Guidelines for Response Groups

The story of what goes on in readers is what we need most as writers: not evaluation of the quality of our writing or advice about how to fix it, but an accurate account of what our words did to readers. . . . When are they with us? When are their minds wandering? What are they thinking and feeling? What do they hear us saying? —Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, *Sharing and Responding*

Responding to others' writing and multimedia projects is a skill that develops with practice. Like the writing process, peer response is recursive, cycling through written and spoken conversations between writer / project creator and readers/audience. In responding to a work, we agree to answer the question: "What do you think of this?" Our answers can be most helpful when we develop our skills as attentive and honest readers / audience members.

Note: Multimedia can be defined as the integration of media objects such as text, graphics, video, animation, and sound to represent and convey information.

Each response group must develop its own process, but the length and type of the piece up for response may determine some of the mechanics. For instance, if the piece is short (fewer than two pages of double-spaced prose), the writer can read the piece aloud and readers can follow along on copies. Likewise, a multimedia presentation of five to eight minutes can be viewed/heard during the group's response time. If the piece, however, is longer, reading a text aloud or running a multimedia presentation takes away valuable response time and also doesn't give the readers/audience the time they need to absorb the piece. Writers / multimedia creators with longer pieces may want to distribute copies or make the work available ahead of time (if time and opportunity allow for it) so that group members can read or experience those pieces before it is the writer / project creator's turn in the response group.

For the Writer or Multimedia Project Creator:

Let your readers/audience know the following:
- What's the purpose of your piece?
- Who's your intended audience?
- Do you want your piece BLESSED, ADDRESSED, or PRESSED?
    o **Bless**: If you want your piece blessed, you're not ready to hear criticism yet (however constructive it might be). You want only to hear about what's working so far.
    o **Address**: If you have chosen the address option, what one problem or concern do you want your readers/audience to address? Be as specific as possible.
    o **Press**: You're ready to hear constructive criticism and give the readers/audience the freedom to respond in any fashion. This, of course, can include "Bless" and "Address."

Listen carefully when group members are responding to your piece. Take good notes. You may find yourself resisting some of the comments and suggestions, but try to remain as objective as possible during the response session. You may need to think about the feedback you receive for a few hours, days, or even weeks.

For the Readers/Audience:

If you respond to a longer piece and write comments, make sure that any handwritten notes given to the writer / project creator are legible. For spoken or written comments, always keep in mind the following:

- Does the writer / project creator want the piece blessed, pressed, or addressed?
- Be honest but kind, even if the writer / project creator has asked you to press the piece.
- Whether the writer / project creator has chosen bless, address, or press, consider these questions:
  - What did the writer / project creator do well?
  - What did you like about the piece?
  - What stuck with you (as strengths in the piece)?
  - For multimedia, what seems especially creative and effective, that exploits the particular strengths of the chosen format?
- With the address and press options, you focus on how the writer / project creator could improve.
  - Responses can be shaped through questions and statements. Use "I statements" and be specific. For example:
    - "I like the metaphor in the first section. I expected to find more references to the metaphor elsewhere in the piece. Why did you choose not to refer to it again?"
    - "What are you trying to say in this part? I got lost during the discussion of revision. I think you want us to understand the concept of revision, but only this brief section refers to the process."

Listen to your reading/audience voice. Notice where you say, "Ooh, that's a beautiful phrase!" or, "What does she mean by this word?" or, "Who's speaking now?" or, "I love this ending!" As you read/experience the piece, where do you frown, fidget, smile, or become absorbed? Use your insights to provide the writer / project creator with a movie of your thoughts, as Belanoff and Elbow call it.

Responding to writing / multimedia projects is *not* proofreading or line-editing. Writers and project creators may ask individuals in the group to act as editor for them, but such work should take place outside the response group.

After the Response Session:

Creators, carefully consider what the responders had to say.
- Did the responders help you see your writing/project in a different light?
- Did they confirm some things you had suspected about your writing/project?
- Did anything they said surprise you?
- Was anything in your writing/project misunderstood?
- What do you think you need to do next to this piece in order to create a stronger draft?

Remember, it's your writing/project, so you may accept, reject, or adapt any and all comments.