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Guidelines for Responding to Manuscripts

When you are responding to a manuscript, remember that you have been given a precious gift, the gift of a writer's words. Always treat these words with the greatest care – the same care you would give a loved one or a friend. Pay attention. Listen with heart. Make sure that your intention is always to help the writer, to allow her and her writing together to flourish. Our task is to support the writer and her work in every possible way, to help her writing grow.

At the end of our workshop, when the manuscript review has been completed, the writer should leave the session feeling energized, revitalized – something important may have shifted for her. There may be lots of ideas burbling around, perhaps as yet not completely formed, or perhaps completely formed. The feeling of what to do next may be immediate, or it may come in time. Either way, what is important is that the work is alive and growing, and the writer knows it – she can feel it in her bones.

It is this sense that we work toward and foster in our manuscript reviews – this knowingness, that the work is important, that it comes from the heart, that there is something important being said in these words. When this feeling arises, and when it has come not from empty words but from a genuine, heartfelt involvement with the manuscript, the writing will grow of its own accord, in ways that honour both the writing and the writer.

Remember that you don't need to tell the writer what to do. Just help her, to the best of your ability, to find her own way to make the piece grow.

Here are a few things for you to consider as you read and respond.

As you read through the piece, **think about what would be most helpful to you.** Write your feedback accordingly. Consider the person whose manuscript you're responding to

as well: what do you know of her or him, and how can you help? Although he is writing in a different context, Hugh Prather's advice is useful here:

Don't ask yourself what *you* would like; don't even ask yourself what any reasonable person would like. Look at your spouse, your child, your friend, and *see* what they like. Loving your neighbor as yourself doesn't mean putting yourself in your neighbor's place. Leave your neighbor right where they are. You become *them*. (*Spiritual Notes to Myself* 50)

Take time in a quiet place to read through the manuscript. Make a space for it in your life, as you would a close friend. Give yourself time to breathe the manuscript in, to enjoy its company. When you are undisturbed while you are reading and responding, when you connect with this writer's words, what you have to say will come from the heart, and it will have lasting value.

Read through the manuscript once without making any notes. Just let yourself take it in – no judgement, no thinking, no analysis. Just take the words in. Then read through the manuscript again, this time **making notes** while you read.

Always go back, as many times as you need to, to find what else is **strong** in the piece. Remember that we live in a culture that teaches us to judge, to critique, to criticize. This kind of reading is a way of distancing ourselves from the writing and the writer. Remember that each person's editor, that internal critic, likes to be active and wants to have a say – both when we write and when we respond. We need to train ourselves, again and always, to see what is working in the piece.

Don't be afraid to tell the **truth**. What did you really experience as you read the piece? At the same time, I find that the Buddhist concept of **right speech** is helpful here: speak what is both truthful and beneficial, and have a sense of timing about your words as well. It may be true that you were angry when you were reading a piece, because your dog just put a big gash in your leg, but that may not be helpful information for the writer. It may be that they misspelled a word they've been working on throughout, but it may not be the time to mention it, because there's something else you want to say that's more important.

Always remember that you're just one reader, and that your response is helpful. Honour yourself by valuing your own response – what you have to say matters to the writer.

Remember that the **writer's editor**, her internal critic, will magnify any critique. Hold this paper as a sacred and wonderful object – because it is.

While there's no law banning technical literary language, remember that there's also **no need for technical language** either. Sometimes, we can end up using this language to distance ourselves from the writing: "this metaphor seemed strained"; "I liked your use of synecdoche here." Where are *you* as reader in this experience of reading? What sang for you in the piece? Where did it start to vibrate and hum for you? Where were those parts that made your toes tingle, your mouth water, your eyes widen in fear? I encourage you

to focus on your **experience of reading**. No one can say that you're wrong if you remember it's just your response. "I" and "my" words are useful here: "my attention fell a little here"; "I found myself riveted when the red sock slipped into the mud"; and so on.

Where did you go "yes!" What do you find particularly strong and memorable? Where did you feel **confused**, or where did you find your **interest waned**? These kinds of responses are helpful.

Remember to look to the strengths first. It is my belief that we have absolutely no right to respond to a manuscript if we cannot first see its strengths. So we train ourselves, in contrast to the way we've been trained, to see these strengths, to hold them in our hands lovingly, to help them to grow.

In our writing workshop, we will follow this **format**: we'll discuss the **strengths** of the piece, often each choosing one particular strength we want to emphasize first; we'll give **one suggestion** (sometimes two or three smaller suggestions, but we aim for one) – one point that can help the writer; then we end with the **strengths**, again perhaps one particular strength we want to emphasize (it can be the same or different from before), so that the writer leaves knowing what is strong about her work.

Always, always, here is our #1 rule: **if it's not fun, we're not doing it right**. Keep it fun! Whatever we do, it should be something that makes us laugh and smile and hold our writing as the precious gift that it is – even as we play around with it, letting it be formed and reformed like clay.