Marcy’s Philosophy of Critiquing
(A long sermon!)

A piece of fiction reveals itself to the writer in various stages. Generally speaking, these different stages require different kinds of feedback.

When I was in college, the creative writing workshops I took did not recognize this fact. Writers and their work were damaged when rough drafts were treated as if they were polished pieces of fiction. Writers often became muddled, believing that their every effort should result in perfect pieces. If not, they weren’t true writers. Furthermore, it seemed to me that there was a hidden agenda in how pieces were critiqued. That agenda, which one of my professors admitted to me in a private moment, was to discourage students from becoming professional writers since the marketplace was already saturated, and it was difficult to make a living as a writer. Only hard criticism was considered valid. Discouragement was the tone of our workshop sessions. Any praise was distrusted. Compliments were for wimps.

In this course, I am taking a very different approach. I believe that writing craft is something that can be learned. It’s not just a talent that only a chosen few are born with. Therefore, I assume, in an advanced fiction workshop, that you are here to explore the craft. You know that your work can be improved and are eager to hear the views of others. I also assume that one of your most important tasks as a writer is to gain knowledge about your own process. My goal is for you to understand what will keep you involved with a piece of writing, pushing you to stay with it until it is better than you thought possible. Finally, I assume that reading and feedbacking the work of others will teach you more than you can imagine about your own writing.
As for this praise business, it’s encouraged. I believe that it’s as important for you to discover what you (and your classmates) do well – and why – as it is for you to find the weak areas in your writing. As a matter of fact, knowing the first will lead you to better the second. So take a leap of faith and believe the compliments you receive in here.

I’ve divided the feedback process into three stages with different expectations for the work at each stage. At any of the small group workshops and for the whole class critique, you are invited to turn in work at any stage. Please tell us whether it is a rough, second or polished draft so we may give you appropriate feedback. Below are my descriptions of each stage with suggestions for both the writer and readers for each stage.

**Rough Draft Workshops**

For the writer: Here is an opportunity to get feedback on a piece of writing that feels rough to you, one that you are just beginning to work on. Complete the piece (or a section of it, such as a chapter or series of scenes), including all the scenes as you know them so far. Expect parts of it to be missing. Spell and grammar check it, but don’t worry about word repetitions, phrasing or style. Type it up for your feedback group. At the end, list the three most important questions you have about it. Be as specific as possible. Don’t ask something general like “Does it work?” A question such as “What additional information do you need to believe John’s actions at the end?” or “What about this culture do I need to explain more?” is much more helpful.

For the readers: At this stage, the writer is groping her/his way into the story. Your classmate may only have a vague idea of what this story is really about. Your most valuable gift as a reader will be your vision. What do you think the piece is about? What questions are raised for you about the character, the setting, the plot? What’s missing? A spirit of open inquiry is most helpful. Answer the writer’s questions, then pose your own. Don’t stint on the praise. The point is to keep the writer working.
Second Draft Workshops

For the writer: This is an opportunity to get feedback on a piece that you are in the middle of working on. You’ve written a rough draft, gotten some feedback on it and have taken the piece further. You have a much stronger sense about what this piece is about and where you think it needs to go. The bones are there. Now you need to know what must be filled in. It’s a time to concentrate on character motivation, pacing, plot development and point of view. Frame your questions for the group along these lines, being as specific as possible. “Have I begun the story in the right place? Is there too much telling? Do I need more dialogue? Do you understand why Casey has a change of heart at the end?”

For the readers: The writer has a much stronger idea of what this story is about and is more deeply invested in what’s already on the page than in a rough draft. Answer the writer’s questions. You can be most helpful by concentrating on matters of craft: point of view, character development, effectiveness of dialogue, pacing, where the story begins and ends. Again, posing questions in a spirit of open inquiry is best. Point out where the writer is successful and why along with places where craft issues are raised for you. Make concrete suggestions for what might be helpful such as adding a scene or a piece of background information etc. Word choice is not yet an issue.

Polished Draft Workshops

For the writer: At this point, you have worked on this piece for so long that you can’t see it clearly. As far as you’re concerned, it’s as done as you can make it. You’re ready to send it out into the world. The questions you have will probably be
very specific. Now is also the time to ask about audience and publication. You should feel confident enough in the piece that you want your group to notice everything -- misspellings, grammar, little goofs. These are the things that an editor will notice when you send it out. Knowing them in advance, to spare you embarrassment, is a gift.

For the readers: Here is your chance to truly be an editor for the writer. Look at the nitty-gritty here: word choice, spelling, grammar. Pretend that you are an editor at some publication. What is strongest in this story? What can be improved? Some big questions may arise, and it may be very helpful to share them. However, consider that the writer is very wedded to the vision in the story. Now is not the time to suggest that it be told in another format or another genre. The choices have already been made. Be specific. Recognize and honor the effort that has gone into creating this piece.