



The Art of Giving Feedback:

Litquake 2025, CCA Writers Weekend, and Healthy Workshop Practices



Photography Courtesy of Isaiah Diaz-Mays

By Isaiah Diaz-Mays

"Providing feedback is a sacred practice that consists of cultural, mental and spiritual exchanges between devoted artists who are passionate about their craft."

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A San Franciscan sun embellished the vast terrace of CCA's Double Ground facility as members from the area's vibrant literary community strutted their way into seats scattered throughout room N-203. Sporting diverse knits of casual cloth from sunhats and trousers to straight cut jeans and light jackets, the attentive group seemed well-prepared for an afternoon filled with discussions as part of *Litquake 2025*, the city's largest literary festival.



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Upon learning that our MFA Writing program would host Writers Weekend this year, the name of one particular panel piqued my interest due to its relevance as a scholar and future author. I felt that *The Art of Giving Feedback (without Losing Friendships)* would provide the gems I'd been seeking over the last few weeks as I navigate my third semester here at CCA. It was the panel I'd need to attend if I wanted to not only enhance my craftsmanship as a writer and critical thinker, but it was equally important for me to be present with the intention of becoming a better teammate, colleague and community member. To understand the importance of giving feedback, one must first comprehend the significance of the customary setting in which feedback is given in our realm; the writing workshop.

A writing workshop is the heart of an MFA Writing program. This is where fellow poets, prose writers, critical thinkers and future authors gather in unison to engage in

constructive dialogue surrounding a selected segment of literature. As a team, whether gathered in a tabled circle, rectangle or square, the room dedicates time to passionately dive into diverging elements of the piece that resonates with them, ignites emotion (either good or bad), or heightens curiosity - amongst a vast spectrum of other thoughts and sentiments, all for the sake of deeper comprehension and refining each other's writing.

The Art of Giving Feedback (without Losing Friendships) entailed a conversation amongst a well established group of authors, journalists and thinkers; Leslie Berlin, Frances Dinkelspiel, Susan Freinkel, Gabrielle Selz, and Julia Flynn Siler. I found this 'neverending' sentiment toward the process of providing feedback to your colleagues and peers widely shared amongst all sorts of writers, spanning from beginners to widely published



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veterans. Each of them shared thoughts on the importance of providing feedback while not only remaining cognizant of the personal relationships between writers, but also the ways in which writers fervently protect themselves and their stories. Panelist Julia Flynn Siler, New York Times best-selling author of multiple award-winning nonfiction novels including *The White Devil's Daughters* placed it, providing feedback is a

sacred practice that consists of cultural, mental and spiritual exchanges between devoted artists who are passionate about their craft. She also expressed continual attentiveness and openness to learning new ways of providing feedback to her colleagues and mentees.

A revered journalist who garnered a lengthy resume filled with accolades, Siler conveyed integral pillars within the practice, elements like ethics and accuracy. Guidelines within editorial professionalism can provide opportunities to structurally support some feedback formats. Where the workshoping process can get blurred is within the more creative realms, where the responsibility of guiding one of your peers toward a more enhanced selection of experimental pages rests upon the shoulders of the artists taking part in the conversation.

Susan Freinkel, author of *American Chestnut*, expressed similar caution. As a science, health and environmental writer who's been published across a variety of national publications including *Smithsonian* and *Reader's Digest*, her focus seemed to shed light on approaching workshops with a deep sense of compassion and understanding, keeping the narrative goals of each respective writer in mind. One can do this in innumerable ways; starting with asking critical questions backed by references from the work, rather than immediately making suggestions.

Posing thought-provoking questions is a favored tool of mine when workshoping, mainly because I seek to understand the vision of a writer and their desired narrative direction - as opposed to making a suggestion that could possibly deter them mentally from the path they had in mind. I strongly believe that sticking with our natural narrative wits as we adopt new strategies accordingly, is vital toward preserving and strengthening our unique voices.

Attending *The Art of Giving Feedback* confirmed that I am not alone as I constantly explore new ways of navigating this complex realm of writing. Learning that some of the panel speakers have been able to maintain and enhance friendships



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amongst themselves for well-over a decade, in some cases even longer, provided a much needed confidence boost. There is no singular way to share organic thoughts with your friends. There isn't a right or wrong way to be transparent with your peers. Providing honest feedback should be encouraged within our beloved circles, for the sake of helping each other grow as artists and kin.

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