**Ground Rules for Workshops at Commonword**

Commonword aims to encourage, value and manage diversity. We are committed to eliminating discrimination and providing equality for all. Our aim is that each member of a workshop feels respected and able to participate to their fullest.

All workshops members will be treated fairly and with respect. All members will be helped and encouraged to develop their full potential and the talents and resources of all members will be utilised to maximise the benefits of the workshop.

Everyone has the right to be treated equally and with respect, and to feel safe and valued. Examples of behaviour or language which undermines these rights includes, but is not limited to:

* Language that would generally be construed as sexist, racist, homophobic/transphobic or ableist
* Interruptions, both verbal and non-verbal, such as talking or leaving the room while someone is reading
* Repeated negative comments or responses, particularly if directed at individual participants
* The use of mobile phones while someone is reading or during feedback

Everyone has the right to be involved in the workshop and to give and receive feedback. The purpose of your workshop is to provide support, encouragement and constructive criticism. Examples of what this means includes:

* Feedback directly to the writer, remembering to phrase your feedback in a sensitive way
* Ask questions
* Try to be objective and to think about what the writer is trying to do
* Listen, discuss and where necessary ask for clarification or explanation
* Remember the purpose of your workshop is to provide support, encouragement and constructive criticism of creative writing.

# Guidelines for Constructive Criticism in Workshops

Workshops tend to bring together a diverse cross-section of people from different social/cultural/political backgrounds. Some may be very new to writing and feel apprehensive about sharing their work, while others may have been writing for years and feel more confident about their work. Writers of all levels of experience can find it difficult to take criticism – we can all get very precious about our writing, become protective of our ‘babies’ or feel that it us that is being criticised rather than our work. For any writer to develop their craft they have to learn to hear criticism and how to apply it to their work. Workshops should provide a useful sounding board for writers. Receiving constructive criticism should be a positive experience. It should make you feel more in control of your writing and enable you to improve it where necessary.

**General Ground Rules:**

\* Be respectful of each other and each other’s work – this means being attentive when people are reading, not talking across each other during discussion and not taking the conversation off on tangents however interesting they may be.

\* Don’t take more than your fair share of time up in the workshop – in a typical session there may only be time to discuss one poem or a short piece of prose from each writer – be aware of how long you are taking in both the reading and discussion of you work, there may not be time for everyone to share work every single session.

\* Treat the workshop as you would any other audience – practice reading your work aloud at home and if possible bring in copies to aid members’ discussion – it is hard to take in a piece of work just on one hearing.

**Giving Feedback:**

\* The purpose of feedback is to **help** your fellow writer. If you're not doing it with that motive, think about whether you should be doing it at all.

\* Feedback **directly** to the writer involved. Try to avoid them hearing your views second-hand via the grapevine.

\* Phrase your feedback in a sensitive way. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. How would you feel if this was being said to you?

\* **Try to be objective in your feedback**. Our initial response to a piece of writing is naturally going to be subjective and it is important to note these first impressions – it may absorb you, bore you to tears, excite you, make you laugh/cry/feel uneasy etc. These subjective reactions are only a starting point – as a critic you need to then identify the cause of your response. In order to develop their craft, writers need to know how they are achieving or failing in their work not that it was ‘nice’ or ‘rubbish’.

\* **Be** **specific**. Avoid vague generalisations like ‘that was cliched’, unless you can follow-up with specific examples of where the writer has used cliché. The more specific you are, the more useful the feedback is likely to be.

**\* Avoid value-laden, flowery and exaggerated language**. Put it simply and straightforwardly.

**\* Think about what it is the writer is trying to do** and avoid the temptation of turning it into your own work!

**\*** Try to think your feedback through before you start talking – this can be difficult in a workshop situation as no one likes an awkward silence, but it is better to say nothing than to make a point without conviction.

**\* Ask questions** to check your understanding of the writer’s intention – it may be that you the reader have missed something in the work or that the writer has failed to communicate clearly their intention or are perhaps unclear about what it is they are trying to do. Asking questions is often a useful way of nudging the writer into solving their own problems.

**\* Critical feedback is about pointing out the positives as well as the negatives.** There is often a tendency to focus on what’s wrong with a piece of work but it is equally important to draw attention to what’s working well so that the writer can build on those good habits.Try and be balanced with your feedback – point out the ‘positives’ before you start on the ‘negatives’.

\* **Be aware of the writer’s experience**. It’s important to avoid destroying the confidence of a new writer by over-doing the feedback. Watch people’s reaction – how is the other person taking what you are saying? Focus on the improvements you think the writer is capable of implementing. But don’t go to the other extreme of giving them a patronising pat on the back.

\* **Be willing to** **discuss it**. Remember that your purpose is to help. Go into more detail/explanation as necessary. If you've thought it out this should be no problem.

**\* Don't push!** Feedback should be offered, not imposed. It's up to the other person whether they accept it or not. They might need to think about it. They might need to take notes.

**\* Own your feedback**. Use ‘I’ statements, e.g. ‘When you used the rhyme 'car/tar' I felt that. . .’

**Receiving Feedback:**

\* **Bring in work that you are genuinely willing to workshop** – i.e. that you are open to discussing and editing.

**\* Listen carefully to the feedback you are receiving**. There may be contradictory advice being dispensed and it’s up to you to decide which suggestions to follow, but don’t just take the easiest option! The best feedback is usually the stuff you already know in your heart.

**\* Try not to get defensive**. The person giving you feedback is trying to be helpful. Avoid the ‘fight or flight’ response! Do think about what’s being said – remember there are people in the group with a great deal of experience. You may not be comfortable with what's been said, but it might bear consideration. Try not to reject other people's views out of hand.

\* You have the right **not** to take the feedback on board, but be polite about rejecting it.

\* **You have the right to** **ask for clarification/explanation**. Feel free to ask questions. Summarise or paraphrase what the other person has said to ensure understanding. Sometimes it can take days, even years, for a piece of feedback to make sense.

\* You have the right to say ‘Stop!’ when you've had enough feedback to be going on with.