

49 WRITERS TEACHING TIPS

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- 1) **Hit the ground running.** Send out an e-mail to all participants outlining your expectations and goals for the class. Send out all handouts as word or PDF documents, and make sure they know to prepare them before arrival. Ask that everybody come with ideas to work with—either ideas already in progress but far from finished, or brand new ideas a person would want to develop.
- 2) **Start of class:** Have everybody introduce her/himself. Ask what they're reading (because this will give you a clue as to what they value as writers). Ask them to talk in general terms about what motivated them to take the class (this may get you a clearer picture of the experience level of the different writers). Ask people who've been published to elaborate. I always warn them that it's highly doubtful a finished product will be ready for an audience in a weekend or even several.
- 3) **Be a good listener.** Hear all students' concerns. Listen when they talk about the pieces you asked them to read to learn what they took away from them. Especially give plenty of time for them to voice comments and opinions. It's OK if they disagree with you, OK if they come up with wholly original interpretations different from yours. Remember, they're the students. Meet them where they are.
- 4) **Mix discussion** of what the class has read with your information and with regular intervals for them to write. With luck, you should find that students jump out right away into their writing—even if the reading material may seem tangential to their own projects, the discussion should push students into fresh looks into their own work.
- 5) **Write and stretch.** I would stress again time to write and stretch breaks. Write on your own work as they write on theirs—model your suggestions. Remember your concentration as teacher is probably more focused than students. Give them breaks.
- 6) **Ask how they are doing.** Take questions about technique and craft. Let questions be conversations; don't kill them right away with a quick answer. Remember, people are learning things about their own methods through the questions they ask. And students will offer excellent ideas, too. At bottom may be doubt: Is this working? My belief is that an idea can always work even if the very paragraph, sentence, or idea doesn't seem quite right. Students are finding their way; encourage them look even if they may feel like they are groping.

- 7) **Nurture the ideas.** It should be evident there's a lot of ad-libbing in a class I teach. I'm learning from the class through their questions and observations where we need to go. Share your ideas about technique, but do not suggest they are doctrinaire for any genre. Keep stressing that people are working on their own ideas, but within reason allow yourself and other students raise questions about the author's work. Be careful— invention is a delicate stage in a work. Don't short circuit a person's idea, and don't second guess the thinking behind it.
- 8) **Stress importance of revision.** There will be little (probably no) time for serious revision. Offer some guiding principles, but stress once again that a thoughtful draft can take a lot of time. Stress taking their time on revisions and that getting stuck is part of the process—a good part because this means the writer has invested in his material.
- 9) **Focus on the big picture.** If you workshop material, accent the positives. Allow for big suggestions, but don't allow nit picks that will discourage the. A writer's grammar improves with his investment in his work.
- 10) **Encourage completion of work started.** Encourage the class to take home and finish what they started no matter how displeased they are with their draft so far. Revision will make them better writers even if the work ultimately disappoints the writer. Regardless, the writer has learned something (if only he/she could focus on the learning and not get bogged down with dissatisfaction).
- 11) **Allow for reading and positive critique.** Have the willing read an excerpt out loud. A good chance for everybody to hear each other's work. If there is to be critique here, keep it positive. Get the class out the door thinking of revision and completion.