

“Brilliant. Essential. This book will—and should—change creative writing workshops forever.”
—JOY CASTRO, author of *Hell or High Water*

CRAFT IN THE REAL WORLD

RETHINKING FICTION WRITING
AND WORKSHOPPING

MATTHEW SALESSSES

CRAFT IN THE REAL WORLD

Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping



MATTHEW SALESSES



CATAPULT
NEW YORK

ALTERNATIVE WORKSHOPS

1. Critical Response Process

Critical Response Process was developed by artist Liz Lerman and is mostly used for performance and theater arts. But it works for any creative art and is gaining popularity in creative writing workshops. The process consists of four steps:

1. Observations (what Lerman calls “Statements of Meaning”) designed for the author to hear how the workshop reacted to the work.
2. Questions from the artist to the workshop.

3. Questions from the workshop to the artist—these are supposed to be “neutral,” by which Lerman means, without opinion.
4. Suggestions (what Lerman calls “Opinion Time”)—if the artist gives permission.

2. Modified CRP

I often use a modified version of CRP as a starting point, from which the workshop may diverge according to the particular needs of the author and manuscript. The basic steps are below. I will go into more detail at the end of this chapter, especially regarding what students do with the workshop manuscripts before workshop even starts. Of note is that about half of the workshops in any course I teach end up doing something other than this modified CRP. If you are interested in how I pick different approaches for different stories, some of the individual options are listed later in this chapter as “Author-Choice Workshops.”

Here are the basic steps of modified CRP:

- a. The author submits the workshop manuscript with “Writing Notes” that describe her process, her in-

tended audience, and any craft decisions she made while writing and revising the manuscript.

- b. The workshop describes what they have read (such as: the audience and how the author addresses that audience, what kind of story the story is, its shape or tone or so forth, what the story is “about,” genres and craft traditions within which the story is working, etc.). This is not summary or criticism but transparency about the ways the workshop has already constructed the story in its imagination.
- c. The author responds to the description and poses a question or multiple questions that frame the discussion that follows.
- d. Discussion includes questions from both the author and the workshop. This is a conversation—readers are not allowed to say what they have already written in their peer letters.
- e. The workshop offers what-ifs and suggestions specific to each page.
- f. The author ends by naming one or two things she will try next in revision.

3. Partner-Led Workshops

In this model writers are paired up for the course according to aesthetic similarities or differences and are in constant communication with each other about their manuscripts. Before workshop, they should meet and discuss particular concerns, fears, desires, etc. for workshop and come up with a plan for how best to approach the story. (A lot of instructor-work is necessary to prepare the workshop for this task—when I lead workshops this way, I check in with each pair every week and sometimes before workshop to discuss the approach we will take in class). The author's partner should then lead discussion, taking questions and redirecting and adding commentary when necessary.

4. Only Questions from the Workshop

The workshop asks questions of the author, and nothing else, which the author may choose to answer or simply note. Questions in this kind of workshop require a lot of preparation, so that workshoppers understand and believe in the kind of questions that do not couch opinion. Sometimes, as in Jesse Ball's model, *The Asking*, which is based on a Quaker tradition, partners may be used to moderate, which again seems to work best when the partners meet before the workshop and discuss in depth the author's concerns both about

the workshop and about the story. If not the author's partner, the instructor should meet with the author beforehand and moderate the workshop.

5. Only Questions from the Author

In this model, the workshop sends the marked-up manuscripts and their feedback letters to the author before the workshop begins—at least a couple of days before, but earlier might be preferable. The author reads everything and formulates questions about topics to expand on, ways to approach revision, readerly reactions, etc. In workshop, the author leads the discussion by asking questions that the workshop answers. In my experience, students are eager to try this method, but it works better for advanced students who are more equipped to answer follow-up questions to their critiques. Instructor help is needed to keep this kind of workshop in conversation, rather than in multiple one-on-one interactions between the author and specific peers. Encourage the author to think beyond simply getting clarification. Instead, it should be a way for the author to open doors that they now know exist but do not know where they lead.

6. Only Suggestions from the Author

As in the previous model, the author reviews all feedback days before workshop. She then generates a list of “suggestions,” which consists of changes, additions, and cuts she might make. This list should be possible but not definite—in other words, the suggestions may be things the author has only vaguely thought about or things the author has thought a lot about, but shouldn’t be things the author will definitely do with revision. (It helps to encourage the author to go big, to write down things she might never otherwise attempt, to encourage her to think of the workshop as a way to test out wild ideas.) Ideally, this is a model in which the author imagines the possible versions of the story and the workshop discusses them. Workshop consists of talking through the author’s list. This is meant to prepare the author for revision. It’s also a good way to build confidence and get writers excited about going back to work on their manuscripts.

7. Everyone Workshops at the Same Time

I have run this kind of workshop in two different circumstances: for novels and for stories guided by in-class prompts (so that everyone in the workshop writes a story and revises it with the same prompts). I have found that this results in very little criticism and a lot of learning from each other’s

processes. In the novel workshop, we did this by talking each day about a different element of the novel and how the writers in workshop approached that element. For example, we might talk about plot, various models of plot, how plot works in the novel manuscripts, what troubles each writer might be having with plot, what the writers learned from each other, successes in each other's work, etc. For the prompt-guided stories, everyone began with the same extended prompt and we talked about how each writer approached that prompt differently, what strategies they used, what they could learn from each other and their differences, what went well in the process and what didn't, and then we chose together something to do in revision; this continued with each week.

This kind of workshop takes the burden off of a single writer at a time and gives everything a more collaborative feel. It requires a lot of preparation from the instructor, and sometimes a good deal of coaxing from the instructor to keep the conversation going. However, these have been some of the most constructive, encouraging, and useful workshops I have run. Generally for more advanced writers.

8. Flipped Workshop

A flipped classroom is a simple idea, but is sometimes very difficult to pull off. It means that the work that is usually done in class, such as discussion and lecture, is done outside of class, and the work that is usually done outside of class, such as writing and reading, is done in class. I have used Google Docs for flipped workshops, but other programs would work. In this model, writers workshop their manuscripts online. (The instructor should monitor the work being done.) One advantage is that more stories can be workshopped each week, though of course this also means a greater time commitment. It also allows shyer students to contribute more.

In class, writers might address lingering questions, as in the fourth model here, or talk through or work on revision. Writers might discuss their revisions or their workshops in groups or meet with the instructor one-on-one. The instructor can offer prompts and exercises based on specific concerns from the online workshops and can then give immediate feedback on process. Usually, I have had writers revise in class, whether through exercises or otherwise. For example, they might reorganize their story physically and tape it to sections of the wall, so that everyone can walk

around. Or they might work on a specific task, such as verb choices, and then share the results with the class.

9. Author-Choice Workshops

Each author chooses the parameters of her own workshop—what is permissible and not permissible, what kind of feedback to give, the order of events, the setup of the classroom, etc. The instructor should provide options such as the ones on this list and also open the floor to any additional options that might come up. (I have also chosen these options for students who might be better served by one of these models than by the modified CRP we start with.) Once, a friend told me that when she let her students decide how their workshops would go, one student wanted everyone to lie on the floor, so that no one could see anyone else. This model can also be modified to fall within certain options or guidelines, or to determine specific parts of workshop, such as feedback letters or how to begin the workshop. In partner workshops, the author's partner might make interesting choices, especially for partners who work well together.

Possible choices for individual workshops:

- a. *Scissors and Tape*: Cut up the manuscript and tape it to the wall. There are various ways to approach this. The manuscript might be cut up to separate scene from summary, to separate present story from backstory, to cut up main plot from subplots, to follow certain characters, to follow certain themes, etc. Helpful at first is to tape up the manuscript as it currently stands, simply cut into the separate sections, and arrange it with each page as a column. Then move the pieces around, but keep the page order: perhaps keep the present story on the top and put the backstory near the bottom of each column. This example presents a visual representation of how much present story and backstory is on each page, and how that proportion changes as the story moves along. Finally, move the pieces into new positions, asking what each move might mean, asking where the author and/or workshop would move pieces, etc. The instructor might lead this process, or the author, or the author's partner, or each member of workshop might make their own arrangement.
- b. *Draw the Story*: Everyone draws a pictorial representation of the story (keep this vague, as some writers may draw the structure, some the themes, etc., and the

differences are useful). These drawings are shared and explained. The author may ask questions.

- c. *Map the Story*: Similar to B, except that everyone draws a “map” of the story. After individual explanations and questions, the workshop as a whole might work together with the author to create a map of what possible finished versions of the story might look like.
- d. *Sticky Notes*: Sometimes called “sweeping” (a term I’ve heard attributed to Amy Hempel), start by identifying various elements on each page. This may utilize different-color sticky notes, such as one color for characters, one color for themes, one color for plot developments, one color for stakes, etc. Arrange these notes at first in the order they appear, in columns to represent each page. This should present imbalances that are either useful or not so useful to the story. Now talk through moving various elements around to where they might be most useful to the story. (Instead of sticky notes, I have used colored paper and markers so that the workshop can read the “notes” from their seats.)
- e. *Highlighters and Underlining*: Have everyone highlight or underline various things in the manuscript. I’ve found this particularly useful with “inside story” and

“outside story” or “character arc” and “story arc,” with identifying characterization or agency or stakes or so on in the story, and with stylistic matters. Also with identifying shifts in tense, POV, time (especially a lot of shifts in time, even in individual sentences and paragraphs). Again, this is useful in giving the author (and workshop) a visual way of understanding her manuscript. Stylistically, each writer might highlight sentences that best represent the author’s style and underline sentences that least represent the author’s style (with explanations for what the style is and why these specific sentences) or so forth.

f. *T Charts or Venn Diagrams*: These can be used to compare the beginning to the ending, one character to another, inside and outside story, an earlier draft to a later draft, etc. For example, I often use T charts to show how two different characters in a story might present two different models for the protagonist (the obvious one: mom and dad). One friend might have ended up a lawyer and unhappy while another friend might have ended up broke but content. A Venn diagram might be more useful if you also want to highlight common attributes, such as things the two

friends have in common also with the protagonist, like where they grew up and how they all wanted at one time to be rock stars, in the same band, etc.

g. *The Hot Seat:* Someone other than the author sits in the workshop's "hot seat." This could be a partner who acts as the author, other workshoppers (alone or in rotation), or the instructor. For example, the instructor might attempt to defend the choices the author made (based on the evidence of prior meetings, the manuscript, and/or notes on the writer's process), which can give the author and the workshop a sense of how each craft decision has meaning and consequence and can acquire conscious intention. Alternatively, the person in the hot seat could be a character (this works well with younger writers) who might be asked to explain why she did certain things in the story or what her life looks like otherwise or so on. The author or partner could answer for the character.

10. Defense-Style

As in a thesis or dissertation defense, the author might first present a defense of her various craft decisions, explaining why she did certain things in the story and what they mean,

even going line by line. This can be done with a “committee” made up of readers who have seen more than one draft and an “audience” made up of the rest of the workshop, or it can be done with the whole class. The workshop should ask questions that help the author clarify her intentions. However, this model needs a lot of preparation and a lot of counter-acting the power imbalance that occurs (also in a thesis/dissertation defense) when the author must be “on defense” against the feeling of being attacked.

11. Author-as-Workshopper

This is the reverse of the defense-style workshop. In this model, the author critiques the story, and the workshop attempts to defend it. This can be especially useful when the author already has a good idea of what she thinks the flaws in her manuscript are, and when workshop might simply repeat her concerns back to her. When the workshop defends the manuscript, they are put in the position of the author, and the author may learn new possibilities for the story and for how to think about the things she currently feels are flaws.

12. Debate-Style

The author submits a list of craft decisions she made in the story, along with her manuscript, and the workshop splits in half. Half the workshop defends the author's decisions while the other half critiques them. The author may moderate or defer to a partner or the instructor to moderate.

13. Elements of Fiction

This model is particularly useful in beginner workshops. From a list of various elements of fiction that the workshop has already discussed and/or is familiar with (plot, scene, structure, setting, characterization, etc.), writers randomly select one element to talk about. (Perhaps they draw from a hat.) The selection may be done on the spot (which means workshoppers should be familiar with any and all terms) or before the workshop (which allows workshoppers to prepare their remarks). Workshop covers these various elements in the particular workshop manuscript, each element led by a single participant.

Alternatively, this model can be done in subgroups, wherein each group workshops a different element (or elements) in the story and then summarizes their conversation in the larger workshop. However, this cuts off some of the

author's access to the particularities of each discussion (for good or ill).

14. Workshop the Workshop

After workshopping a manuscript, the workshop workshops the workshop. That is, they discuss what seemed to go well or poorly in the workshop, how they could do better, etc. This model contributes to improved workshops as a course goes on.