# A Guide to Workshops at the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's

'[The writing workshop is] trying to use a communal, public instrument to help people perfect what is an individual and private, sometimes very private, craft' - A. L. Kennedy

## Introduction

During the workshops, you'll share works-in-progress with your fellow writers and give feedback on work by others. In doing so, you will build your skills as a creative reader and advance your own writing in response to feedback and discussion. We aim to become a community of writers who will share encouragement and insight as we all move forward in our writing practice.

Every workshop is different because a writing workshop is shaped above all by the individuals taking part. This guide is intended to give you an overview of how we approach our workshops, to let you know your responsibilities as a participant, and offer some tools and advice that will help you get the most out of the process and put the most in.

The movement between the private space of composition and the more public conversation of the workshop can give energy and direction to our work. Taking part in the workshop conversation can help each of us clarify our aesthetics and our agenda: to work out what we really want to achieve as writers, and how to start getting there.

'If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot.' - Stephen King

## How does it work?

Work will usually be circulated in advance by the workshop host. Participants are asked to read all the work and consider their responses. Work up for discussion will be introduced by the host, who can chair discussion and invite responses in a constructive manner.

To begin, the Writer (or the host) will read the poem, and another member of the group might sight-read this again. **The group then describes what they have read. Here we are not attempting to summarise or to criticise, but to state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, or striking.**

The Writer may take some time to ask questions, or group discussion may naturally progress. The Writer may stipulate whether they want opinions or more neutral queries, they may also redirect to other aspects of the text if they feel discussion is becoming irrelevant.

Sharing material with a workshop is a challenging and potentially stressful thing to do. Equally, responding to that work is a demanding discipline. **We should be respectful both of the writer's rigour as an artist and of their feelings as a person. The priority is to be considerate.**

## When it's your turn to share work

Submit any piece of writing that you would like to share and discuss to the workshop host. Consider what people can realistically read and respond to, **one poem is often enough for a workshop but two smaller poems might also suit. It may be helpful to provide a Writer's Note with your submission - providing a context for your readers**: describe the writing process for the piece, the intended audience, identify problems of craft that arose in the writing, and raise any questions you would especially like to discuss.

Bear in mind the workshop is a resource for you to draw on, not a hurdle to be cleared. If it serves your writing to be an active reader and critic, you are under no obligation to share your own work.

When your poetry gets workshopped, you will end up with a mass of feedback. You are not under any obligation to take notice of this, to accept it or use it in any particular way. The workshop gives you an insight into how a particular group of readers has responded to your work. As the writer, you decide what use, if any, to make of this information.

'I have been a reader for so much longer than I've been a writer. In truth, reading other people's writing gives me as much pleasure as producing my own stuff.' – Wendy Erskine

## When responding to the work of others

It may be helpful to write a Response Note for the writer or make annotations on a copy of their work. You'll then develop your thoughts on each submission in the workshop conversation. When providing feedback consider the following:

- Your aim is to help the writer gain insight into how their piece comes across to a reader. You do this by reading attentively and noticing how it works on you as you read. **How does reading it make you respond, and why?** What thoughts, feelings, questions, expectations, sensations, satisfactions, frustrations and confusions does it generate, and why?
- **Observations and Questions are valuable kinds of feedback.** Observations are specific, concrete, objective, precise points about what a text is like or how it works. (eg. the first three stories in Dubliners are written in the first person, and the collection then shifts into the third person.) Questions are queries that invite the writer to think about the artistic choices they have made. (eg. why does the poem shift from first to third person after the third stanza) Good questions tend to be ones that you, the reader, don't already know the answer to.

- Another good kind of feedback is a 'What If'. By this I mean a suggestion of an opportunity or possibility for how the work might be developed from its current state. (eg. What would it be like if you tried the first/third person shift in different ways?)
- What are not useful are responses expressed in terms of pure opinion or personal taste, such as 'I liked/didn't like that', 'That was good,' 'I related to this,' 'I want to see,' 'I don't like this genre,' etc. If you find yourself coming up with these kinds of responses, push them forward into something more analytical by asking yourself why and how. Why did you like or dislike that aspect of the piece? How did it create your response?
- The most unhelpful kind of response is one which passes judgment on a piece without trying to understand it on its own terms. Beware of this.
- Be concise in your feedback. Select the two or three most important points, rather than feeling you have to cover everything there is to say.
- Approach the workshop submissions with the assumption that the material is not yet finished. The workshop is a place to talk about work in progress and writing as a process: we are not expecting to see finished products.
- Bear in mind that your critiques of other writers' work may or may not be helpful to those other writers; but they will certainly be helpful to you, because they will help you to understand your own values and priorities for writing.

**By attending one of our workshops you agree to take responsibility for the feedback you provide to others and to follow this code of conduct at all times. If you do not adhere to this guidance, you may be asked to review the guidance above, or if no improvement has been made, to step back from the workshop group.**

**If you wish to raise a concern regarding workshops or feedback given please contact Rachel Brown at r.brown@qub.ac.uk**

You may find it helpful to have specific topics or questions in mind as you read a piece and prepare your feedback. Asking yourself some focused questions about how the piece works will help you formulate a response. The following checklist is adapted from Ian Samson's 'A Guide to Assessing Creative Prose:

The qualities below are essentially the most positive you might expect, but that's not to say that all work will display all these qualities – rather, you might find it useful for pinpointing strengths and weaknesses in a piece of writing. Workshop assignments will rarely allow for all of these qualities to be displayed, but final assessments should at least aspire to them. Lists are not in order of any precedence.

Terms in bold are useful as a thorough checklist when self-editing and when considering others' work.

**Language**: clarity and precision; vitality and inventiveness; vivid and dextrous engagement with the possibilities of English; avoidance of clichés, archaisms and banal generalities unless for specific effect; selective deployment of adjectives and adverbs; use of figurative language to telling effect; control of cadence of rhythm and tone; control of linguistic register; technical accuracy in grammar and punctuation; avoidance of repetition and redundancy.

**Form and Structure**: coherent and appropriate structure for content; control of narrative pace and chronology; control of narrative tense; skilful deployment of back story; well-realised plot; evidence of principles of conflict, crisis, climax and consequence; skilful control of point of view.

**Content and Theme**: insight and maturity; subtlety; power; emotional depth; intellectual curiosity; inventive engagement with themes; engaging and plausible scenes; evidence of research. Setting and Observation: vivid and usefully selective; convincing creation of fictional world; strong sense of atmosphere and place, as appropriate; individuality and precision in observation of detail; effective detail.

**Character and Voice**: complex and nuanced characterization; plausibility of motivation and psychology; avoidance of stereotypes; stock characters usefully deployed for comic or satiric effect; subtle handling of tensions between characters; effective individuation of voices; dialogue revealing of character; convincing speech rhythms, diction and idiom; avoidance of hackneyed expression; appropriate speech tags and modifiers.

In all work: correct and consistent use of grammar, punctuation and spelling. Evidence of editorial ability and practice.