers with a member of your group, and write your name at the top of the front page. Read thoroughly, making critical comments, margin notes, and a substantial endnote, as well as attempting to answer any questions the author has written. When you finish, return the paper to the author and quietly explain your comments and suggestions. The author should not defend or talk back except to ask for further clarification or suggestions for improvement. Be constructive, and try to make sure the author understands not only what you mean, but what to do with that information. Then trade again. We will usually try to get two readers per draft.

Remember I will read your draft comments when the author turns in the draft in his or her unit project folder, so I will know if you’re just phoning it in.

Later in the semester we will investigate computer-based workshopping processes. The principles remain the same: careful, thorough reading; useful, critical comments; suggestions for improvement; direct answers to direct questions when possible; oral communication to ensure understanding.

## Tips:

Comments that are too general are unhelpful. Vague comments like “It’s pretty good,” or “With a little more work you’ll be all set” don’t teach anybody anything. Be specific, and offer suggestions for change as well as just criticism or praise. (It’s not plagiarism to help someone craft a good sentence to replace an unclear one.)

Comments that are too superficial are unhelpful. Pointing out comma errors and misspellings is very end-stage editing. Focusing too much on that can blind you to larger flaws of logic, organization, evidence, etc.

Comments that are too assignment-mechanical are unhelpful: what good does it do if you tell me “It’s a bit too short”? I know it’s a bit too short. Help me identify the parts that need expanding, and how to expand them.

Comments that are too nice are unhelpful. I have seen many B and C papers accompanied by draft worksheets that say, “it looks good.” Identify the good spots, but the majority of these papers—in their rough draft forms, anyway—will have much room for improvement.

## Examples (taken from actual drafts):

“2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph weak” “You may need to shorten your paragraphs or omit some ideas so you won’t exceed the limit.” “Most examples come right from the author. Very many examples.” “**All examples are properly placed!**” “With more detail the paper will fill in.” “Need more specific examples.” “More examples.” “Strong in the body and good conclusion.” “It is a little short, maybe just expand some.”

*Comments like these are much too vague to be of any real help. What is “more detail”—where? and what kind? Will any “detail” at all, anywhere, satisfactorily “fill in” the paper? Is “very many examples” a good thing or a bad thing? What does “weak” mean, and how can the author improve it? Ditto for “strong in the body.” “Omit some ideas?” Which ones are expendable?*

“Argument could be strengthened in third paragraph.” “Need a stronger topic sentence for each paragraph. Good use of detail.” “The second paragraph argument is especially strong.” “Second paragraph could use some more sentences and facts, examples both of good and bad behavior.” “Third paragraph is ver strong but a little wordy and hard to follow.” “**Well-written, but I often got lost and had to re-read many sentences. Of course that’s probably just me.**”

*Comments are a bit better—at least in that they locate the problem so the author knows where to look as he or she revises. But again, they’re often not specific enough. What sort of “sentences” and “facts” should go in the second paragraph? What “detail” is especially well done, so we know what to do more of? Isn’t “wordy” and “hard to follow” a problem? Which sentences lost you, and how can I fix them so as to find you again?*

“Where is the clear argument thesis? The first paragraph only summarizes the issue.” “**Good lead in the first paragraph, but include main topics u will cover in paper in intro paragraph.**” “Be more specific with ‘social problems’ (first paragraph). Define ‘competitiveness’ (second paragraph).” “Chad should be better identified before you explain his attendance situation.” “First paragraph is best when you give all those examples that the author is narrowminded and judgmental.” “**Strong use of personal experience in second paragraph.**” “In the third paragraph, I would try to word it more toward the side of your argument—it sounds like you’re in favor of the author.”

*Ah, there we go. Good, strong, helpful, direct, precise, and encouraging comments. Notice the concrete praise, as well as the specific critiques. Keep in mind that tThe author may choose not to take them all—maybe, for example, he or she is “in favor of the author,” or maybe that’s a rhetorical “straw man” device that the author doesn’t want to change. But the comments offer great potential to a good revision.*