

# PROSE

## 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 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) may read a few paragraphs so the group can tune back in to the story. **The group 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, **a convenient length is 1,500-3,000 words**. If you submit a 200-word flash fiction, you can expect that people will give fine-grained feedback; if you submit a 4,000-word story, you can expect that responses will be a bit more broad-brush.

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 manuscript 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. 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 collection shift from first to third person after the third story?) 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 effect would it have if you tried shifting the fourth story into the first person?)
- Specific ideas for changes to what the writer has done – 'fix-its' – may or may not be helpful or welcome. Think twice about offering these, and if you do, do so with tact.
- 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 and never do it.
- Be concise in your Response Note. 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.

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 pages contain three alternative checklists you can use to guide your response.

## **Checklist 1: 'A Guide to Assessing Creative Prose'** (Source: Ian Sansom)

This guide is intended as a checklist for assessing both your own and other's work.

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 Dialogue:** 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:** correct and consistent use of grammar, punctuation and spelling. Evidence of editorial ability and practice.

**Checklist 2: 'Guidelines for Writing Helpful Letters of Response to Colleagues' Stories'**  
(Source: David Foster Wallace)

1. What has the writer set out to do? What is the story's meaning or purpose or point? Or agenda, or goal? What basic reaction do you think the writer is trying to get from the reader?
2. Has the writer actually done what she set out to do? Can you see gaps between what she thought she was doing and the way the story actually comes off?
3. Does the story really begin where the writer starts it, or should it begin earlier or later?
4. Is the story too long for what it's trying to accomplish? Where might it profitably be cut?
5. Is the story too short? Does the writer only sketch or hint at things that need to be developed more fully? If so, which elements need more fleshing out?
6. Is the story's point of view appropriate, and is it consistent? Does the writer remain faithful to the vantage point she took when beginning the story, e.g., totally omniscient, or omniscient with respect to only one character, or objective?
7. Is the story's dialogue convincing? Does it sound like real human beings? Does their dialogue help to develop the story's central characters? Why or why not?
8. Are the characters 3-D, human, complex and developed? Or are some of them only stereotypes, sketches? Which of the characters do you really feel you know?
9. Are the characters behaving consistently? Do their actions match the way the writer wants us to see them as people? Does the story give them sufficient motivation for doing what they do?
10. Is the writing natural and interesting? Does the story's narrator sound human, or is the writing puffed up and overly formal, such that the prose seems too 'written'?
11. Does the story's plot seem to move towards some climax, epiphany or other unfolding of meaning? Or does it seem slow and static (or maybe rather random or chaotic)?
12. Is the story's overall sense of proportion appropriate? Is too much time devoted to character or events that don't seem to contribute to the story's purpose? Is too little time devoted to characters or events that seem crucial to the real story?
13. If the story has left you with confusions or unanswered questions, what are they?
14. What are the strongest points of the story as it stands, the elements that have the strongest effect?
15. When revising, what two or three things seem most important for the writer to work on in order to make the story more successful?

### **Checklist 3: 'A List of Craft Questions to Take into Consideration'** (Source: Matthew Salesses, *Craft in the Real World*)

Here are a few items to investigate while reading your peers' and your own work. Ask yourself these questions, then address them where appropriate. Note that this list is just to get you started, that it is by no means exhaustive, and that our definitions will change as we go. There is much more that could and should be considered.

**Action:** What happens? What is the reason it happens? Is it linked causally? Is what happens satisfying? Does it work thematically? Does it reveal character? Is anything happening? Is enough happening? Is too much happening? How do you make sense of the various actions together? What do the actions mean?

**Agency:** Who causes the action? Whose decisions move the plot forward? Whose desires? Does the main character have the most agency? Or are there other forces that have more agency? Why is the protagonist the protagonist? How does agency work in the world—who has it and who doesn't? Why? How do the characters show their agency? How do they use it or give it up? How can they have more agency? What does the amount of agency the characters have say about their position in society? About an aesthetic sensibility? About theme?

**Arc:** How does the protagonist change (or try hard to change and fail)? (Character arc) How does the world change or fail to change? (Story arc) Are these arcs satisfying/resonant? Do they work together? What do they mean about the characters, the world, the theme, the purpose of the story, the audience?

**Audience:** For whom/to whom is this piece written, ideally? How can you tell? How does it affect the writing? What expectations are being assumed? Met? Undermined? Disregarded? What tradition does the work fall into? What kind of publication would this be published in? Is there a regional audience? Gendered? Raced? What is explicit and what is implicit? What would more or clearer focus on audience mean for the story? What would it look like?

**Characterization:** Does the audience have a clear vision of who the characters are? What makes a character different from any other? Are they described via physical details, age, gender, locale, socioeconomic status, race, sexuality? What is left out and why? What does characterization say about theme, purpose, audience? Do we know the characters' wants and fears? Toward each other? Toward themselves? Toward the world? Is it clear where they work? Live? Do they have families, friends, lovers, enemies, frenemies? How much does the audience need to know to understand the characters' particular identity positions in the world? Are the characters shown through decision and action? Otherwise? Why? What is their attitude in a given situation? In general?

**Conflict:** What is standing in the way of the protagonist (and other characters) getting what they want? Does this conflict escalate/complicate as the story progresses? Does the story let the characters off the hook? Why? Does this conflict come from outside and inside? Is this a story that leans toward fate or toward free will? Do the various conflicts work together thematically? If there is no conflict, what does the work of conflict in the story? What changes how things are desired or how those desires are understood?

**Context:** What information does the story need to present in order to make sense to its audience? Does the story present too much information for its audience? Too little? In the right places? What larger context does the story engage with? What larger context does it disregard or assume? Does the material give the appropriate information to make sense of where things are in the story/on the page? Do we get information too early? Too late? How does the story convey information? How could it convey information more efficiently?

**Grounding:** What clues does the story give to its audience to situate the story in time and space? Do we know what is happening? Who the characters are? What the premise is? When time is

passing? How much time has passed? Should we know these things, if we are or are not the audience?

**Inside/Outside Story:** Is there an inside and outside story going on—i.e. is there an internal change happening vs. an external change happening? Is there action and change both outside of the protagonist and within her/him? For example, the protagonist chickens out, his wife has an affair, the protagonist faces a lion vs. the protagonist feels himself come alive and change for a brief instant into the man he wants to be (“The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber”). The first is the outside story, the second the inside story.

**Language:** How is the language being used appropriate to the story, situation, characters, etc.? Syntax, diction? For the audience? What does it reveal about characters, audience, theme, world? Where does it seem to pick up in energy? Where does it seem to lose energy? Why? What sounds does it traffic in? What rhythms/meters?

**Pacing:** What is the balance of summary and scene? Does backstory slow the story down or help deepen the stakes? How much time do we spend with the most significant characters and actions of the story? How much do we spend on less central things (to the audience)? What can be cut? What should be added? How does the author’s “breath” change throughout the story?

**Perspective/Point of View:** Is the point of view clear and consistent? What does the POV choice mean thematically? Aesthetically? Does form match content? Is the psychic distance appropriate? Too far? Too close? Not enough variety/movement? Whose story is it? Would first or third person (or even second) work better? Why?

**Raison d’Être:** Why this story on this particular day, at this particular time, in this particular place? Is this the most important moment in this character’s life? Is this the right moment to tell the story? What is going on at the point of telling?

**Setting:** How does the setting affect the story? How does it factor into what happens and who people are? Why this setting and no other? Does the setting appear on the page both explicitly and implicitly? Does it affect the inside and outside story? How aware of the setting are the characters? Is the narrator? Is the story? How aware of the real world is the story?

**Stakes:** Is it clear what stands to be gained or lost during the events of the story? In the telling of the story? Between the story and the world? Are the stakes high enough in each case? Are they different for different characters, for different audiences? Does the protagonist care what happens? Why? How? What are the story’s objective stakes? What are the story’s subjective stakes? Do the story stakes rise as the story progresses?

**Structure:** Do the passages of the story appear in the most meaningful order? What is the meaning? Is it different for different audiences? Do early sections of the story foreshadow later parts? Should they? Are transitions effective? Are all scenes “doing something” to advance the story in the order that they are in? What is the audience expected to remember from earlier in the story? What is the audience expected to forget? How is the story organized and how does that help accomplish (or not) the story’s effect? How does form represent/do justice to content? How would the story be different if it were organized differently? What does the structure say about how we make meaning in the world?

**Tone:** How is the story oriented toward the world? The narrator? The characters? Is the story supposed to be funny? Dark? Melodramatic? Campy? Etc. Does it depend on the audience? Why? What in the story gives you this feeling? How does the story convey its tone? Through what other elements? Setting? Style? Stakes? Characterization? Voice?

**Voice:** How is the story told? How much is narrative summary? What is in narrative summary and why? Are there parentheticals? Italics? Where is the emphasis? Why? How old is the narrator or

point-of-view character? How educated? Cultural background? Formal? Informal? What makes this voice different from any other? Why this voice and not another? What is shown and what is told? Why? What are the metaphors used and how do they create a sense of voice? How much detail comes into play and what kind of detail? Who is telling the story? Why? How do you know? How are they addressing an implicit or explicit listener?

**Vulnerability:** What does the story risk? How is the story the author's and the author's alone? Does the story challenge the status quo? Does it challenge its characters enough? Does it challenge its author? What is still in hiding?

**Beginning:** Does the beginning introduce us to characters and situation and stakes effectively? Does it set up our expectations for the rest of the story? Does it teach us the rules of the story? Is it extraneous? Does it explain too much/not enough? Where does it suggest the story might go? How does it establish audience? How does it encourage its audience to keep reading? What does it "promise" its audience? What does it "demand" from them?

**Ending:** Does the ending fulfil or undermine expectations set earlier in the story? How so? Or how not? What does this mean? Are the audience's questions answered or addressed or purposely and satisfyingly left unanswered? Should more happen? Less? Would the answer be the same for the ideal audience? Does the ending explain too much/not enough for that audience? How has it delivered on or subverted the expectations the story set up in the beginning? What does it mean to read the story teleologically/what does the ending mean to how we make meaning of the action in the whole? What does the ending tell us about what a story is and does?

## Recommended Reading

Here are some of our current favourite short stories and novels to help think through aspects of craft and process such as voice, character, narrative, plot, structure, dialogue and setting.

Lucy Caldwell, *All The People Were Mean and Bad*  
Sarah Hall, *The Grotesques*  
Will Eaves, *Murmur*  
Jo Lloyd, *The Invisible*  
Zadie Smith, *NW*  
Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox*  
Eimear McBride, *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing*  
James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late*  
Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*  
Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

## Some Reading About Writing

AI Alvarez, *The Writer's Voice*  
Chinua Achebe, *Home And Exile*  
Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating With the Dead*  
James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*  
James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*  
James Baldwin, *The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy*  
Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*  
Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*  
Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*  
Catherine Brady, *Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction*  
Peter Brooks, *Reading For The Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*  
Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*  
Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?*  
Angela Carter, *Shaking A Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*  
Michael Chabon, *Wonder Boys*  
John Cheever, *The Journals of John Cheever*  
Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*  
Teju Cole, *Eight Letters to a Young Writer*  
Joan Didion, *On Keeping a Notebook*  
Will Eaves, *The Inevitable Gift Shop*  
T. S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*  
Mike Figgis, *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*  
Dan Fox, *Pretentiousness: Why It Matters*  
Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*  
Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*  
E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*  
John Gardner, *On Becoming A Novelist*  
Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*  
Edward Gorey, *The Unstrung Harp, or, Mr Earbrass Writes a Novel*  
Romesh Gunesekeera and A. L. Kennedy (eds), *Novel Writing: A Writers' and Artists' Companion*  
Patricia Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*  
Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*

Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*  
Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia*  
Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*  
Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*  
Anne Lamott, *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*  
Ursula K. Le Guin, *Steering the Craft*  
Mario Vargas Llosa, *Letters to a Young Novelist*  
David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel*  
David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife*  
Robert McKee, *Dialogue: The Art of Verbal Action for Page, Stage and Screen*  
John Mullan, *How Novels Work*  
Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*  
Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*  
Orhan Pamuk, *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist*  
Tim Parks, *The Novel: A Survival Skill*  
DBC Pierre, *Release the Bats: A Pocket Guide to Writing Your Way Out Of It*  
Francine Prose, *Reading Like A Writer*  
Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words*  
Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*  
George Saunders, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*  
Rebecca Solnit, *Hope In The Dark*  
Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*  
Ali Smith, *Artful*  
Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind*  
Zadie Smith, *Feel Free*  
Zadie Smith, *That Crafty Feeling*  
Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*  
Jeff Tweedy, *How To Write One Song*  
Jeff Vandermeer, *Booklife: Strategies and Survival Tips for the 21st-Century Writer*  
James Wood, *How Fiction Works*  
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*  
Virginia Woolf, *Essays*  
John Yorke, *Into The Woods*