A Student's Guide to Workshopping the Ten Minute Play

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by

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Introduction

You know what it feels like. I know you do.

You're sitting in a writing class and the professor says something like, "Let's start by workshopping Jen's script." Put your name in place of mine and read that sentence again. "Let's start by workshopping *your name here's* script."

You shift your weight in your chair and realize how uncomfortable the plastic classroom chair you're sitting in really is. The circle of chairs that was arranged as a "discussion circle" when you came in and looked like fun all of a sudden becomes not so attractive and you really just want to head back to your dorm or car and *get away from this class*.

Or maybe you're like me and when your professor announces to the class she is going to start by workshopping your script, you have no idea what she's talking about. *"'Workshop' is a verb?"* you ask in your mind.

This book is the result of that question. Two years ago, I was a student in a playwriting course at Rider University. By the second week of class, we had written our first ten-minute play and my professor, Rebecca Basham, started the class with that exact sentence, "Let's start by workshopping Jen's script."

Now, don't get me wrong. I like talking about my writing. I like being the center of attention. And, I love listening to other people read my writing. But in that moment, sitting in my first playwriting course, I had no idea what Professor Basham was talking about.

Workshopping? What does that look like? What am I supposed to do?

I raised my hand.

"Professor Basham?"

She acknowledged me, "Yes, Jen?"

"What do you mean by *workshop*? I didn't know that word was a verb."

And so it began. What followed that question was a semester of some of the most powerful development sessions I have experienced. Professor Basham outlined what a workshop session should do, and by some stroke of luck, we

had students in the course who were willing to workshop, and workshop well.

By the end of the semester, I was hooked. The workshop sessions allowed each student to hear his work. We figured out how to talk about each other's writing in a meaningful way. We debated characters and plot lines and conflict trajectory. Those Tuesday night classes were some of the most powerful sessions I had ever experienced. And, my writing got better.

By the end of the semester, I knew I had to keep developing as a playwright, but I also knew I wanted to understand more about the art of workshopping. I wanted to know how to run a good workshop, and what was important about being a participant, either as an author or as a workshopper. ("Workshopper" is my phrase for the participants in a workshop session who are reading and providing responses to the script; I got tired of calling these folks "readers-slash-critics.")

I approached Professor Basham about creating a project to study the art of workshopping. Designed as an experiential project, I would run 50 workshopping sessions online, engaging playwrights from all over the world. I figured that after running 50 sessions, I would have enough material to be able to articulate the elements of an effective workshop session. I would learn what was critical to creating an environment for meaningful discussion about a script. I would gain experience as a facilitator. I would reflect on the most important features of workshop participation.

To my surprise, Professor Basham agreed to sponsor the project as a semester-long independent study. And so, it began. “The Ten Minute Play Workshop Project” was born.

Over the course of nine weeks, I had over 100 authors and workshoppers participate in 50 online workshop sessions. Each session used a web-based meeting tool to get the participants connected by web cam or telephone. I recorded

the audio of each session and then posted it, along with the script, on a blog where I published my thoughts and responses to each of the sessions *(tenminuteplayworkshop.com)*.

And from that–from connecting with playwrights in France and Brazil and Canada and the United States–I began to understand the elements of an effective workshop. You are holding those elements in your hands. They are simple and straightforward and easy to understand.

This book can be read in a couple of hours. Grab a cup of coffee and start. Or, throw your laundry in the washer and settle in. By the time your clothes are dry, you will not only know how to participate in an effective workshop, you'll know how to run one, too.

And, along the way, you may realize what I did from being a part of so many workshops: *I learned about my own writing.* It's true. While I was workshopping other people's scripts, I began to see what worked and what didn't. I learned to

articulate my responses to an author's script in a way that was clear, and able to be absorbed. And then, one night, while I was reading one of my own scripts, I heard my voice inside my head, *workshopping my own piece!*

When you learn to workshop someone else's work effectively, you will also become better at analyzing your own work. This may be the easiest way to become a better writer.

This book will prepare you to sit tall in your chair during the next workshop session you're in, whether you're a facilitator, an author, or a workshopper. And, if you want to practice your workshopping skills, come join us at *tenminuteplayworkshop.com*. The project started such a strong community of workshoppers, we can't seem to stop.

Jen Whiting
December 2012

Thank You

The Ten Minute Play Workshop Project wouldn't have been possible without help from a world of people. To each of you, *thank you.* You know what your participation meant to me.

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Thomas Constantine Moore
Rachel Arbeit
Ashanté Pickett
Thomas Koron
Dennis Agle
Chase Yenser
Theodore Kemper
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Jane Denitz Smith
Eric Sirota
Jeffrey Wolf
Tom Misuraca

I do want to give a special thank you to my family. As the Ten Minute Play Workshop project was getting on its feet, they helped fill the sessions, as workshoppers and, for my mother, also as an author. My mother and stepfather were living on a barge in the canals of France during this time and had to stand under specific street lights to get the local Internet signal and, due to the time zones between here and there, most of the sessions happened at 2:00am! It's true: mothers never stop being mothers. And, in this case, stepfathers, too.

My brother and his wife also pitched in and workshopped scripts from their apartment in Philadelphia. All along, they promised me they wouldn't reveal the pseudonyms they were using to give the project a sense of being fully established. As with most things that need developing (like every script you're about to workshop), the project needed a little help to get established and stand on its own two feet.

By the middle of the semester, the project *was* established and *could* stand on its own. Still, I was lucky enough to be able to count on family to help even this middle-aged college student take a crazy idea and make it work. Thank you Mom, Christian, Greg and Aiko.

And, the artwork on the cover? That's from my brother, too. I love his work.

Chapter One
Workshop Session Elements

Workshopping is simple. The basic elements of a ten-minute play workshop session are introductions, casting and reading the script, responding to the script, and a quick wrap-up.

There, you've finished Chapter One. Really. Go check on your laundry; it might be ready to go in the dryer.

Chapter Two
Introductions

If there is one element that most determines the outcome and level of effectiveness of a workshop, it's the introductions section. Don't be fooled: introductions do more than share names and backgrounds of the facilitator, author, and workshoppers. This is the moment in the workshop where *intentions* are established. This is also the time when the facilitator can *guarantee*

the author and workshoppers have a successful session.

Intentions? Guarantees? Yup, it's true. During the introductions section of the workshop, the facilitator elicits the intentions of all the participants (author and workshoppers). These intentions are the basis for moving forward with the workshop. If you're the facilitator, be ready to set the tone for the workshop with some very specific questions.

Here's an example of an opening that establishes the tone and intentions of the workshop:

"Welcome to Ten Minute Play Workshop session #37. I'm Jen Whiting and today's session features a script by Cate Vincent titled 'I Am Still Here.'"

This opening sentence sounds straightforward and obvious, right? It is. And, it does some very specific things. First, it establishes who the facilitator is and identifies the copyright of the material you're about to workshop. This is an

important responsibility of the facilitator, whether you're recording the session for web distribution or simply doing a session in a classroom. By introducing the author and clearly stating the title, you not only set up the focal point of the workshop, you do the author the service of protecting his copyright.

The part of this opening sentence that establishes you as the facilitator is also important. You need to do this early to insure you have control of the workshop. Yes, I said it. *The facilitator controls the workshop.* Not only does he need to have control to lead a successful discussion, it is his responsibility to make sure the comments offered during the workshop session are done in such a way that they can be heard by the author. Make no mistake, workshop sessions can–and should–have very direct responses to help the author see his script from the workshopper's point-of-view, but it is the responsibility of the facilitator to help the workshoppers know the boundaries of delivering their responses.

By establishing this control early (through your opening sentence) you will actually put people at ease. You'll be demonstrating to the author that you are actively leading the discussion (and won't let it get derailed). You'll also be showing the workshoppers that they can take the role of workshopper (and not facilitator) and that you'll keep the discussion on track, even if they begin to stray off course.

Your opening sentence needs to do all of this. Don't feel as if you have to use the opening sentence I use; develop your own. Practice it while you're on your next run, or driving home for the weekend, or in front of a mirror in your room. Deliver this sentence with confidence. Practice the tone you use. The more sure your voice is in Sentence One, the more successful your workshop will be.

Ready for Sentence Two? It's more important than Sentence One.

I struggled during the first twenty workshop sessions I led to prepare the authors to welcome responses to their work that were meaningful. Very quickly I realized that the authors were not introducing themselves and opening themselves to meaningful responses to their scripts. It's no wonder; we all think our scripts are hot, and we wouldn't be in a workshop session unless we were ready for folks to read our work. To develop a way in the introduction to have the author *beg* for responses, I solicited ideas from other facilitators and developed a Sentence Two that worked. By crafting a Sentence Two that made the author identify what he thought wasn't working in his script, the workshop had already started, without anybody knowing it.

Here's my Sentence Two:

"Cate, will you introduce yourself? Tell us a little about yourself and what parts of the script you think need attention during the workshop."

This Sentence Two establishes that the time the workshoppers are about to devote to reading and workshopping the script is for a reason. And that reason is *to make the script better.*

My Sentence Two establishes that–even before the author has opened his mouth–he is here because he thinks the script can be improved. Even if the author doesn't think this is true, your Sentence Two needs to establish that it is. Why else would you and the workshoppers be spending time on this?

Authors: when you take the microphone, so to speak, introduce yourself in a way which feels comfortable to you. It's interesting to hear where you're from (especially if the session is happening online), and how long you've been writing.

Here's what is not helpful during a workshop introduction: *if you're a published author.* Although it's wonderful that you're a successful writer, if you want to keep the playing field level

and get the deepest and most truthful responses from the workshoppers, keep your accomplishments as a writer quiet. Some workshoppers may consider themselves amateurs and will clam up if they know they're workshopping a professional writer's script.

As the author, you need to recognize how *every word you say* affects the relationship the workshoppers will have with you (and your script). Be cognizant of how you're phrasing your introduction, especially when you're identifying the parts of the script you think need attention.

Some people think that having the author pre-identify the parts of the script that need attention biases the responses from the workshoppers and that a workshop should happen without this part of the introduction. I have found the opposite to be true. By forcing the author to talk about his script in an analytical way during the introduction, the workshoppers and the author become collaborators in the process, because the

author is identifying at least one part he wants to have analyzed.

When the author does this–even for one moment–the group begins to coalesce into a collaborative team instead of a group of people who identify as "author" or "workshopper." Only the author can successfully begin this collaboration (since they own the piece of writing about to be workshopped), and they should, if they want to wring as much value from the workshop as possible.

Workshopping is as much about human relationships as it is about the script itself. The relationship that is established during the first few moments of the introduction is the foundation for the rest of the workshop. By the end of the first sixty seconds, it should be clear who the facilitator is, who owns the copyright to the script, who the author is and *that he is seeking direct and meaningful responses to his script.*

All of this needs to happen within the first minute. It's a tall order, but with practice, you can do it.

The last part of the introductions are to get the workshoppers to speak, even if only to say their names. This is Sentence Three that the facilitator needs to say.

Here's my Sentence Three:

"Robin, will you introduce yourself?"

You're probably saying to yourself, "That's obvious, Jen. I could have written that." Of course you could have, but let me explain the design of Sentence Three.

I don't define what I want to hear from the workshoppers; I simply give the first workshopper the stage. This is important because you are about to cast the script. You need to hear each workshopper's voice, and also determine if he is comfortable speaking in front of a group. I

have my pen ready and make notes in the cast of characters list while I'm listening to the workshoppers introduce themselves, since I'm about to cast the script.

It's also important to ask each workshopper to introduce himself for the very simple fact that *every human being wants to be known by his name*.

And, finally, you as the facilitator are trying to form the group into a collaborative team. By asking the workshoppers to introduce themselves, you are once again taking control of the session and establishing your role.

Pass the "introduction baton" from one workshopper to the next in an appropriate way. If you know their names, use them when you ask them to do their introductions. If you don't know their names, motion with your hand as you ask each one to do his introduction.

Introductions may seem like a simple part of the workshop, but they do very important things for the group. By the end of the introductions, everyone should be comfortable in his role and, if you're the facilitator, you will know you have done what you can to set up a successful workshop.

Summary

Here's the recap, for those of you who are reading this as you walk across campus to class:

The introductions section has three sentences (used by the facilitator):

1. Welcome to *workshop session name*. I'm *facilitator's name* and today's session features a script by *author's name* titled "*script title*."
2. *Author's name*, will you introduce yourself? Tell us a little about yourself and what parts of the script you think need attention during the workshop.

3. *Workshopper's name*, will you introduce yourself?

These three sentences:

- Establish control.
- Protect the copyright of the script you are about to workshop.
- Force (yes, force!) the authors to open themselves to meaningful responses.
- Create a collaborative spirit in the group.
- Prepare the facilitator to cast the script for the reading.

Chapter Three
Casting and Reading the Script

Now the fun really begins. The second element of a workshop is to cast and read the script.

Some workshop facilitators have the author cast the script, but I'll throw out a challenge to authors: *let it go.* I know this script is your baby, and that it's still in the teenage years, but it'll be

OK if someone else casts your script. In fact, it'll be good, for you and for the script.

Casting a script is a personal thing, but at this point, it's time for the author to begin to embrace the distance he'll need to be effective in the response section of the workshop. So authors, I know you've worked hard on your script and you may want your friends or folks whose voice you like to read certain parts, but let it go. This is your chance to hear your script in voices like those that may be cast by directors the world over.

You expect this piece to be on stage, don't you? Well, this is your teenage script's first stage. If it's strong enough, it'll do just fine. If it's not, that's important information for you–as its author–to have.

The facilitator should have been taking mental (or actual) notes on the cast sheet during the introductions and can now ask specific folks to read certain parts. It's as simple as saying, "Jake, would you mind reading 'William?'"

If you're a workshopper and are asked to read a part and you don't want to, say so. You can get out of reading a part easily. Try something like, "I'd rather just listen this time, if that's OK." If there are enough other readers, that's a fair request and one the facilitator should respect.

As the facilitator, feel free to mix genders between readers and characters. Sometimes it's fun to do that specifically, as it allows the author to hear his dialogue from a differently-gendered voice. This is sometimes the fastest way to see if the dialogue is specifically-gendered or if the author was relying upon a vocal tone to make it so.

Once you've cast all of the parts, also assign someone to read the stage directions. If possible, have a participant read the stage directions, or assign it to yourself. I use this sentence:

"I'll read the blocking stage direction throughout. Not the emotive direction, just the blocking."

I take an extra sentence here to make it clear to the readers that I'm not going to read the directions like "beat" or "angrily" or "with emotion." It helps them understand they need to be interpreting their lines appropriately, and also avoids confusion during the reading so they don't wait for me to read those directions.

Do the author a favor and don't cast him as a reader. Even if you need to double-up two character parts on one reader, it's important to let the author sit back and listen to the script. In many cases, this is the first time he's heard it outside of his own head.

What's next? Should you just jump in and read the script? I'm going to share a little trick with you here, one that helps relax the sessions, the author and the workshoppers. And, it will bring the intensity down a notch. Not too much, just a touch.

You are about to have the author's script read for (most likely) the first time, and then you are

going to lead the workshoppers through a robust response session. This is a piece of writing the author has caressed, and carried, and cared for. It was in him as an idea, and he had the mettle to put it down on paper. And now, under your guidance, he is releasing it to the world. *This is a big deal.*

Here's the trick: stop talking. Inhale, verbally. Make this an important moment. *It is an important moment.*

I try to make it sound like this:

(Beat. Inhale.) "Whew. OK. Is everyone ready? Everyone ready to start?"

This simple hesitation, this reluctance to jump in as if we do this everyday, this single moment of observance of what is about to happen–*and that it is important*–is key. It relaxes people. It shows folks that you're nervous, too, and that it's alright. The author realizes that even if no one likes his script, at least it was recognized as an important

piece of writing, important enough to get your full attention during this moment of preparation.

And then, here's what I say to kick off the reading:

"OK, let's go."

It's simple, but now everyone knows we're starting.

Next, the stage direction reader should begin the reading. If you're the stage direction reader:

- Read the title and the author's name.
- Read the time and place details.
- Read the cast of characters, their names and descriptions.
- Read the opening stage direction.

Let this opening reading set the tone for the importance of the effort. Take your time. Imagine you're reading this on a stage in front of an audience. Except for the stage, the other parts are

true. Be true to the script. Let every detail come through. Be sincere and engaged. The character readers will follow your lead.

Now, for the character readers: it's your turn to shine. Be ready for your part, even if you've never seen the script before. Think about your character from the description the author used in the cast of characters. Feel the stage beneath your feet, the lights on your face. Take on the role, even as a reader.

I want to tell you a story to illustrate one of the fun, and poignant, moments that often happen during workshops in the Ten Minute Play Workshop project. Late in the first semester of the project, we had a script that opened with a folk singer on stage at an "open mic" (Darren Caulley's script, *With You**). Caulley had recruited some of his friends to be in the workshop and Thomas Constantine Moore was cast as "Bryan." I read the opening stage direction, which revealed the open mic scene and the expectations for the "Bryan" character: he

was on the stage, singing a folk song for the first two minutes of the script.

I finished reading the opening stage directions and waited. Would Thomas read the words instead of singing them? Would this be a "pretend" reading of the script, or would he give it his best effort, even if he wasn't a singer?

You can imagine what happened next (or I wouldn't be including this story in the book). Thomas belted out the song, building the agony and intensity of the emotion for the opening two minutes. He had never seen or read Caulley's script before, and so his performance was a cold reading. Amazingly, he made up the melody as he went along, and within the first ten seconds actually had a true-to-life folk song with his own melody, *a cappella.*

Of course, this made the workshop session come to life. *But more important, it helped the author to hear the script fully.*

Thomas respected the script enough to give it his all. He knew the session was being recorded, but still he put himself out there, on the same limb with the author: the shaky and precarious limb of *exposure.*

Take some risks as you read your character. Follow the character's arc through the script. If "George" gets emotional, *get emotional.* If "Nancy" gets mad, *get mad.* If "Lyle" sings, *sing* (or do your best). If "Dolene" is a bitch, *get bitchy.* The workshop is not a time for the author to be the only one under the microscope; we all are. Become your part. It's your role in this section of the workshop. Be it.

As the script reading progresses, each participant will begin to forget he is in a workshop. The script will become the focal point, and the participants will become workshoppers.

When you come to the end of the script, everyone has a choice to make. When the final words (typically "Black Out" or "Lights Out") are read,

each person has to decide what his first words will be.

The moment immediately following the "Black Out" is critical to the next section, *responding to the script.* However, I include this moment in this part of the workshop, *reading the script*, and here's why: the author is not yet ready for the detailed responses he is about to hear. It is *this one moment* that will either keep the author's mind open to the upcoming responses, or not.

Workshops are about finding what is good in a script, and what needs attention. During this first moment, when the script has been read and is hanging in the air between the author and the workshoppers, the facilitator needs to find something that works in the script *and say it.*

Let's face it, as authors we need that first welcoming motion into the next section to stay open to the responses we are about to hear. And it's the responsibility of the facilitator to build a bridge for the author.

Whether you think the script is complete or not isn't the point during this precarious moment. Right now your job as a facilitator is to build the bridge to the response section that will invite the author to walk over it with you.

And here's the other thing: *every script has strengths.* This is the time to let your response to the script's strengths be vocalized. Here are some sentences I use in this moment:

"Wow. I love your ending, John. Completely satisfying!"

"Whew. What a script! It's still washing over me."

"Katie, I love your characters!"

If you really feel you can't endorse a script this enthusiastically, try something as simple as:

"Nice work, Jim!"

But, right now, at this moment, you–as the facilitator–have to be enthusiastic or the rest of the workshop will fall apart. And, *you have to be the first person to speak.* You need to continue to reinforce that you are in control of the workshop and that you will make it successful – for everyone.

No one is ready for the response section just yet, and everyone is waiting for your cue. The success of the workshop rests in your hands right now. All it takes is one sentence to lead the workshop to the response section successfully. But that one sentence has to be positive, enthusiastic and sincere. *Build the bridge.* It doesn't matter what's on the other side of the bridge, but if you don't manage to get the workshop there, no one will ever hear the responses.

Summary

Here's the recap, for those folks that just want the bare bones version:

Reading and casting the script is simple, with three key components:

1. The facilitator casts the script, using his best judgement to make the reading successful. Don't cast the author as a reader.
2. Readers should engage in their roles, meaningfully. Lay it out there; give the author a true rendition of his characters and script.
3. The first moment of silence after "Black Out" is critical to the success of the response section. The facilitator must build the bridge to the response section by setting a sincere, positive tone.

** You can hear the workshop session of Darren Caulley's script "With You" (with Thomas Constantine Moore's impromptu folk-singing performance) at tenminuteplayworkshop.com. Caulley's script was workshopped in session #39.*

Chapter Four
Responding to the Script

Here we go. This is the meat of the workshop. Get out your knife and fork and let's dig in.

And, I mean that specifically. Get out your knife and fork. As a group of participants in a workshop session, we're here to dig in to what works in the script and what doesn't. But, we'll

do this with a knife and a fork. We'll have manners. We'll be civilized.

The script you just read (or heard) is in the workshop because the author thinks it's at a point where it is ready for a response. It's a teenager. The author knows it's not yet finished; that's why he asked to have it workshopped. If the author felt the script was stage-ready, he would be submitting it to competitions or for production. The script is past the infant stage, but it's not yet fully mature. The workshop is a rite of passage for a script, a step that helps the author change a teenage-script into a mature script. After this, he may release the script to the world, to have it stand on its own. But, not yet.

Think about teenagers you know. And then, think about their parents. Not only are the teenagers fragile in their psyche, so are their parents! A teenager has been under his parent's roof for a long time. He's a facsimile of his parents; he's *a part of* his parents.

So is it, too, with scripts. *The words came out of the body of the author.* They were born of the author and–like a child–are *a part of* the author.

During the response section of the workshop, take care with the script as you would with someone's child. Treat the parent (the author) as you would want to be treated. This is a rite of passage for the script, yes, but it will only be effective if done with a knife and a fork, in a civilized way.

Initial Responses

The facilitator starts the response section with a call for "initial responses." I use this sentence to open the response section:

"OK, let's get started. Initial responses to the script? What worked best in this script?"

This sentence opens the door for initial responses that are *positive*. If you're a workshopper, make sure your first response focuses on what you felt was strongest in the script. Start at the top. There

will be time for what you feel needs attention later in the response section of the workshop but for now–to establish trust in the group–start with the script's strengths.

If the workshop group is small, every workshopper should offer one specific area or character or arc of plot that struck him as strong or well-developed. If you felt the dialogue was hot, say so. If you liked the juxtaposition of the characters, let the author know. If you were on the edge of your seat, that comment will pave the way for a deeper discussion.

If you're in a large workshop group, not everyone needs to talk in each response section, but, if you're a workshopper, make sure you contribute something to the discussion. The author wants to know how you were affected by his script. *Let him know.*

The initial responses should build a solid relationship between the author and the workshoppers. If you're the facilitator and this

isn't happening in the first 60 seconds of the response section, *make it happen!* Ask specific questions to specific workshoppers to elicit positive responses. Just as you controlled the introductions, you need to control the initial responses. Keep it positive. Highlight the script's strengths. These positive initial responses will insure the rest of the responses can be heard by the author.

Once the workshoppers have had a chance (and been led) to comment on a specific element of the script they felt was strong, lead the discussion through the following elements, in any order you feel works for the script.

- Character Development
- Plot Progression
- Dialogue Credibility
- The Arc of Conflict
- Moments That Break the Focus
- Is the Title Satisfying?

Character Development

Character development is a good place to begin. Talking about people allows us all to connect on common ground. You can start this part of the response by asking the workshoppers questions like:

"Do you feel you know the characters enough? Can you relate to them enough to believe their fears or ambitions?"

As a workshopper, when you're talking about a script's characters, focus on the relationships they have with each other. Ask yourself if you know enough about each character to know if you would want to share a cup of coffee with him. If, by the end of a script, you aren't sure if you like or dislike each of the characters, their personality isn't obvious enough. It's not bad to dislike a character. In fact, if you find yourself thinking, "There is no way I would want to spend time with that character!" the author has succeeded in

showing you enough about the character's personality to garner a visceral response.

Don't disparage a character simply because you don't like him. In fact, congratulate the author on achieving a level of believability that makes you know you *don't* like a character.

If you do like a character, let the author know. But, more important, point out *what* in the script drew you to the character. Do you like that he revealed his fears early on? Do you like that he was sexy, or coy, or that the author let him be affected by another character?

Do you feel as if you know a character enough to become a part of his story? Is there enough backstory to ground you in his plight? Focus on these points and, if any one of them isn't strong enough for you, craft your response in a way that gives the author a specific point of departure for where you lost the thread of the character's development.

Here's an example of a sentence you can use to explain why a character's development is weak in your mind:

"I was with *character name* up until the point she *did something specific*. But when she *did that specific thing,* I couldn't see her doing that. Her personality up to that point made me doubt her motivation."

The key element in talking about characters and their personalities and motivations is to help the author see what you are seeing. You don't know the characters like the author does. Remember, authors walk around with these characters in their heads all day, imagining them and then using dialogue to bring them to life. Help the author see where he needs more connective tissue to bridge the outer motivation and the inner motivation of a character into believable actions.

Plot Progression

Plot progression is one of the elements of a script that nearly always gets unanimous agreement by workshoppers. By that I mean this is not a point of personal preference, like other elements. If a plot breaks down in its progression, everyone knows it. Well, except perhaps the author.

You can start this section of the response with a sentence like:

"OK, plot progression. Did it flow? Did it make sense? Where did you get derailed or confused?"

By opening this discussion with both positive and negative questions, you begin to open the door to execute the trust you have been cultivating between the workshoppers and the author. You are saying that this is a good time to begin talking about the weaknesses of the script. Waiting until this part of the response section will make the comments about script weaknesses seem natural, appropriate, and appreciated.

The transition you make from “Did it flow?” to “Where did you get derailed or confused?” is specifically done by your middle question, “Did it make sense?”

Using two yes/no questions to open this discussion and following them immediately with an open-ended question will encourage the workshoppers to get more specific about their responses. If they don’t dive into the “where did you get derailed” with details and examples from the script, probe a little harder and specifically ask for examples. You can lead this with a comment of your own:

“On page eight, at the top, I was confused about who had left the vial of poison out.”

Model for the workshoppers the kind of responses that are helpful. And workshoppers, *get specific*. The best session an author can have is when he can’t keep up with taking notes as you tell him where the script lost you. Give exact spots in the

script where you lost a progressive thread of action.

Now, for authors: let me just come out and say it. Get your big-girl panties on. Workshops that use the traditional gag order–where the author can't speak until the very end–are simply a way to handle immature authors. The most effective workshops I have been involved in were those where the author acted so maturely that he started *workshopping his own script,* right along with the workshoppers! Talk about maturity!

If you find yourself starting to defend why you wrote something a certain way, stop. Don't. *Zip it.*

If you find yourself forming a rebuttal to a comment from a workshopper, *you are missing the point.*

If you find yourself not writing down the ideas the workshoppers are offering, do us all a favor and *stop the workshop right there*. If you aren't ready to hear someone else's response to your

script yet, *that's OK*. Just don't waste our time. Sit with your script a bit more. Mature it past toddler stage and come back when it's ready.

I don't believe in the gag order. I expect an author to know when his script is ready to be workshopped, and to have participated enough as a workshopper to understand how annoying it is for an author to be defensive during a workshop.

Cowboy up. You're a writer!

Dialogue Credibility

Dialogue is the crux of the matter. Take some time to talk it through as a specific section of the response.

Some authors are so good at telling the story through dialogue, you'll beg them to turn their ten-minute play into a one-act or a full-length play. If you feel that way, it's probably because the dialogue is *hot*. Make sure you tell these authors how you feel!

Talking about dialogue is what helped me to see most clearly where my own writing was falling apart. During a workshop in late October of the first semester of the project, I found myself saying, "The dialogue stops *telling the story* and starts *telling me about* the character. And that makes it fall flat. I don't want it to be so explicit. I want more intrigue, more suspense, as I watch the character unfold."

And then, just as that comment was leaving my mouth, I realized that I was talking about a problem I have in my own writing, too. Voila, I was *workshopping my own work during someone else's session.* Wow!

If you feel the dialogue is flat and one-dimensional, say it. One easy way to test if dialogue is not specific to a character is if you have to flip back to see which workshopper is reading which character. If the dialogue doesn't define the character with every word, and you have to *remember* which character is speaking from your casting list, let the author know.

One more story from a Ten Minute Play Workshop session may illustrate a point about dialogue. We were workshopping a script with a rough-and-tumble male character who brings flowers to an apartment which has a boyfriend/girlfriend couple living in it. The girlfriend complains that this guy is harassing her and that he should stop. Not to give the end away but... well, you'll have to go listen to the script to hear the ending; it's that good. (It's Session #18, Stephen Baily's script, *A Dozen Roses,* on *tenminuteplayworkshop.com*.)

Anyway, this particular session had a workshopper in it who is from Brazil (Altenir Silva, a movie and television writer from Rio de Janeiro). I cast Silva as the rough-and-tumble character mostly by accident. Now, Silva doesn't speak English as his first language, but he did a great job with the role.

When we started discussing the dialogue in the script, everyone in the session agreed that the rough-and-tumble character should be directed to

have an accent. Hearing this character's words with Silva's accent–and the implied notion that this character was not speaking in his native tongue–introduced a *vulnerability* that balanced his personality, which made him more believable. This was a stroke of luck, but it made me realize that dialogue is the deepest of all script elements and needs full attention.

The Arc of Conflict

Talking about conflict is typically the shortest part of the response section of the workshop. Here's how it usually goes:

Someone says, "I wanted more conflict in the script."

And then, *everyone agrees.*

That's it. Seriously. In all 50 sessions we did in the first semester of the Ten Minute Play Workshop project, not once did we say, "Oh, that script has too much conflict, dial it back a bit."

This section of the response typically draws out the most ideas for new angles in the script. Conflict is easy to devise but hard to execute. Flooding the stage with new ideas about how to deepen the conflict is a great way to nudge the author to deepen it, even if just a little.

Authors: take in all the suggestions. You don't have to use them, but they might lead you down a new path. And that path might be fun.

Moments That Break the Focus

This is a question that came to me from my coxswain experiences. As an adult, I got hooked on being a coxswain for the local rowing club. Every morning, I would don a microphone and squeeze into a seat in the rowing shell that is built specifically for the coxswain. I would steer the boat and try to help the shell move faster. When appropriate, I'd alert rowers that their blade was going into the water before everyone else's, or that the height of their handle was off during the recovery portion of the stroke.

In rowing, the most efficient way to move a boat is not necessarily by having the strongest rowers. No, the surest way to create speed in rowing is through *synchronicity.* Everyone moving together is the goal, and the coxswain is the one who helps the rowers achieve that during a race.

One of the ways I learned to help the rowers move as a single unit was by using the call, "Two-seat, you're breaking my view." Meaning, "Hey, guy in the second seat, your oar is moving differently from everyone else's. You're noticeable, and that's bad when we're trying to achieve synchronicity. Shape up!"

When responding to a script, think about if there was a moment that "broke your view." Did the focus of the character's motivation get broken by an extraneous action or sub-plot? Did a relationship change in a way that felt unnatural and counter to the aims of the script? Did the energy in an interaction shift without cause? These are some of the things that can break the

focus and cause the script to slow down, just like a rowing shell when the rowers aren't in synch.

And, these are the things that a first reading of the script will uncover. Help the author by pointing out these distractions; he'll thank you for it.

Is the Title Satisfying?

Titles are personal devices. I've seen authors so attached to a title they can't stand to hear it doesn't work. But what do I mean when I say "It doesn't work?" Here's what workshopping a title can help the author see:

- Does the title entice you into picking up the script, or coughing up the money to see the show? Is it intriguing enough?
- And, more important, by the end of the script (or the show), are you satisfied that you know the meaning and significance of the title?

These two questions are critical, and will help guide a discussion of titles in a meaningful way.

If a title didn't make you want to read the script, the author needs to know that. So many scripts are given a title before they really have form or, conversely, get a title slapped on them simply because the script is going to workshop and needs one, pronto.

I think titles are like bikinis. They show off the good stuff, and can't hide the bad.

The second part of the title discussion harkens to what we want to feel as human beings: smart. *We all want to feel smart.* If, by the end of the script, I still have no clue what the title means, I'm going to leave the script (or worse, the theater) dissatisfied.

Make sure the title leaves the reader feeling smart. During the workshop, help the author think about whether his title is intriguing enough to make one want to figure it out. And, by the end of

the script, one needs to know exactly what it means.

Authors, I know you get attached to titles. If your workshoppers are telling you they don't get it, think of what it feels like to hear an inside joke and not be a part of it. That is how a weak title makes people feel.

Titles can alienate readers or they can make them feel included. Listen to the responses you get from the workshoppers about your title and treat them like gold. A good title may be the difference between an inclusive script that people love and understand (and recommend to their friends) and one which doesn't even get opened.

Summary

Here's the recap, in case you've been up all night working on the title of your latest script:

The response to the script is done with a knife and fork. That's my way of saying we are

civilized as we offer responses to an author's work.

The responses should (at least) focus on these elements:

- Initial Responses (positive)
- Character Development
- Plot Progression
- Dialogue Credibility
- The Arc of Conflict
- Moments That Break the Focus
- Is the Title Satisfying?

And, during this section of the workshop, authors should listen for the gems they are being offered by the workshoppers. No rebuttals, no defensiveness, no explanations as to why your way is the right way.

Listen. Absorb. Appreciate.

Chapter Five
The "Quick Wrap Up"

Whew. That was intense.

Whatever transpired during the response section of the workshop needs to be brought to a close in a way that satisfies the author and the workshoppers. And, since the script is being workshopped by human beings, that means giving

everyone a chance to share his "last thoughts or responses" in a way that closes the session.

The facilitator also needs to acknowledge that everyone's time is valuable and, even if the workshop could go on for another ten minutes, *it is always better to end before you run out of things to say.*

The "Quick Wrap Up" phrase starts this section. If you're the facilitator, you should be keeping an eye on the clock. Here's a schedule (in minutes) that works for a ten-minute play workshop session:

- 0:00 - 2:00: Introductions
- 2:00 - 3:00: Cast the script
- 3:00 - 13:00: Read the script
- 13:00 - 23:30: Respond to the script[1]
- 23:30 - 25:00: The "Quick Wrap Up"

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[1] If your response session is rocking and rolling, keep at it! Just make sure to bring it to a close before the workshop runs out of steam.

At twenty-three minutes into the workshop, you should be looking for a place to break in and say:

"Yes, yes... I'm sorry I have to cut this great discussion off, but we're getting close to the end of the workshop and I want to have time for everyone to do a quick wrap up."

Typically, whoever was speaking will interrupt you and finish the point he was making a moment ago, and *that's just fine.* You're thirty seconds ahead of schedule (purposefully), so let him come to closure. Then, state your intention again. Here's the sentence I use:

"What a great workshop session. Thank you all so much. Before we end, let's do a quick wrap up. *Author's name,* do you have any specific questions you didn't get answered already?"

This question does two things:

1. It gives the author a chance to probe into a specific area.

2. It reminds him that he has had a lot of questions answered already.

Typically, the author is so overloaded with the workshop responses that he will simply thank everyone and comment about how useful the session was. For authors: this is just fine. Workshop sessions present a lot of new ideas and, unless you do have other specific questions, it's just fine to start to bring the tempo down and simply thank everyone for their responses.

Since we don't use the gag order during workshops, this time really is to let folks reflect on the goodness of the workshop and bring some closure to the session. And–for the facilitator–this section needs to be managed as specifically as the opening introductions.

Once the author has had his chance to ask more questions or simply to thank the workshoppers, turn the attention to the workshoppers. I typically say something like:

"Does anyone have any closing comments for *author's name*... anything you didn't already mention?"

This sentence does two things:

1. It opens the door for any remaining comments, but in a group-oriented way (instead of individually), which means folks typically will simply murmur a positive comment about how much fun they had or how great the session was. (Remember, workshop sessions are made up of *all* the participants. *If you've led the group effectively, the session will be great and they will feel it.*)
2. It leaves the author with the notion that there may be other script elements they need to think about that didn't surface during the workshop session.

The last part of this section is to thank everyone, *individually.* I mean it. As the facilitator, you need to acknowledge everyone who contributed to the

session. Remember, people want to be called by name. And by this time you should have, at least, written down everyone's name, so *use it to thank them for their time* and invite them to continue workshopping.

The last thing I do to signal the workshop is over is to use a sentence like:

"Again, I want to thank everyone for his contributions to this session; I had a great time and enjoyed workshopping with you. And, I can't wait to see this script on stage. *Author's name,* stay in touch about this, will you?"

That's it. An effective workshop, regardless of the maturity of the script.

Whether you're the facilitator, the author, or a workshopper, each participant has a significant role in the success of a workshop session. Sticking to the core principles will insure every workshop gives back to all the participants in a meaningful way. And, it should improve the

scripts that are being workshopped. Isn't that the point?

Summary

Here's the recap, for those folks who've been working on their next script instead of reading this chapter:

The "Quick Wrap Up" uses these three sentences:

1. What a great workshop session. Thank you all very much. Before we end, let's do a quick wrap up. *Author's name,* do you have any specific questions you didn't get answered already?
2. Does anyone have any closing comments for *author's name...* anything you didn't already mention?
3. Again, I want to thank everyone for his contributions to this session; I had a great time and enjoyed it all. And, I can't wait to see this script on stage. *Author's name,* stay in touch about this, will you?

These three sentences allow the facilitator to close the session in this way:

- Allow the author to ask any final questions, but more important, lead him to thank the participants for their responses.
- Allow the workshoppers to finish any thoughts they have, and have them feel they have been a part of something successful.
- Thank everyone for his time and contributions.
- Bring closure to the session and signal the session is over, but that the work of the author may not be.

Chapter Six
Workshopping Principles

If you've only got ten minutes to prepare for participating in a workshop, read this chapter; it contains the workshopping principles the Ten Minute Play Workshop sessions depend on.

Workshopping Principles for Participants

Workshopping a script is tough. On one hand, you want to be true to the workshop and respond to what worked in the script and what didn't. On the other hand, this is a piece of writing that a human being has done, and if you come out of the gate like a bull, he'll stop listening, and whatever you say will be lost.

But, make no mistake, there is an art to this, one I'm learning more and more about as I spend time participating in workshops of stage plays and screen plays.

Here are the Ten Minute Play Workshop Project's *Principles of Workshopping:*

- "Feedback" has no place in a workshop; clear and articulate responses and ideas for improvement do.
- Workshopping is a luxury for authors, and for the folks workshopping the script.

That's right, workshopping is a luxury for all of us. Think about it: people are reading your work, people are listening to your work, with the intent to help you hear your own words more clearly, to make your writing more poignant and more powerful. And for those doing the workshopping, it's a chance to be articulate with critique, to express how the script moved you, or where the light grew dim and you lost sight of the characters or the storyline. What could be better than that?

The entire world of feedback mumbo-jumbo is useless here. The feedback-sandwich is dead. In fact, feedback is dead. Everyone knows when they're being setup for the "bad news" about their script. To be most effective, we need to understand that there is no such thing as "bad news" in a workshop.

How can we be most effective while workshopping? Some guidelines:

- Pay Attention. You have a job to do, whatever your role. Be prepared to do it. If

your mind is somewhere else, excuse yourself.

- Absorb the script. If you're listening, close your eyes, sit back, relax. If you're a reader, get into it, be your character. If you're an author, begin to embrace the distance you'll need to see your work from a new perspective.
- Be articulate. When you're discussing an author's work, be specific. If you had a visceral response to a certain character or scene, figure out why and share it. If a bit of dialogue wasn't deep enough, cite it. If you lost the thread of the story, find exactly where you lost it and point it out. If you loved a certain section or phrase or character, say so. If you're going to workshop, *you've got to be specific.*
- Respect the writing. I bet you think I'm going to say "be kind in your comments," but I'm not. By "respect the writing" I mean *show up, have some guts, be bold*. As writers, we're only as good as our last piece,

> and workshopping is the process by which we exercise our characters and try out the story before going public with a script. Once we put a piece to press, it's done, so we owe it to each other to show up and be direct with our responses to the script. If you see some way to grow the characters or the voice or the story of a piece, have the guts to say it.

Workshopping is like participating in a good race. My job as a competitor is to drive you, my fellow competitor, to your best performance. Ever. *Feedback has nothing to do with making something better.* In fact, looking back is a waste of time. Workshopping is about looking forward, helping to find the things that will make the script better, stronger, more resilient.

Workshopping Principles for Authors

Being workshopped is a luxury for an author. That's right, a luxury. It's not something that happens everyday. When it does happen, be ready for it.

What does being ready for a workshop mean? Some guidelines:

- A workshop is not a judgement; it is a response to a reading of your work that has the sole purpose of helping you understand how other people hear your script.
- When your script is being read, don't read along. Listen. Close your eyes. Pretend you're in a theater and the guy next to you is coughing. Do your characters come through with the subtlety you want? And, are they strong enough, even over the sound of that guy coughing? *Listen.*
- When you hear comments about how people were affected by your work, again, listen.

Listen slowly. *It is unnecessary to form changes or responses or rebuttals.* Simply listen. You won't get this opportunity all the time, so take it in.

- *You do not need to defend your work.* You do not need to explain your work. In fact, don't offer any explanations about why you did something-or-other in the script; take in the responses and the ideas for improvement and let them be. *Ideas for improvement do not need to be adopted, they simply need to be collected.*
- Ask specific questions about plot development or voice actuation.
- Ask if the script has the pace you wanted. Does it flow?
- Ask if a set design idea worked.
- Ask if the title feels right.
- Ask, ask, ask. This is your chance to get specific ideas about what is working in your script. This is also your chance to

understand where you lost a reader or a listener. *Ask, ask, ask.*

- Did I mention not to explain or rebut or defend your writing? Yup, I did. But I'm going to mention it again: *Do not explain or rebut or defend your writing.*

That's it. You're done. And, your clothes are probably dry by now.

Put this book down and *go workshop!*

About the Author

Jen Whiting is a writer and a student. She earned her bachelor's degree from Rider University in her mid-forties and is currently pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Queens University.

About the Ten Minute Play Workshop Project

The Ten Minute Play Workshop Project hosts online workshopping sessions for ten-minute plays. There is no membership fee, rather each author simply gives back to the workshopping community by participating in a couple of sessions as a workshopper for each script he has workshopped. All you need to participate is a connection to the Internet or a telephone.

Join in the fun!

tenminuteplayworkshop.com