

How to Workshop for Writers

Tuesday, April 12, 2016 • 6:30-8:30 p.m.

Marvin Auditorium 101BC

You can gather like-minded writers, share works, successfully workshop fiction, nonfiction and poetry and make your own writing community right where you are. We'll show you how. Leave armed with new connections and resources to get started with creating or joining a writers group.

Presentation by Leah Sewell, Communications Editor, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library

Contact Leah Sewell at lsewell@tscpl.org.

Speaker Leah Sewell

Leah Sewell's debut collection, *Birth in Storm*, evokes haunting images that draw readers back for frequent rereading, with striking sound quality that invites us to read aloud and savor the syllables. Sewell has made a name for herself in Topeka as a woman of immense talent and creativity. She was the editor-in-chief of Topeka's arts and entertainment magazine, *seveneightfive*, for five years. She was also the founding editor of Topeka family and lifestyle magazine, *XYZ*, and was co-owner of the magazine from 2013-2014. She also works as a freelance graphic designer, with over a dozen poetry and prose book covers to her credit. Read an interview on the library's website here: <https://tscpl.org/books-movies-music/interview-topeka-poet-leah-sewell>

Workshop notes

Some background – how Leah Sewell started the Topeka Writer's Workshop, 8 years ago

To jumpstart herself into writing again – she went to Lawrence Arts Center for a writers workshop – but writers workshops ask you to get involved in their work and their readings, and getting involved outside of town is hard. So she asked around Topeka to other writers to see if they wanted to join a writers workshop.

Reasons to join a writer's group

- Accountability - Once a week, every other week or once a month
- It keeps you writing - If you come to group and don't bring something to share, they notice and ask to see new work
- Really beneficial to your writing – If you write in a vacuum, you may not realize that your awesome work isn't that awesome. The whole idea is to be published, to have your work read – somebody is going to read it and it's got to make sense to that person
- When you get a group together then you start getting excited and sharing ideas and starting stuff: let's make a reading series, let's all start blogs, let's start a facebook chat after the kids go to bed
- We're reading each other's work. Your writer besties are going to be reciprocal when you have a deadline.
- You're a writer. You surround yourself with other writers. You're a writer.

Writers Workshop: How do you do it?

- Connect with other writers, feel the excitement, take the next step and form your group.
- Collect emails or start on Facebook
- Try out existing groups -- SpeakEasy Poets, the fiction groups in the area (one list compiled by Kansas Authors Club is here: <http://www.trmscreativeservices.com/kac/District1/index.html>)

- Have meetings – hold readings – gauge the reaction of your crowd when you read your work, it helps to have friends on your side when you go to a public space to read

Writers Workshop Exercise

Leah shared an early draft of an Elizabeth Bishop poem

How to Lose Things The Gift of Losing Things

Read a few stanzas and show the iterations of her poem to get to the final poem “One Art”

The Paris Review published some of Elizabeth Bishop’s early drafts, to much controversy.

When you workshop an early draft, you are saying: “Here’s my thing. Let’s treat it like it’s alive. I’m cultivating it into something that’s going to be beautiful.” As fellow writers we get to see that process as it becomes what it’s meant to become. We aren’t all Elizabeth Bishop out of the gate- we need to rewrite and a workshop is a great place to do that.

Writers Workshop Example

Famous writer’s workshop in Portland with Cheryl Strayed and Chuck Palahniuk

http://www.oregonlive.com/books/index.ssf/2010/06/chuck_palahniuk_chelsea_cain_a.html

Maybe you will join a high performance dangerous writers group with the people who are going to blurb your book - this is different than in graduate school –

The pressure is on to bring in pages - You want to do well and bring in your best

Writers Workshop Model

You have a house mother or house dad facilitator

Their job: Emailing – hey you guys, a reminder – next month we’re going to be reading such and such let’s get together at so and so’s house. And I’m bringing cookies!

The Phone Booth

One technique from an MFA program – the phone booth (also called New Criticism) – a writer comes and brings their stuff, or it’s been pre-sent in advance.

You read it and gauge their reactions.

You act as if they don’t know the reader and they act as if they don’t know you. You can’t assume it’s the writer speaking (unless it’s memoir).

Have one person go at a time.

Start with the good. And then into some very nicely phrased... “and I do have this criticism to share...”

Don’t say “If this was my story...” because it’s not your story.

Once you’re done with workshopping that piece you can let the person outside of the phone booth, then they can say “oh, well, this is what I was trying to do with that piece” or “you had a weird interpretation of that piece but it’s cool even though I didn’t intend it”

Don’t explain your work in advance, but set up fiction like “this is the first chapter” or “this is a complete short story” and then read it aloud – then go to the phone booth while they read and give feedback.

If you submit for publication, that’s the way an editor is going to read your stuff, so this feedback without explanation first is valuable.

In Leah’s group, they all bring a piece at the time of the workshop, some people like to bring a packet for the next week or by email before they discuss it. And then have the writer read it aloud. Sometimes we’ll have the poet read it and then not the poet read it. Helps with line breaks and hearing pretension

BASIC checklist

Leah shared a BASIC checklist for workshopping and these notes are a supplement

- You can't just say "I really liked it" try "The best part was when.."
- Clarity – it's hard as a reader to be right there with it if you are second guessing things, and trying to figure out what's going on, what did the writer intend, help them figure out how could that be better
- Syntax – noun-verb agreement, verb tense – what if this piece was in first person instead of third, what is the flashbacks were in present tense – if weird stuff is going on, question the possibilities for how to fix it
- Imagery – Eudora Welty is a great example – even in her dialogue- you can see the whole thing. That's what you want as a reader. Sometimes as a writer what you see in your head isn't being communicated out. Take over someone's brain for a minute and guide them into your world.
- Sensuality – can you see the plumpness of the lip, can you hear the courtyard sounds after school
- Pacing and Rhythm – not just for poetry. You need a variety of sentence lengths and paragraph lengths.
- People have a rhythm to their speech, be paying attention to that as a reader
- Repetition – especially in first person narrators because people repeat themselves
- Language Choices – when you are purposefully inserting imagery or exposition – experience the richness and preciseness of language especially in descriptions
- Dialogue – sit and write down phrases that you overhear. Eudora Welty is a master of dialogue. People don't talk the way writers write them.
- Don't waste your time in workshop discussing issues of punctuation unless you are e.e. cummings
- For fiction – pay attention to structure, especially if you are writing to genre – if you aren't covering the bases in the right order, find out if they just don't know the rules or if they are breaking them intentionally
- When you are reading, you can notice all of these things and figure out why it was so beautiful – lyrical? Imagery? Smell of erasers? The stuff that makes us gasp when we are reading.
- Fully participate in some marginalia (and write all over the book you are reading.)

Workshop exercise - Astra

Leah had each small group table workshop an early version of a poem – we gave what we liked first and then what we thought could use improvement

After our feedback, she then shared that it was her poem, and that it was from a Renga project in which you write a poem in response to the poem before it and it had to be 10 lines, among other constraints. When you get feedback – sometimes you say "yeah, well, I'm not going to change that though" and move on. Leah read the poem, *Astra*, from her collection *Birth in Storm* to reveal the final version and we noted several changes. "You're a stickler for that precision of language"

Workshop exercise – Dreams

Leah read two pages from a short story called *Dreams* aloud and we workshopped it at our table. After we provided positive feedback and places we would suggest revisiting, she revealed that the author couldn't be at workshop tonight because it is Raymond Carver and he died in 1988 and this is a famous story. Some of the things we detected, he may have been intending. Some power in not knowing what the writer was intending, and not being able to ask.