

A guide for workshop leaders

Thanks for serving as a Burlington Writers Workshop Leader! A workshop leader is a facilitator, not necessarily a professor or a teacher: we are all apprentices in a craft that nobody can master. Our writers workshops are the heart of our organization, leaders evolve from the workshop experience where they develop unique perspectives to add to our collective mission; helping writers do the best work they can do. In that spirit, we honor the integrity of the workshop space, while encouraging writers on all levels to creatively explore whatever it is they wish to write. Our programming aims to be as diverse as our members, offering workshops in all genres under the umbrella of the BWW.

While some workshops follow the familiar guidelines of an MFA programs where writers submit work for feedback from their peers, others will focus on particular craft strategies, or works of literature, retreats in country settings, workshops by established authors, or engage with the greater community (readings, open mics, etc.) We are always open to new ideas, under the BWW umbrella.

How do we become leaders?

If you as a member, after attending workshops, have an idea for a workshop, bring your proposal to the programming committee for scheduling. Success is when the workshop generates excitement, serious involvement and ease: if no one shows up, changes are indicated

What is the BWW “umbrella”?

Within this value statement

- **Inclusivity**—because of the creative potential of difference.
- **Generosity**—because constructive, supportive, honest and challenging feedback meets writers wherever they are in their work.
- **Commitment**—because a membership invested in programming, growth, decision-making and literature grows the community.
- **Dialogue**—because a conversation that often challenges, but always respects, invites the generation of ideas.
- **Collaboration**—because of the wisdom and excitement gained by working with other writers and from immersing in the wider literary conversation.

There are guidelines:

- Respect for one another is a must
- The workshop is not about you, it is about the work
- Our goal is help a writer advance, not to discourage, disparage or discriminate
- No work is inappropriate for discussion, unless it is not on topic. Leaders choice.

- Complaints about a submission or leader stay within the workshop space so that all of us are given the golden opportunity to explore provocative aspects of human nature which we, as writers, need to courageously confront. Suggest trigger warnings, if appropriate.

Workshop Timeline

- Two months of workshops are scheduled in advance.
- **30 days before:** contact the [scheduler](#), to make sure you're listed on the Meetup Calendar as well as on the BWW website. Check to see that a meetup page has been created with correct information.
- On your page, if there are submissions, post the correct format:
 - double spaced, 12 pt serif type, with numbered pages.
 - File format: e.g. 1217_burlington_1 or 2 (month/day_city)
 - .doc or .pdf files only
 - Other generic info, such as links to how to post will be on the page.
- Read the posted file beforehand.
- You may want to contact the writer
 - If the work is an incorrect genre for this workshop
 - If you want to discuss content (e.g. possible trigger warnings)
 - If this writer has submitted the same work over and over
 - If the piece is part of a novel and requires knowledge of previous chapters
- If you want to edit the content of your page, there are organizers tools available for you after you log into Meetup. Click "organizers tools-edit meetup." If you don't see them, contact the website manager stephen@burlingtonwritersworkshop.com.
- Have a backup topic in case no one submits, a backup host should you need to cancel.
- **3 weeks before:** hit the "announce" button on your page. This message goes to all with a generic sum up of your workshop. Or, if you want to personalize your message, go to "organizers tools-contact attendees", select the option to mail to all members and personalize your email. If requesting submissions, remind submitters to post their files **10 days before the workshop**. These files have a limited time in the file list.
 - Limit your attendance to 12. After that, a waiting list will be automatic.
 - Make sure you are listed as the host.
 - Comment on your page requesting submissions, if appropriate.
 - Note that files should be printed and commented upon for feedback.

- **10 days before:** Check to see if you have submissions. Post any material you want participants to read in advance. If attendance is slow, announce again.
- As RSVP's arrive, welcome newcomers and remind them to download the material.

Here's a sample email:

Hello Writers!

I'm looking forward to seeing you on [DATE OF WORKSHOP].

I wanted to let you know that work by [JACK] and [JILL] are now posted in the [Files section](#) of Meetup.com. Please make sure you read these, write comments in the margins, and type up your responses for the authors. Make sure your name is on your responses.

If you have questions on how to give feedback, please don't hesitate to ask. These guidelines may also be helpful to you: ["How it Works"](#) and ["On Giving Feedback"](#).

Also, we do have [# OF PEOPLE ON WAITLIST] on the waitlist for this workshop, so if plans have changed and you can't attend, please change your RSVP as soon as possible or you will be marked down as a no-show.

If you're new to the workshop, please follow [these directions](#) to find our space, located at 110 Main Street Suite 3C third floor in Burlington.

Thanks!

[WORKSHOP LEADER]

- If you're full up with a wait list, then contact the attendees, reminding them to read the material and -
- This is important - to RSVP "no" if they've changed their minds so the waitlist can move up.
- One note: unfortunately, sending messages doesn't always work since Meetup members have the option of blocking messages. When possible, collect email addresses so you can stay in touch.
- **Day Of:** Show up 1/2 hour early to prepare yourself and the space

NOTE; comments below are specific to Burlington where we hold the bulk of workshops. Leaders in Middlebury and Montpelier know how to navigate their spaces.

- We have coffee, tea, water - check all this out.
- If your workshop is held on a day that the outside door is locked, either station someone at the door and/or post your cell phone. Or: A member is let in, this member lets in the next one and so on until start time. After that, leave the phone number.

Like a compelling story, a good workshop has a beginning, middle, and end.

Beginnings

- Let people introduce themselves by name and their genre(s) of choice. It's helpful to ask an ice-breaking question: Perhaps gear this question to the topic at hand, make the answers brief.
- Give a brief reminder of the process or topic. Setting the tone for respectful discussion at the start of each workshop is key.

For submitting writers:

- If there are two, submitting, give them equal time (about 45 minutes) with a 10-minute break in between.
 - The writer may ask workshop participants to focus on specific elements of the story, and then to step into the "sound-proof box." The participants will talk about the writer's work, addressing each other, without the writer's participation. The writer will have a chance at the end of the discussion to ask for clarification or elaboration, but is not invited to defend or explain the work.
 - Kick off the conversation on a positive note. Start with a prompt such as, "Who would like to start with what's working well in this piece?"
 - Remind the group that respect is essential, that the workshop is not about us, that we all have the responsibility to keep focused on the work in front of us.
 - Encourage participants to speak about "the narrator" rather than "the writer" as this keeps things focused on the work and helps cut down on confusing the narrator's voice with that of the writer.
- If someone's getting off topic or going on too long, ask others for their feedback.

For workshops without submissions

- Be prepared for a lively discussion of your craft topic with reading materials, prompts, questions. Be prepared with references to books, other topics, website links etc. One idea is to ask participants to arrive with a few pages of their own work that's relevant to the topic. Ask them to define their trouble spots. Have everyone read and discuss. Segue into other topics of interest as a way of promoting your next workshop.
- Hand out printed materials, work one to one when possible.
- Another idea is to have one submission of a piece directly related to your topic, use that submission to guide the conversation.

Middles (not muddles)

As a facilitator, you'll use your listening skills and pointed questions to guide the discussion. You must also use tact to help participants. BWW has developed feedback strategies: nothing is written in stone, but this is a well traveled road

For all genres: Here's [the Rubric](#) developed for manuscript readers for Mud Season Review. It's a well thought out guide for anyone providing feedback in any genre.

It's helpful to guide people toward specifics. For example, participants may find it easy to say, "I really liked this passage on page three." Ask that participant to explain why. Another example: When a participant says, "There are a lot of boring parts in this story," your job is to ask: "Can you point one out to us?" When the specific passages become the focus of discussion, you're doing your job well.

- As you invite an author to return to the discussion, remind them that they need not respond to comments and there is no need to defend their work. It is up to the author to decide what might be helpful, to choose what feedback makes sense to them and what parts of their writing to revise or not revise.
- Most participants are respectful in their comments. But every so often, you may get a comment such as "I hate this piece" or "This is bad writing."
 - Ask the commenter to point to a specific paragraph and articulate exactly what about the piece/writing isn't working for them.
 - Remind participants that the focus of the workshop is not our personal reactions. The goal is to help the author figure out what's working and what isn't.
 - Offer some examples of what helpful feedback sounds like.
 - Remind participants that not to rewrite the piece. Avoid words like "should" or "need to" as there is no "right answer" when it comes to feedback.

What happens if the workshop goes south?

- Pause to get back on track and try to solve the problem within this group. Do not let participants bully, insult, nag or act irresponsibly.
- If a participant is offended by content, suggest that, having seen the material in advance, they had a choice whether or not to participate. Question the submitter as to the intent of the offensive materials and open up a discussion of how a writer can handle potentially difficult material without turning off the reader. Someone offended by Lolita might be enlightened by the various interpretations of this novel over decades. Segue into a discussion of the difference between writing an offensive character and the author promoting this offense. There's a lot of richness possible in discussions such as these and we would be amiss to censor them.

That said, handling sensitive material is up to the each leader.

- Make it clear that complaints need to be handled within the workshop space or, if not resolved, brought to the programming committee for discussion. Complaints to the board are not appropriate and will be sent back to the workshop leaders.
- Unprepared participants: If someone shows up without having read or printed out the work, ask them to sit in and listen without providing feedback.
- Conversation dominance: When a participant dominates much of the workshop conversation, other participants will feel left out, frustrated, and intimidated. Workshop leaders agree that careful observation of commentary and a friendly but firm touch can help to keep the conversation moving and help everyone feel heard and involved.
 - Break in and thank the participant for his or her comments, noting that you'd like to hear what other participants have to say on the matter at hand.
 - When a participant begins philosophizing beyond the piece: Remind the group that while general philosophy is interesting, let's stay on topic.
 - When a participant interrupts another participant: Nicely, but firmly, note "let's hear from this person first."
 - When participants actively shut down other participants' feedback: Remind the group that all comments and observations are equally valid and it is important for the author to hear everyone's feedback. As workshop participants, we can certainly disagree, but it's not our job to censor each other's feedback. It's up to the author to decide which feedback to listen to and incorporate.
- **And a word about Trigger Warnings:**

"The antithesis of censorship, trigger warnings are not invitations to omit or disregard a piece of writing. At the core of the trigger warning lies the intention to be empathetic. Trigger warnings tell your readers that you are aware of the reality that they may have had various experiences with violence, sexual abuse, discrimination, combat trauma, or may have clinically diagnosed conditions that may be barriers to full engagement in the material. The objective of issuing trigger warnings in our workshop setting is to ensure that dialogue addressing sensitive matters and the momentum of your writing move forward. Ideally, by exploring and discussing a writer's treatment of provocative or unpleasant issues, participants may improve their understanding of human nature, the human condition, the nature and consequence of ideas, and the obligations individuals have to society relative to creative self-expression."

.....Partridge Boswell, poet and BWW board member.

All this stuff happens. Workshops go off track, personalities clash, writers lose confidence, etc. Always feel free to work through the problematic situation in the space, to reach out to your fellow workshop leaders, and in the last resort, to the Programming committee for help. Conflict

can be harmful, stimulating, enlightening. Stimulating courage is essential. Encourage your participants to:

- Ask questions of each other as in, “I thought this paragraph referred to (...) did anyone else?”
- Challenge, like “what are you talking about? Are you being ironic? I don’t understand.”
- Remind readers to comment one at a time, and to let the next person speak.
- Discourage copy editing. Focus on plot, characters, narrative, dialogue, rhythm etc
- Listen to the discussion, rather than to yourself. Make notes during the conversation
- If there are complaints about the submission or your role as a leader, open these up for discussion. Remind people that what goes on in the workshop space stays within the workshop space so that all of us are given the golden opportunity to explore provocative aspects of human nature which we, as writers, need to courageously confront.

Endings

It’s important to encourage people to become involved. Regular attendance and greater member engagement is a benefit to us all. Remind people that membership, while free, involves investment: financial or volunteer. Suggest volunteer opportunities, remind people about Mud Season Review, outside readings, retreats and committees. Point to the locked, transparent donation box (in which you’ve deposited some cash) and explain there are many ways to donate, that it is not required but is greatly appreciated to keep the lights turned on.

For Burlington: Remind people to rinse out dishes in the bathroom sink, turn out the lights and lock up from the inside. The key will already be in the lock box; spin the code numbers and leave feeling really proud of what you’ve just accomplished.

Workshop leaders: Burlington:

[Wendy Andersen](#) Creative NonFiction, Tuesday AM
[Elisabeth Blair](#) Poetry Workshops, Thursdays
[Patrick Brownson](#) Lit group, Tuesdays
[Seth Cronin](#) Song writing, Thursdays
[Stephen Kastner](#): All genres, submissions, Friday AM
[Dick Matheson](#) Book Length Fiction, Wednesdays
[Natasha Mieszkowski](#) Fiction, Drama
[Grier Martin](#) Poetry Discussion, Saturdays
[Riki Moss](#) Fiction/Craft, Saturdays
[Erin Post](#) Mud Season Review
[Nancy Kilgore](#) Writing with Spirit, Mondays

Middlebury

[Melinda Bachand](#)

[Rita Jones](#)

Montpelier

[Eva Gumprecht](#)

Essential Links:

Committees

[Retreats](#)
Fundraising [Elaine Pentaleri](#)
Membership [Eva Gumprecht](#)
Programming [Barbie Alsop](#)
Financial [Wendy Andersen](#)
Communications [Eva Gumprecht](#)
Digital [Stephen Kastner](#)
Workshops [Riki Moss](#)
Erin Post: [Mud Season Review](#);

Burlington workshop space:

[Space manager](#)

Building manager:

You're locked out! These members live on the block:

[Barbie Alsop](#):

Charlie Messing

[Directions](#)

Files/ listings

[Scheduler](#) [Upload and download files](#)

[Meetup Calendar](#)

[Calendar:Burlington](#)

[Montpelier](#)

Files/ listings

[Scheduler Upload and download files](#)

[Meetup Calendar](#)

[Calendar:Burlington](#)

[Montpelier](#)

[Middlebury](#)

The Organization

[Bylaws:](#)

[How to donate:](#)

[The Board:](#)

Members

[How to Join:](#)

[How to Give Feedback](#)



Partridge essay:

Website members section (**TBA**)