

WRITER'S WORKSHOP

Writer's workshops are the main work format used in PLoP (Pattern Languages Of Programs) conferences. Here is a short explanation of the format.

Every piece of writing has to stand alone without author explaining what the contents are and mean. The purpose of writer's workshop is to give the author understanding how the work is understood amongst the readers. In addition, participants of writer's workshop also get a chance to give their own opinions how the author could further improve the work. This approach differ from traditional reviews so that the participants are not allowed just to point out what is wrong with the work, but they are expected to suggest improvements. How the reader feels that the author should correct their work? This makes the life of the author easier as the feedback is given in a constructive way and author has concrete suggestions how to improve the work. One purpose of writer's workshops is to eliminate explanations and excuses of the author and also to eliminate direct accusations without improvement suggestions from participants. The basic assumption in writer's workshop is trust between the participants and the author and trust that the author really wants to improve the work. In other words, the author has all the power but also whole responsibility of the work.

The length of the writer's workshop is about an hour. All participants must read the work carefully before the workshop. Participants should also write comments to the paper. This is absolute precondition for the workshop because without reading the paper, participant does not have anything to say in the workshop and poor preparation will show itself. In the writer's workshop the intention is not to discuss typos and such, the paper will be handed to the author after the workshop, so the author gets typos fixed as participants have marked them on the paper.

This approach suits especially good for papers which are hard to define when they are "done" (e.g poetry). That's why the work does not need to be finished when it is workshopped. For example, writer's workshop can be used to get new ideas, guidance, etc. In software engineering, this approach could be used to review user interface specifications or functional specifications.

In the most strict version of writer's workshop participants are divided into two groups: authors and other participants. In this context, authors mean persons who have shown or will show their own work for the other participants. So participants are just hang-arounds who will not present their own work. In the strict form only authors are allowed to speak. Other participants are just present to follow the workshop but can not participate in discussions. As writer's workshop is about trust, if one would participate without later on presenting his/her own work, it would be easy pan the work as there is no fear that your own work will be panned by the author you panned. If it is possible the strict form of writer's workshop will be arranged so that participants sit on two circles. Participants who are allowed to speak sit in the inner ring and the rest in the outer ring. In the main phase of the workshop, the author is moved to the outer ring.

PHASES OF WRITER'S WORKSHOP

0. Preparation

- Every participant reads the work and comments it well before the workshop.

1. Beginning

- Workshop is started by selecting a moderator. Typically moderator is changed even though participants are exactly the same
- Moderator introduces the work at hand and the author. For example: “Today we have honour to discuss <author>'s work called <topic>.
- Moderator keeps track of time so that the workshop does not run overtime.

2. Presentation

- Author reads a short piece of his/her work, for example the abstract.
- Author can shortly tell participants about the background of the work, if it is not explained in the work it self. For example, “I found this patterns while working in XX doing YY.. .etc”.

3. Summaries

- Workshop moderator asks each (or some) of the participants to give a short summary of the paper.

4. Confirmation

- The author if asked if the readers have understood the contents of the paper. Author judges that based on the summaries that the participants gave. If readers have misunderstood the paper, author can give some guidance or the workshop is ended here.
- The author moves to the outer ring and does not participate into the discussions, (s)he will become a fly on the wall. The author will make notes for him/herself.
- Participant do not refer to the author by name anymore. Only by using such terms as the author or the writer. For the participants, the author is now non-existing being. Participants will not even look at the author.
- If moderator gives permission, the author can be asked questions for clarification during the workshop. This typically is necessary only when unfinished work is workshopped.

5. What author should keep

- During this phase, participants tell which are the parts that the author should absolutely keep in his/her work. Also other especially good aspects of the work are discussed.

- If some participant agrees with another participants opinion, (s)he will say “gosh”¹, to avoid repeating the same things again and again
- Typically this phase is especially hard for Finns as giving positive feedback is harder than giving negative feedback. At the latest, here the poor preparation will be revealed.

6. Suggestions for improvement

- This phase typically follows the order dictated by the moderator. For example, first comments on the paper format, then general comments, and finally the document reviewed section by section.
- The participants do not just say what is wrong with the paper, but also tell how the work could be improved. Typically a sentence is started by saying something like: “The author could improve this paper by....”
- Different participants may have conflicting opinions how the work could be improved (or some might even consider that a section should not be changed, when another participant wants it removed). In many cases this reveals new viewpoints to the work and is valuable input for the author.
- After the workshop the author gets to decide which suggestions to use and which he neglects. If author wants so, none of the suggestions need to be utilized.

7. Summary of discussions

- The moderator asks each (or some) of the participants to give a summary of the discussions had in the workshop. Summary typically describes which were the main points of the discussions. The summary should contain also positive comments.

8. Questions

- The author is asked back to the inner ring of the workshop and (s)he is given an opportunity to ask questions for clarification (E.g. “What did you mean when you said..”, “This remained unclear as the discussion moved to the next topic).
- The purpose is to get clarifications, not to comment on the improvement suggestions the workshop gave the author. Author is not allowed to explain or present excuses.

9. Thanking the author

- The workshop participants thank the author for the work well done by applauding while standing up.

10. Follow up

- The author does the improvements to the paper as (s)he wishes.

¹ “Gosh”, used to strengthen the opinion. Originally the term comes from the sound of fountain. It describes the flow of similar opinions. Opinions are so to speak flowing like water from the fountain.