



## THE WRITING CENTER

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### Writing Groups:

#### Responding to Other People's Writing

Responding to other people's writing can be difficult. Here are a few tips to get you started:

- ✓ Say something positive about the piece. Even if a piece of writing needs a lot of work, there is usually something good that can be pointed out - the nugget of a great idea, a particularly well-turned phrase, the beginnings of a good organizational structure, or a thorough understanding of the material.
- ✓ Critique the writing, not the writer. Instead of saying, "You aren't very good at conclusions," say, "This conclusion didn't really work for me."
- ✓ Speak from your own perspective, using phrases like, "My reaction to this was ..." or "I found this to be ..." rather than "this part of the paper is ..." Acknowledge that there may be a variety of opinions about the piece of writing.
- ✓ Remember that you are in a writing group to help one another improve. It does not help the writer if you see problems with his/her writing but don't mention them because you're afraid of hurting his/her feelings. Usually a writer would rather hear about a problem from the friendly, supportive members of his/her writing group than hand in a paper with problems and hear about them (with a poor grade!) from a professor.
- ✓ Talk about the way you responded as you were reading. Sometimes it's easier and more helpful to say, "When I read this sentence, I wasn't sure if the paragraph was going to be about this or about that," than it is to say, "This sentence was confusing." It can be helpful to have the whole group read the first paragraph and then predict the rest of the paper before reading further. It will help the writer to know what you expected when you began the paper and how those expectations changed as you read.
- ✓ Be specific. Instead of just saying, "The organization needs work," try to figure out where and why the organization broke down. Perhaps you could suggest a different order for the ideas in the paper or think of the kind of transition that might help make the jumps between ideas seem more logical.

- ✓ Whatever you say, imagine yourself on the receiving end of the comment. If this were your work, what would be helpful to you? How would you want people to provide you with criticism?
- ✓ Prioritize and sort your comments for the writer. What interfered the most when you read the paper or what was the hardest part of the paper to understand? Sometimes it is helpful to break down your comments into a list of "big things" and a list of "little things" that the writer could do to improve.
- ✓ Tailor your comments to the writer and his/her needs. Ask what kind of feedback would be helpful and try to provide that. Ask the writer what sections s/he is most worried about. Avoid suggesting hours and hours of revision for papers that you know are due the same day as your meeting - you can still point out bigger problems, but focus on what can be done between the meeting and the due date.
- ✓ Write out key points that you want to share with the writer. This will help you remember them and also provide a written record of your feedback.