

Help for Professionals

Elizabeth Rankin, *The Work of Writing: Insights and Strategies for Academics and Professionals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. 144 pages. \$16.00.

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Elizabeth Rankin's *The Work of Writing* draws upon years of experience with writing groups, so it's no surprise that its primary focus is feedback. Addressing professionals about their "professional work" of writing, Rankin acknowledges that not all writers have groups available for feedback, so she gives advice not only on "Getting Feedback from Others" but also for "Writing on Your Own" (where she advises writers about how to think like other readers). We see groups at work in her frequent "scenarios."

Each chapter has several of these narrative accounts. They illustrate writer's block, resistance to revision, observation of genre expectations, submission, and more. Convinced that "all writers face similar challenges" (xii), Rankin bases her book on the idea that these particular stories capture common experiences. So we learn of Julia, an established academic writer who is preparing her first major grant proposal. Scientists in the group advise her to "cut to the chase," identify the "problem," and reduce the first three pages to a paragraph. Ignoring their feedback, she sends off the proposal much as it was when she brought it to the group. Later, we learn, the proposal was rejected for the very reasons the scientists had criticized it.

Rankin is especially helpful in telling young writers how to "exorcise the grad student within" (59) and enter the "professional conversation" (5). Achieving a professional voice involves more than having a PhD in hand, and Rankin points out some of those features: avoiding over-use of citations, qualifiers, and "calls for further research"; achieving an acceptable personal voice; and defining one's contribution to the discipline, no longer "showing what we know," but knowing the right questions for ourselves as writers. So we have Sara, who has trouble

separating her professional contribution from those of known scholars; Eric, who has to make a place in scholarship for his innovative research; and Kurt, who needs help expressing opinions gracefully.

Following the scenarios, Rankin tells how writers can get the best help from a writing group and how they can give themselves feedback. Much of her advice is familiar, such as setting the writing aside for a few days so as to read it more objectively; since we often ignore such injunctions, it is good to be reminded. Writers, she says, can help themselves acquire a professional voice by noting genre conventions as they read other work in their field and by observing how other writers balance professional and personal voices.

Rankin's appendix on "Organizing a Writing Group" gives specific, helpful information. Here again she calls on her own experience regarding "basic structure," "membership," "meetings," and "leadership." Particularly helpful for someone working within a writing group or planning to start one are lists of "Writer's Responsibilities," "Readers' Responsibilities," and "Reading Drafts in Progress: Levels of Response." The routine for feedback is first to clarify any open questions, next to say something positive, then to respond to the writer's questions, and finally to make other comments. The groups, as Rankin describes them, meet weekly, with members requesting time on particular weeks and distributing their work in advance.

In this book on professional writing, where "as writers our first obligation is to think about what we are contributing to that conversation" and "to make sure that our readers stay focused on it as well" (10), Rankin opens a collegial conversation with her audience in a voice that is authoritative yet personal. She observes scholarly conventions of style but is not constrained by them. She contributes a wealth of ideas and advice gleaned from years of working with writers in various disciplines.

WPA readers might share Rankin's book with graduate students struggling with issues of voice, focus, style constraints, or reader awareness; how to begin a project and how to end it; how to make their writing less like student writing and more professional; or how to respond to and accept reader criticism. But the book is, indeed, intended for people like you and me, who, like all writers, are sometimes at a loss for how best to present our ideas. And it is an excellent "how to" if we've been thinking of getting a few colleagues together to form a writing group.

Without question, Rankin favors writing groups as a way for writers to get reader response. It is also clear that collaboration of this kind requires a commitment of time and effort. However, the time spent reading and responding may be balanced by the sensitivity to one's own

writing that comes from tuning in to the styles of others. Undoubtedly, says Rankin in quoting a colleague, when the group is working well, “Something definitely happens.”

