

(& respond to)

What to listen for in new group writing

Kate Murphy (Sligo, Ireland):

- The unusual image rather than a surfeit of adjectives or adverbs: "Her toenails are still painted blue to match her bikini, but they're all chipped now."
- Connection that causes you to see things from a different angle: "You have to be careful and talk to the seedlings gently, lifting them by the roots without tugging. Imagine you are brushing your little girl's hair."
- Voice: Is there more than one voice in the piece and does the language remain true to the voice (like the child's in this one): "I think dying's a very difficult thing to do, and after you've done it you're too tired to do anything else."
- Selection of significant detail: "The hospital smelt of blood and old toilets and sickness."

Laurie Baron (Michigan):

- Something new in a writer's work: For instance, when the person who always uses the same-named character to enter his writing uses first person for the first time, or the one whose work goes deeper and deeper every week
- A particularly strong emotional current and what it conveyed to me
- Larger themes or movements in a piece

Bonnie Mason (Maine):

- Musicality of the writer's voice, the way the words flow
- Literary devices, such as alliteration, personification, metaphor, etc.
- Whether a distinct picture comes quickly to mind

Maggie Mears (Arizona):

- Characters we can see, feel and hear
- Action verbs
- A beginning that grabs the reader immediately, makes them suck in their breath and beg for more
- Well-developed conflict/tension
- Empathy for a character
- Vocabulary that holds our attention
- Variety of sentence length and structure
- Inner dialogue
- Dialogue that moves us along in the story

Birgitte Saltorp (Copenhagen, Denmark):

- "Veiled truths": What the narrator is trying to keep hidden from most eyes, or from his/her own self
- Sensory ingredients (sounds, smells, etc.) that give the audience strong recognition
- Rhythm and rhyme, but not necessarily end-rhymes; a beat or pulse that keeps me listening
- Where the voice of the writer grows intense, indicating more gold to be found

Enid Santiago Welch (Massachusetts):

- Originality of voice

- Fresh language
- Well-paced sentences
- Sing-song of bilingualism
- Sustained metaphors
- Transition
- Theme
- Repeated language for coherence, emphasis
- Feelings, thoughts, or images that came up for me

Alison Hicks (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

- "Hot button" words that might feel risky to the writer but need to be read back and their use affirmed
- Words, phrases, actions or descriptions that have "the ring of truth," that is, sound authentic in a deep way
- Individual language and speech patterns that help to characterize and give that authenticity: For example, regional, cultural, racial and class variations on "standard English"
- Bravery in the writing
- Things that provoke, make me think
- Things I want to hear again and mull over
- Things that provoke emotion in me
- Beauty: What moves me
- Believable action
- Tension that builds and is maintained
- Blocking: Sense of characters as particular bodies in time and space
- Sense of scene and place
- Arc: Sense of beginning, middle, end
- Structure/plot
- Clear movement back and forth in time
- Clearly handled and exploited point of view
- Smooth integration of dialogue
- Precise detail
- Specificity
- Decisions I see the writer making: To start here rather than there, to write in first rather than third person, to choose a certain point of view/a certain metaphor/a particular image, etc.

Compiled by
Amherst Writers & Artists
writing group leaders.

