

Critique Guidelines

Begin by saying what you think is **the “best” passage in the story** (or essay, novel, etc.) , and what it represents about the work—why you feel it represents the best elements of the story—and maybe sharing 2-3 of your favorite lines. This helps the writer understand what specific parts of the story resonate most with readers, and which lines might best exemplify a writer's style.

Then, we discuss **what elements deserve amplification or muting** (great ideas or scenes that go too fast or get too little stage time; themes or subtexts or minor characters that could be doing more dramatically) and which need muting (where does the story veer into cliché or predictability or heavy-handedness). *Every story draft has at least one component that needs amplification and one that needs muting.*

Next, we discuss **expansion and contraction**. This is largely about pacing—*are there moments that need to slow down, open up lyrically, or linger on an emotion or image?* Or, are there parts that go on too long, that feel boring, that could be condensed because you, even as an obligated reader, were tempted to skim them?

Finally, we discuss **what the story is about**—what it says about our world or the human condition that is troubling, destroying, uplifting, intense, inexplicable, or surreal. For instance, how does a post-apocalyptic story reflect something that is more buried in the contemporary world? Or, what does a story about heartbreak say about a particular, specific, and often unstated component of heartbreak? And finally, if the story veers into the surreal or absurd, how does the story dramatize, eerily and/or hilariously a mystery of the human experience that is impossible to describe (but possible to show) (Think Barthelme!)?

Sometimes, a “fun” way to close the workshop is for other students to tell the writer how they would revise the story if they were given a charge to finish it. What would they do with the story and why? This is not a way to say what **should** be done with a story, but a purely **speculative exercise** that ends a session demonstrating the vastly different ways a story can be approached in revision