Writers rarely experience the impact their writing has on readers. When they do experience this in a writing workshop, the idea of writing for an audience ceases to be an abstraction. Writers actually witness and hear readers' responses. In some ways, though, it doesn't matter what readers say or what advice they give; it's that experience of writing for a real audience that matters most of all.
MAKING THE MOST OF PEER REVIEW

Sharing your writing with strangers can be among the most frightening and gratifying social experiences. It can be a key to the success of the next draft or a complete waste of time. One thing sharing your writing can’t be, however, is avoided, at least in most composition courses, which these days frequently rely on small and large group workshops to help students revise. This is a good thing, I think, for three reasons:

1. It’s useful to experience being read by others.
2. Workshops can be among the most effective ways for writers to divorce the draft.
3. The talk about writing in workshops can be enormously instructive.

Being Read

Being read is not the same thing as being read to. As we share our writing, sometimes reading our own work aloud to a group, we are sharing ourselves in a very real way. This is most evident with a personal essay, but virtually any piece of writing bears our authorship—our particular ways of seeing and saying things—and included in this are our feelings about ourselves as writers.

Last semester, Matthew told me that he felt he was the worst writer in the class, and that seemed obvious when I watched him share his writing in his workshop group. Matthew was quiet and compliant, readily accepting suggestions with little comment, and he seemed to rush the conversation about his draft as if to make the or-
deal end sooner. When Matthew’s drafts were discussed, his group always ended in record time, and yet he always claimed that they were “helpful.”

Tracy always began presenting her drafts by announcing, “This really sucks. It’s the worst thing I’ve ever written.” Of course it wasn’t. But this announcement seemed intended to lower the stakes for her, to take some of the pressure off of her performance in front of others, or, quite possibly, it was a hopeful invitation for Tracy’s group members to say, “You’re too hard on yourself. This is really good.”

To be read in a workshop group can mean more than a critique of your ideas or sentences; for students like Matthew and Tracy it is an evaluation of themselves, particularly their self-worth as writers. Of course, this isn’t the purpose of peer review at all, but for those of us with sometimes nagging internal critics, it’s pretty hard to avoid feeling that both your writing and your writing self are on trial. This is why it’s so helpful to articulate these fears before being read (see Exercise 15.1). It’s also helpful to imagine the many positive outcomes that might come from the experience of sharing your writing.

While taking workshop comments about your writing personally is always a risk, consider the really rare and unusual opportunity to see readers respond to your work. I often compare my published writing to dropping a very heavy stone down a deep well and waiting to hear the splash. And waiting. And waiting. But in a workshop, you can actually hear the murmurs, the sighs, and the laughter of your readers as you read to them; you can also see the smiles, puzzled expressions, nodding heads, and even the tears. You can experience your readers’ experiences of your writing in ways that most published authors never can.

What is so valuable about this, I think, is that audience is no longer an abstraction. After your first workshop, it’s no stretch to imagine the transaction that most writing involves—a writer’s words being received by a reader who thinks and feels something in response. And when you take this back to the many solitary hours of writing, you may feel you have company; that members of your workshop group are interested in what you have to say.

This is a powerful thing. In some ways, it’s the most important thing about the workshop experience.

**EXERCISE 15.1**

**Workshopaphobia**

**STEP ONE:** In your journal, fastwrite for three minutes in response to these questions:

1. How do you feel about yourself as a writer? How do you feel about your writing?
2. What are your biggest fears about sharing your writing with others?
3. Imagine, for a moment, the worst thing that could happen.
4. Imagine the best thing.

**STEP TWO:** Finish this exercise by completing the simile: *Sharing my writing with others is like _____.*

**STEP THREE:** Discuss these entries in small groups or with the entire class. Then generate a list of qualities of a really good workshop group, one you believe would be the most satisfying for you.

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**Divorcing the Draft**

Our writing relationships include our emotional connection to drafts, and this often has to do with the time we spent writing them. In Chapter 14, I described my relationship with my high school girlfriend, Jan, as analogous—although I wasn’t very committed at first, the more time we spent together, the more I became attached to her, so much so that I was blinded to the problems between us. Similarly, when we work hard and long on a first draft it’s difficult to get much perspective on it. We are so entangled with what has already been set down that it’s often difficult to imagine what we might say instead. Sometimes, we need to divorce a draft, and the best remedy for this is time away from it. But students rarely have that luxury.

Workshops provide an alternative to time and are effective for the same reason some people see therapists—group members offer an “outsider’s” perspective on your work that may give it new meanings and raise new possibilities. If nothing else, readers offer a preview of whether your current meanings are clear and whether what you assume is apparent is apparent to someone other than yourself. It’s rare when a workshop doesn’t jerk writers away from at least a few of their assumptions about a draft, and the best of these experiences inspire writers to want to write again. This is the outcome we should always hope to attain.

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**Instructive Talk**

Consider a few comments I overheard during workshops last semester:

- “I don’t think the focus is clear in this essay. In fact, I think there are at least two separate essays here, and it’s the one on the futility of antiwar protests I’m most interested in.”
- “Do you think that there’s a better lead buried on the third page, in the paragraph about your sister’s decision to go to the hospital? That
was a powerful scene, and it seemed to be important to the overall theme.

- "I was wondering about something: What is it about the idea that we sometimes keep silent not only to protect other people but to protect ourselves that surprised you? I mean, does knowing that change anything about how you feel about yourself as a parent?"

- "I loved this line. Simply loved it."

The talk in workshops is not always about writing. The "underlife" of the classroom often surfaces in workshops, a term one educator uses to describe the idle talk about the class itself. Most writing classes ask students to step out of their usual student roles. Rather than quietly listen to lectures or study a textbook, in a writing course you are asked to make your own meanings and find your own ways of making meaning. Whenever we are asked to assume new roles, some resistance can set in, and workshops can become an occasion for talk about the class, often out of earshot of the instructor. This talk isn't always complaining. Often workshops are opportunities to share understandings or approaches to assignments and especially experiences with them. They can also be a chance for students to try out new identities—"I really liked writing this. Maybe I'm an okay writer after all."

While this kind of talk may not be directly about a draft, it can help you negotiate the new roles you're being asked to assume in your writing class. This is part of becoming better writers who are confident that they can manage the writing process in all kinds of situations. However, the main purpose of workshop groups is to help students to revise their drafts. But why seek advice from writers who are clearly less experienced than the instructor? Here are four reasons:

1. By talking with other students about writing you get practice using the language you've learning in the writing classroom, language that helps you describe important features of your own work.

2. Since writing is about making choices among a range of solutions to problems in a draft, workshop groups are likely to surface possibilities that never occurred to you (and perhaps wouldn't occur to the instructor, either).

3. Your peers are also student writers and because they come from similar circumstances—demands of other classes, part-time jobs, and perhaps minimal experience with college writing—they are in a position to offer practical and realistic revision suggestions.

4. Finally, in most writing courses, the students in the class are an important audience for your work. Getting firsthand responses makes the rhetorical situation real rather than imagined.

Will you get bad advice in a peer workshop? Of course. Your group members will vary in their experience and ability to read the problems and
possibilities in a draft. But in the best writing workshops, you learn together, and as time goes by the feedback gets better and better. Paradoxically, it pays off in your own writing to be generous in your responses to the work of others.

MODELS FOR WRITING WORKSHOPS

The whole idea of peer review workshops in writing classes has been around for years. Collaboration is hardly a novelty in the professional world, but small group work in academia is a relatively recent alternative to lecture and other teaching methods in which the student listens to a professor, takes notes on what is said, and later takes a test of some kind. You won’t learn to write well through lecture, although it may be a perfectly appropriate approach for some subjects. Since collaboration in the writing classroom fits in perfectly with the class’s aim of generating knowledge about the many ways to solve writing problems, peer review of drafts in small groups is now fairly commonplace. You’ll find workshops in writing classes ranging from first-year composition to advanced nonfiction writing.

What will workshops be like in your course? Your instructor will answer that question, but the workshop groups will likely reflect one or more of the following models.

Full-Class Workshops

Sometimes you may not work in small groups at all. Depending on the size of your class and your instructor’s particular purposes for using peer review, you may share your work with everyone in a full-class session. This is the approach that is popular in creative writing classes, and it’s typically used in composition classes to introduce students to the process of providing responses to other students’ work. It also can work nicely in small classes with ten students or less.

In a full-class workshop, you’ll choose a draft to share and you (or your instructor) will provide copies for everyone either a few days before the workshop, or at the beginning of the workshop session. On drafts you receive days ahead of the session, you’re often expected to read and bring written comments to class with you. If you receive the draft at the beginning of the workshop session, you might make notes while the draft’s author reads the piece aloud, or take some time to write some comments either immediately after the draft is read or following the group discussion.

Reading your draft aloud to your workshop group is a common convention in all kinds of workshop groups, large or small. This might be something you resist at first. It will quickly become apparent, however, how useful it is to read your own work aloud. It’s an entirely different reading to literally give voice to your words. You’ll stumble over passages in your draft that seemed fine when you read them silently, and you may notice
gaps you glossed over. You'll hear what your writing voice sounds like in this particular essay, and whether it works for you and your readers.

Your instructor may lead the discussion in a full-class workshop, or she may sit back and wait while students share their responses. There may be guidelines and ground rules for responses as well (for some examples of these, see, “The Reader’s Responsibilities” section that follows later in the chapter). If your draft is being discussed, your instructor may ask you to simply listen. Sometimes it’s best to avoid defending certain choices you made in a draft and simply take in the range of responses you receive to what you have done. In other cases, you may be asked to present the large group with questions to consider. It certainly can be scary sharing your work with twenty or twenty-five people, but imagine the range of perspectives you’ll get!

Small-Group Workshops

Far more typical is the workshop group of between three and seven members, either chosen randomly, by your instructor or self-selected. These groups may stay together all semester, part of the semester, or you may find yourself working with fresh faces every workshop session. There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these alternatives, all of which your instructor has considered in making a choice.

Ideally, your workshop group will meet in a circle, because when everyone, including the writer presenting a draft, is facing each other you’ll have more of a conversation and be able to engage each other directly (see Figure 15.1). Like so many writing group methods, this is a basic principle of teamwork borrowed from the business world.

Some of the methods of distributing drafts apply to the small groups as well as the full-class workshop discussed earlier: writers will distribute copies of their drafts either a few days before their workshops or at the beginning of the sessions. You will provide written comments to each writer either before or after the workshop.

One-on-One Peer Review

Your instructor also may ask you to work with a partner, exchanging drafts and discussing them with each other. While you lose some of the range and quantity of feedback by working with a single reader, this conversation is often richer because each of you is reading the other’s work with particular care and attention. It’s likely you’ll also have more time to talk since you’ll be discussing only two rather than four or five drafts.

One variation of this kind of one-on-one peer review is the draft exchange. Your instructor will ask you to make a pile of drafts at the front of the room and ask you to take a draft from the pile, comment on it, return it, and then take another. You may return multiple times to collect, comment, and return a draft, and the result is that each draft may have three or four readers during the class session.
No matter what model your instructor chooses, the success of the workshop depends largely on the writers themselves. Sure, it can be harder to get what you need from some groups, but in the end, you can always get some help with a draft if you ask the right questions and seek certain kinds of responses.

How should you prepare for a workshop to make the most of it and what are your responsibilities during the workshop? Here's a list you might find helpful:

- Make sure everyone in the group has a copy of the draft in a timely way.
- Reread and reflect on the draft before the workshop session. What kinds of responses would be most helpful from your group? What questions do you have about the draft's possible problems?
- Time the discussion so that your draft gets the allotted time and no more, particularly if there are other drafts to discuss.
- Avoid getting defensive. Listen to comments on your work in an open-minded way. Your obligation is simply to listen, not to take all the advice you're offered.

**FIGURE 15.1** The small group workshop.
The Internet can make the peer review of writing more efficient than working with hard copies and face-to-face meetings (and even phone calls). After all, you can share your work the moment you finish it, sending your drafts to others by e-mail (either as an attached file or by pasting the draft into your message) or through courseware such as WebCT or Blackboard. You also won’t have to take notes while your peers discuss your work or try to decipher their handwriting scrawled in the margins of your draft; instead, you will have all of your peers’ typewritten comments on your computer where you can organize and save them. Moreover, with access to electronic copies of your draft, your peers can even write their comments directly into your draft (see “Writing with Computers: Using the Comments Function” in Chapter 3). When you want to communicate online as a group, use chat or instant messaging for “live” discussions (be sure to save the transcripts), or Web forums, discussion boards, and Web logs (blogs) for continuing discussions.

Peer review over the Internet, however, is not without its challenges. There are, after all, no alternative forms of communication (electronic or otherwise) that can capture all of the nuances of face-to-face communication; you may find communicating exclusively over the Internet is too sterile for your tastes. Also, some people may be more sensitive about granting others access to their electronic drafts than they are about their printed drafts. You should decide on conventions for reviewing and commenting on drafts up front, before there are any misunderstandings. You will also need to ensure that each of the participants has compatible systems and software.

- Take notes. There are two reasons for this. First, it will help you remember other students’ comments, and second, it will signal that you take those comments seriously. This increases everyone’s engagement with your work.

THE READER’S RESPONSIBILITIES

Tina poured her heart and soul into her personal essay draft, and she was anxious to get some response to it. When it was her turn to workshop the piece, however, one of the group’s members was absent, and two others failed to write her the required response. “It was so lame,” she told me. “It was as if no one cared about my essay. It sure makes me feel less inclined to read their stuff carefully.” If this workshop group were at Hewlett-Packard or any of the thousands of business that encourage teamwork, the slackers would be in trouble. It’s true, however, that teamwork in the writing class depends more on internal motivation—a sense of responsibility to
The Reader’s Responsibilities

- Always read and respond to a writer’s draft in a timely way. The writer may suggest the type of response that would be most helpful, and if so, always keep that in mind.
- Whenever possible, focus your responses on particular parts or passages of the draft, but except in an editorial workshop, avoid a focus on grammar or mechanics.
- Offer suggestions not directives. The word “could” is usually better than “should.” Remember that the purpose of workshop is to help identify the range of choices a writer might make to improve a draft. There is almost always more than one.
- Identify strengths in the draft. This is often a good place to begin because it sets writers at ease, but, more importantly, writers often build on strengths in revision.
- Consider varying the roles you play in conversation with your group (see “Inquiring into the Details: Finding a Role”). It’s easy to fall into a rut in group work, pretty much sticking to saying the same kinds of things or developing certain patterns of response. Stay vigilant about this and try deliberating shifting the role you play in the workshop group.

Inquiring into the Details

Finding a Role

The slacker is a role that’s easy to slide into in small group work. It’s completely passive, and it’s really pretty selfish. Active roles ask more of you, but they pay off big because you learn more about your own writing. There are several active roles you might assume in a workshop group. Try them out.

Roles That Help Groups Get Things Done

Initiators: “Here’s how we might proceed with this.”
Information seekers: “What do we need to know to help the writer?”
Information givers: “This seems to be an important example.”
Opinion seekers: “What do you think, Al?”
Opinion givers: “I think this works.”
Clarifiers: “We all seem to be saying that the lead doesn’t deliver, right?”
Elaborators: “I agree with Tom, and would add . . .”
Summarizers: “I think we’ve discussed the thesis problem enough. Should we move on to the evidence?”

**ROLES THAT HELP MAINTAIN GROUP HARMONY**

Encouragers: “I love that idea, Jen.”
Expressivists: “My silence isn’t because I’m not moved by the essay, but I’m still trying to figure out why. Is that why you’re quiet, Leah?”
Harmonizers: “I think we disagree about this, but that’s okay. Let’s move on to discussing this next page.”
Compromisers: “Maybe both Richard and Joseph are right, particularly if we look at it this way . . .”
Gatekeepers: “Jon, we haven’t heard anything from you yet.”

**WHAT CAN GO WRONG AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

Lana is not a fan of workshops. In an argument essay, she complained that they “lack quality feedback” and sometimes workshop groups encourage “fault finding” that can hurt the writer and the writing. Things can go wrong in workshops, of course, and when they do students like Lana feel burned. Typically, unsuccessful workshop groups suffer from two major problems: lack of commitment by group members and lack of clarity about the process of giving feedback. It’s like a cold and a runny nose—when a group is afflicted with one problem it usually suffers from the other.

Lack of commitment is easy to see. The writer whose draft is to be discussed forgets to make copies for the rest of her group. Members who were supposed to provide written responses to a writer’s draft before class hastily make notes on his manuscript as it’s being discussed. The group is supposed to allot fifteen minutes to discuss each draft but finishes it in five. Members are frequently absent and make no effort to provide responses to drafts they missed. Discussion is limited to general, not particularly thoughtful, compliments: “This is really good. I wouldn’t change a thing,” or “Just add a few details.”

This lack of commitment is contagious and soon infects nearly every group meeting. Things rarely improve; they frequently get worse. Part of the problem may be that workshop participants may not be clear about what is expected of them, a problem that should be minimized if you reviewed the checklists about the writer’s and reader’s responsibilities in workshop discussed in the preceding sections. A solution that is beyond your control is that the instructor evaluates or even grades workshop participation, but a group can evaluate itself, too. Since it’s awkward to evaluate a specific student’s performance in your workshop group, consider filling out a survey similar to the one shown here following every workshop
session. Surveys such as this generate information that the group and its members can consider as they attempt to improve.

### GROUP SELF-EVALUATION

Check the box that applies.

1. Overall, how effectively did your group work together today?
   - Poorly
   - Adequately
   - Well
   - Extremely well

2. How would you evaluate the participation of group members?
   - Participation was limited to a few people
   - Participation was adequate, although more people could have been actively participating
   - Participation was good; only a few people were inactive
   - Participation was excellent; everyone was involved

3. How do you feel about your own performance today?
   - Poor
   - Fair
   - Good
   - Excellent

4. If you shared a draft in workshop today, were you satisfied with the responses? Were they helpful?
   - Very unsatisfied
   - Unsatisfied
   - Somewhat satisfied
   - Satisfied
   - Very satisfied
   - Not sure

5. What one thing could your group change—or could you do—that would improve how the group works together? (Answer briefly.)

Groups that work together over a period of time should always monitor how things are going, and the group evaluations can be particularly helpful for this. If problems persist, the instructor may intervene or the group
might consider intervention of its own (consider Exercise 15.2 as one option). Remember, the best workshops have a simple but powerful effect on writers who share their work: it makes them want to write again.

### EXERCISE 15.2

**Group Problem Solving**

If group self-evaluations reveal persistent problems, devote ten minutes to exploring possible solutions.

**STEP ONE:** Choose facilitator and recorder. The facilitator times each step, directs questions to each participant, and makes sure everyone participates. The recorder takes notes on newsprint.

1. Your instructor can give you a tally of the responses to the group evaluation survey and discuss the patterns of problems. Do writers seem dissatisfied? Do readers feel like they’re performing poorly?
2. What is behind these problems? Brainstorm a list.
3. What might be done to change the way the group operates? You must come up with at least one concrete idea that you agree to try.

**STEP TWO:** After the next workshop session, set aside five minutes at the end to discuss whether the change improved the group’s performance. Is there something else you should try?

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**ONE STUDENT’S RESPONSE**

**AMY’S PERSPECTIVE ON WORKSHOPS**

**WHEN THINGS GO RIGHT**

In both small and large workshops things are most productive when the conversation delves deep into a couple of issues instead of skimming the surface on a broad range of topics. My best experiences have been in small workshops because the groups were willing to get more deeply involved in a piece. It probably helps that there aren’t too many ideas in a small group and the ones that get thrown out for debate are well considered. I always appreciate it when the group writes notes on my paper for future reference and my absolute best workshops have been multiple sessions with the same small group. Assessing each other’s progress really helps in the revision stages.
WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

Especially in a small workshop people can take things too personally and ruin
the objective atmosphere, letting their own agenda take precedence over pro-
gression. In one of the worst workshops I’ve been a part of, we were assessing
an essay by a writer who chose to write about her relationship with God. The
essay had many problems, she used very vague metaphorical language and the
attempted symbolism didn’t really work. It was a bit hard to read because of the
overly sentimental tone of the piece. Instead of discussing these points though,
the workshop turned into an argument about outside topics and became pretty
vicious. The writer was very open to most of the comments I made about some
major changes that needed to happen in the piece, but very defensive (under-
standably) to the personal attacks. The communication simply broke down due
to varying personal beliefs when they could have been a strength of the group.

In a large group a fine balance must be achieved. It is important that the con-
servation runs deep, but also that it covers more than one topic. Because of the
multitude of opinions in a large group the entire workshop can get stuck on one
topic or section of the piece. Not only is it unproductive when the debate gets
stuck, but it’s also really hard to sit through.

METHODS OF RESPONDING

One thing I don’t need with an early draft is someone to tell me that I mis-
spelled the word “rhythm.” It is a word I’ll never be able to spell, and that
fact makes me eternally grateful for spell checkers. I do like to know
whether an early draft delivers on its implied promises to the
reader, and especially whether there is another angle or another
topic lurking there that I might not have noticed. But I don’t
want my wife Karen to read my stuff until I have a late draft to
show her because I sometimes find her comments on early
drafts discouraging.

The kinds of responses we seek to our writing in workshops depend on at
least two things: where we are in the writing
process and how we feel about the work in progress. There’s noth-
ing particularly surprising about this. After all, certain kinds of
problems arise during different stages of the writing process, and
sometimes what we really need from readers of our work is more
emotional than practical. We want to be motivated, encouraged, validated,
or feel any number of things that will help us work well.

Experiential and Directive Responses

It makes sense, then, to invite certain kinds of readings of your work that
you’ll find timely. In general, these responses range from experiential—
this is how I experienced your draft—to more directive—this is what you could do to make it better. Which of these two forms would make reader comments on your work most helpful? For example, depending on who you are and how you work, it may be most helpful to get less directive responses to your work early on. Some people feel that very specific suggestions undermine their sense of ownership of rough drafts. They don’t want to know what readers think they should do in the revision but how readers experienced their draft. What parts were interesting? What parts confusing? On the other hand, other writers feel particularly lost in the early stages of the writing process; they could use all the direction they can get. You decide (or your instructor will make suggestions), choosing from the menu of workshop response methods below. These begin with the most experiential methods of response to those which invite your readers to offer quite specific suggestions about the revision.

Response Formats

The following formats for responding to workshop drafts begin with the least directive, most experiential methods and move to the more directive approaches. While many of these formats feature some particular ways of responding to drafts, remember that the writer’s and reader’s responsibilities described earlier apply to all of them. Participate thoughtfully and ethically (see below, “The Ethics of Responding”) and you’ll be amazed at what you learn about your own writing from talking with other writers about theirs.

The No-Response Workshop. Sometimes the most useful response to your work comes from simply reading it aloud to your group and asking them to just listen, nothing more. Why? You may not be ready for comments because the work is unformed and you’re confident that you’ll discover the direction you want to go in the next draft. Comments may confuse or distract you. It’s always helpful to read your work aloud to yourself, but it’s also valuable to read to an audience even if you don’t invite a response. You will read with more attention and awareness. Finally, you may simply feel unprepared for a response because your confidence is low.

The method couldn’t be simpler. You read your draft with little or no introduction while your group quietly listens. They will not comment unless they want you to repeat something because it was inaudible. Remember to read slowly and clearly.

The Initial Response Workshop. Robert Brooke, Ruth Mirtz, and Robert Evans\(^1\) suggest a method that is useful for “maintaining your motivation to write while indirectly learning what to improve in your text.” It might also be appropriate for an early draft.

\(^1\)Robert Brooke, Ruth Mirtz, and Robert Evans, Small Groups in Writing Workshops. (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1984).
The Ethics of Responding

Respect the writer.
Everyone contributes.
Say “could” rather than “should.”
Say “I” rather than “you” as in “I couldn’t follow this,” rather than “you weren’t very clear.”

They suggest that you invite three kinds of responses to your work: a “relating” response, a “listening” response, and a “positive” response. These three types of response to a draft could be made in writing, in workshop discussion, or both.

- **Relating response.** As the name implies, group members share what personal associations the writer’s topic inspires. Perhaps they’ve had a similar or a contradictory experience. Maybe they’ve read something or seen something that is relevant to what the writer is trying to do in the draft.

- **Listening response.** This is much like the “say back” method some therapists use with patients. Can you summarize what is it that you hear the writing saying in the draft? Is this something that is helpful to know?

- **Positive response.** What parts of the draft really work well and why? Might these be things the writer might build on in the next draft?

**The Narrative of Thought Workshop.** A writer who hears the story of readers’ thinking as they experienced the draft can get great insight about how the piece shapes readers’ expectations and how well it delivers on its promises. This method borrows a term from Peter Elbow—“movie of the mind”—to describe the creation of such a narrative response to a piece of writing.

The easiest way to create stories of your readers’ experiences is to prepare your draft ahead of time to accommodate them. Before you make copies for your workshop group, create 2- to 3-inch white spaces in the manuscript immediately after the lead or beginning paragraph, and then again in the middle of the essay. Also make sure there is at least that much white space after the end of the piece.

You will read your draft episodically, beginning by just reading the lead or introductory paragraph, then allowing three or four minutes for your group’s members to respond in writing in the space you provided for
some of the questions below. The writer should time this and ask everyone to stop writing when it's time to read the next section of the draft. Repeat the process, stopping at the second patch of white space after you've read roughly half of the essay. Give your group the same amount of time to respond in writing and then finish the essay to prompt the final episode of writing.

- **After hearing the lead:** What are your feelings about the topic or the writer so far? Can you predict what the essay might be about? What questions does the lead raise for you that you expect might be answered later? What has struck you?

- **After hearing half:** Tell the story of what you've been thinking or feeling about what you've heard so far. Has the draft fulfilled your expectations from the lead? What do you expect will happen next?

- **After hearing it all:** Summarize your understanding of what the draft is about, including what it seems to be saying (or not quite saying). How well did it deliver on its promises in the beginning? What part of your experience of the draft was most memorable? What part seemed least clear?

Discuss with your group each of the responses—after the lead, after the middle, and at the end of the draft. This conversation, and the written comments you receive when you collect their copies of your draft, should give you strong clues about how well you've established a clear purpose in your essay and sustained it from beginning to end. The responses also might give you ideas about directions to take the next draft that you hadn't considered.

**The Instructive Lines Workshop.** Most essays balance on a thesis, theme, question, or idea. Like the point of a spinning top, these claims, ideas, or questions are the things around which everything else revolves. Essay drafts, however, may easily topple over because they lack such balance—there is no clear point, or there are too many, or some of the information is irrelevant. In discovery drafts especially, a writer may be seeking the piece's center of gravity—or centers of gravity—and a useful response from a workshop group is to help the writer look for the clues about where that center might be.

This format for a workshop invites the members to try to identify the draft's most important lines and passages, by clearly marking them with underlining or highlighter. What makes a line or passage important? These are places where writers explicitly or implicitly seem to suggest what they're trying to say in a draft and they may include:

- A line or passage where the writer seems to state his thesis.
- A part of a narrative essay when the writer adopts a critical stance and seems to be trying to pose a question or speculate about the meaning of an experience or some information.
• A part of the draft in which the writer seems to make an important claim.
• A scene or comparison or observation that hints at the question the writer is exploring (or could explore).
• A comment in a digression that the writer didn’t seem to think was important, but you think might be.

These underlinings become the subject of discussion in the workshop session. Questions to consider include: Why did this particular line seem important? What does it imply about what you think is the meaning of the essay? Do the different underlined passages speak to each other—can they be combined or revised into a controlling idea or question for the next draft—or do they imply separate essays or treatments? Would the writer underline something else? How might the different interpretations of the draft be reconciled?

The Purpose Workshop. Sometimes writers know their purpose in a draft: "I'm trying to argue that the Enron collapse represented the failure of current methods of compensating CEOs," or "I'm proposing that having vegetarian fast food restaurants would reduce American obesity," or "This essay explores the question of why I was so relieved when my father died." What these writers may need most from their workshop groups is feedback on how well the draft accomplishes particular purposes.

Before the workshop session, the writer crafts a statement of purpose similar to those in the preceding paragraph—a sentence that clearly states what the writer is trying to do in the draft. This statement of purpose should include a verb that implies what action you're trying to take—for example, explore, argue, persuade, propose, review, explain, analyze, and so on. As you probably guessed, these verbs are usually associated with a particular form of inquiry or genre.

The writer should include this sentence at the end of the draft. It's important that you make your group members aware of your purpose only after they've read the entire piece and not before. Discussion and written responses should then focus on some of the following questions:

• Were you surprised by the stated purpose, or did the essay prepare you for it?
• If the stated purpose did surprise you, what did you think the writer was trying to do in the draft instead?
• Does the lead explicitly state or hint at the stated purpose?
• What parts or paragraphs of the draft seemed clearly relevant to the stated purpose, and which seemed to point in another direction?
• Did the draft seem to succeed in accomplishing the writer's purpose?

If more directive responses would be helpful to you, consider also asking some questions such as whether there might not be a stronger begin-
ning or lead buried elsewhere in the draft, or soliciting suggestions about which parts or paragraphs should be cut or what additional information might be needed. Which parts of the draft seemed to work best in the context of the writer’s stated purpose, and which didn’t work so well?

**The Graphing Reader Interest Workshop.** What commands readers’ attention in a draft and what doesn’t? This is useful to know, obviously, because our overall aim is to engage readers from beginning to end. This is something that is difficult to do, particularly in longer drafts, and reader attention will often vary from paragraph to paragraph in shorter drafts, too. But if your draft drones on for three or four paragraphs or a couple pages then the piece isn’t working well and you need to do something about it in revision.

One way that you can know this is by asking your workshop group to literally graph their response to your essay, paragraph by paragraph, and then discuss what is going on in those sections that drag.

For this workshop, consecutively number all the paragraphs in your draft. You or your instructor will provide each member of your group with a “Reader Interest Chart” (see Figure 15.2), on which the corresponding paragraph numbers are listed. On the vertical axis is a scale that represents reader interest, with “5” being high interest and “1” being low interest in that particular paragraph. As you slowly read your draft aloud to

**FIGURE 15.2** Reader interest chart.
your group's members, they’ll be marking the graph after each paragraph to roughly indicate their interest in what the paragraph says and how it says it.

When you’re finished, you’ll have a visual representation of how the essay worked, paragraph by paragraph, but the important work is ahead. What you need to discuss with your group is why a paragraph or section of the draft failed to hold some readers’ attention. What is going on in those parts of the draft?

- Are they confusing?
- Do they needlessly digress?
- Is the prose awkward?
- Is there too much or too little explanation?
- Are they too loaded with facts and not enough analysis?
- Does the writer seem to lose his voice?

One way to find out what’s going on with the weaker parts of your essay is to look at the stronger ones. What do you notice about those paragraphs that were rated a “4” or a “5” by your group members? What are the particular strengths of these sections? Can you do more of that in other, less lively sections of the draft?

The Sum-of-the-Parts Workshop. Like a watch, a well-written essay moves fluently forward because all of its parts work together. In workshops you can never talk about all those parts; there is too little time, and often it’s hard to tease apart all the gears and the springs that make an essay go. But you can try to be as thorough as you can during a workshop, essentially running through a checklist of some of the most important elements, including purpose, theme, structure, information, and style. In this workshop, you attempt to cover as much territory as possible, so the responses you get will have breadth but not depth. You also invite some directive responses from your readers—suggestions for the revision and specific areas of confusion—as well as their interpretation of your purpose and theme.

One of the best ways to solicit this information is to use a worksheet like the one below. Typically, this worksheet would be filled out by your group’s members outside of class and before you workshop the draft. It would then be attached to the copies of your draft and returned to you after the group discusses the work. If your peers respond thoughtfully to the worksheet, it can generate a wealth of information for you about your draft.
WORKSHOP WORKSHEET

**Purpose:** In your own words, what is the writer’s motive in the draft? Use one of the following verbs to describe this in a sentence: explore, explain, argue, analyze, review, report, propose, persuade, reflect.

**Theme:** State in your own words what you think the thesis, main point, or central question is in this draft. What question does this idea or question raise for you?

**Information:** Name at least two specific places in the draft where you wanted more information to fully appreciate what the writer was trying to say. What kind of information do you suggest (anecdote, story, fact, detail, background, example, interview, dialogue, opposing perspective, description, case study, etc.)?

**Design:** Identify at least one paragraph or passage that seemed out of place. Any suggestions about where it belongs?

**Style:** Place brackets [ ] around several sentences or passages in the draft that seemed awkward or confusing to read.

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**The Thesis Workshop.** An alternative to the sum-of-all-parts format is to focus on a single element of the draft that you are particularly concerned about, and no part is more important than the thesis. An essay without an implicit theme or an explicit thesis is an essay without meaning. No one is particularly interested in reading a pointless story or research essay, nor are most readers interested in points that seem unrelated to the information in the draft or that are painfully obvious. For example, the idea that the death of your Aunt Trudy was sad for you is a much less compelling theme to build an essay around than the idea that her death—and the deaths of family members generally—upset the family system in ways that helped you to take on new roles, new identities.

A thesis workshop will help you make sure there is a controlling idea or question behind the draft, and help you think more deeply about what you’re trying to say. Your workshop members can help with this because they bring a range of perspectives and experiences to a conversation about your theme that might make it richer and more informative for you.

In this workshop, group members receive the drafts ahead of time. Before the workshop session they should underline the thesis, main idea, theme, or question that seems to be behind the draft. This will be the *main thing* the writer seems to be saying or exploring. This isn’t particularly difficult in essays with explicit thesis statements, such as arguments or proposals, but in personal essays and other more literary pieces, the theme may not be so explicit. In that type of essay, they should underline the passage that seems central to the meaning of the essay. This may be a reflective passage or it might be a scene or moment.
Second, at the top of a piece of paper, they should write down in a sentence or two—at most—the thesis or theme as they understand it. This may involve simply copying it down from the draft. However, if thesis or theme is not that clear or explicit, each reader should write it down in his own words, trying to capture the main point of the draft.

Then, members should fastwrite for five minutes about their own thoughts and experiences about the writer’s thesis or theme, constantly hunting for questions it raises for them. Say the draft’s thesis is that the university athletic programs have become too powerful and have undermined the university’s more important academic mission. In the fastwrite, explore what you’ve noticed about the football team’s impact on the school. Where does the football program get funds? Does it compete with academic programs? Then fastwrite about what you’ve heard—for instance, that athletics have strong alumni support, and so on. Keep the fastwrite focused on the thesis; if it helps, stop and reread it for another prompt.

The workshop session that follows will be a conversation that is largely focused on what people thought was the point of the draft, and their own thoughts and feelings about it. The writer should facilitate the conversation without comment and make sure the following two things are discussed in this order:

1. What seems to be the thesis, theme, or question behind the essay? Is it clear? Are there alternative ideas about what it might be?

2. What does each group member think or feel about what the writer seems to be saying? How do the reader’s experiences and observations relate to the writer’s main point or question? And especially, what questions should the writer consider in the next draft?

Although it may be hard to keep quiet if your draft is being discussed, the conversation will probably surprise you. You may discover that several of your group members either failed to understand what you were trying to say in the draft or give you a completely new idea about what you were up to. At its best, the thesis workshop inspires you to think more deeply about your theme or main idea as you consider the range of experiences and questions that other people have about it. Take lots of notes.

The Editing Workshop. In a late draft, the larger issues—for example, having a clear purpose, focus, and point, as well as appropriate information to support it—may be resolved to your satisfaction, or you may feel that you already have some pretty good ideas about how to deal with them. If so, what you may need most from your workshop group is editorial advice: responses to your work at the sentence and paragraph levels.

In the editing workshop, you invite your group members to focus on style and clarity (and perhaps grammar and mechanics). The questions that direct the reading of the draft might include some or all of the following:
• Did you stumble over any awkward passages that seemed to interrupt the fluency of the writing?
• Were there any sentences or passages that you had to read a few times to understand?
• Could any long paragraphs be broken down into smaller ones? Did any paragraphs seem to be about more than one thing?
• Are the first and last lines of the essay well crafted? Are the last lines of paragraphs strong enough?
• Were there any abrupt transitions between paragraphs?
• Was the voice or tone of the draft consistent?
• (Optional) Did you notice any patterns of grammatical problems, including run-on sentences, unclear pronoun references, lack of subject-verb agreement?

Group members who see any of these problems should bracket [] the sentence or passage and refer to it when discussing the editorial issue with the group. The workshop discussion has the following ground rules:

• Be respectful of the writer's feelings. Some of us feel that style is a very personal issue, and that grammar problems are related somehow to our self-worth.
• Don't have arguments about editorial judgments. It isn't necessary for group members to agree. In fact, you probably won't agree about a lot of things. Offer your comments on style as suggestions and then move on, although don't hesitate to offer a differing opinion.
• Make sure to identify places in the draft where the writing is working just fine. Editorial workshops need not focus exclusively on problems. Sentences, paragraphs, or passages that work well stylistically can often help the writer see how to revise the less effective parts.
• If readers have some comments about larger issues in the draft, things such as purpose or theme, ask the writer first if she welcomes that kind of feedback. Otherwise, keep the workshop focused on editorial matters.

An editing workshop may sound a little harrowing. It really isn't, particularly if the group knows the ground rules. My students often tell me that these conversations about style are some of the best workshops they have had. Everybody learns something, not just the writer, a principle that applies to many workshop formats and another reason that peer review is such a useful practice in the writing classroom.

**Reflecting on the Workshop**

The real work follows the workshop. Then you have the task of mulling over the things you've heard about your draft and deciding how you're go-
Using What You Have Learned

The writing workshop is just one of many forms of collaboration that you’ll likely experience both during and after college. Even unsuccessful workshops are instructive because they’ll help you to understand how groups work and what roles you can play to make them function better. Consider your experience so far.

1. What is the best workshop group experience you’ve had in this class? What made it so good? What was the worst experience? What made it so bad?

2. As you reflect on your own performance in groups, what have you learned about yourself as a collaborator? How would you describe yourself as a group member? How would you like to describe yourself?

3. If you’re currently involved in a group project in another class, how would you compare your writing workshop with that other group project? Can what you’ve learned in one provide useful guidance for the other?
You can use this chart to get feedback on a research paper—if the categories for feedback are helpful to you. Otherwise, modify what's here to work for your context, purpose, and audience. (When you give a chart like this to others, ask them to fill in all the comments explaining how they checked off the paper’s qualities; it can help, before you use a chart like this, to discuss what kinds of comments are helpful.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Testing a research paper</strong></th>
<th>doesn't do/ have this</th>
<th>does this only</th>
<th>done perfectly</th>
<th>comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The introduction to the paper...</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>grabs the attention of the reader.</td>
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<tr>
<td>focuses the topic (that is, it clearly expresses the problem or question with which the paper is concerned).</td>
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<td><strong>The paper's overall argument...</strong></td>
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<td>makes sense.</td>
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<td>can be argued.</td>
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<td>answers the question or problem posed in the introduction.</td>
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<td><strong>The supporting argument(s) of the paper...</strong></td>
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<td>can be easily followed by a reader.</td>
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<td>are ordered to support the overall argument.</td>
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<td><strong>The ending/conclusion of the paper...</strong></td>
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<td>supports the overall argument.</td>
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<td>follows out of the preceding supporting arguments.</td>
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<td><strong>In terms of differing viewpoints, the paper...</strong></td>
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<td>acknowledges that they exist.</td>
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<td>addresses and considers those viewpoints.</td>
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<td><strong>The ethos of the paper is...</strong></td>
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<td>appropriate to the argument.</td>
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<td>credible.</td>
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<td>engaging to a reader.</td>
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<td><strong>The paper's sources are...</strong></td>
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<td>credible.</td>
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<td>appropriate for the arguments.</td>
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<td>appropriately documented and cited.</td>
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responding to the writing of others

When you are asked to respond to the writing of someone else:

- **Be sure you know the kind of feedback the writer needs.** Perhaps the writer only needs someone else to make sure the grammar and spelling are correct—but perhaps the writer needs feedback on the order of ideas, in which case correcting spelling is useless because the words you corrected might go away in the revision. If a writer asks you for help with a piece of writing, and does not specify what kind of help—ask (and this can assist the writer in articulating what the writing needs).

- **Do tell writers what you like about their writing, and why.** Writers (like any person) need to know what they do well. When we have a sense of what we do well, it gives us a ground on which we can stand as we start developing our other abilities.

- **Read the writing at least twice before you make any comments.** You might take some notes during a first reading, but use the first reading to get a sense of what the writer is trying to do—then reread to look for the parts in the writing that most support what the writing is trying to do, and for the parts that aren’t as supportive.

- **If you are asked to give feedback on the main argument of a piece of writing, say first what you think the main argument is.** You may be seeing a different main argument from what the writer intends, and the writer needs to know; the writer can then reshape the argument to fit the original intention, or can reshape it to pull out what you see. But if you give feedback on a different argument than what the writer intends, the writer will be revising at cross (and confusing) purposes.

- **Give reasons for your comments.** If instead of, “I get lost in this paragraph,” you say, “In this paragraph you started out writing about the effects of video game violence on children but then you ended by writing about television cartoons, and I couldn’t see what connected those two ideas,” you give the writer information useful for revision. (And if you work to articulate feedback in this way, you’ll find it easier to look at your own writing just as carefully; teachers of writing often talk about how useful to their own writing it is to have to formulate feedback to people in their classes.)

- **Think about the most useful, respectful feedback you’ve ever received, and emulate it.** (You might keep a collection of useful feedback, and analyze what makes it useful. This will not only help you give good feedback to others, but will help you develop a stronger eye for reading your own words more critically.)

- **Think about the most useful, respectful feedback you’ve ever received, and emulate it.** We repeat this advice because how you give feedback determines how others use it—and even if they can use it. You know how it feels to put a lot of time and effort into any production, and then to get it back with only negative comments. You know how it feels when someone simply says about your work “I don’t like this,” or, worse yet, “This sucks.” Giving feedback is not a neutral process—it involves emotions. If you really want to help someone, be positive in your feedback. Say, “I think this could be stronger if...” or “It looks to me you are trying to achieve x, so maybe a more effective way of doing it would be...”