Questions for Non Evaluative or Non Critical Responding   Peter Elbow

> *. . . most people are far more anxious to express their approval and disapproval of things than to describe them."* (C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 7)

Describing the text:

- What does the text say? What is the main idea?--the supporting ideas?
- What does it almost say? (What thoughts and ideas or attitudes do you hear **almost** stated or hovering around the edges? What does the writer imply or assume? What is the writer's point of view or stance? What follows or what are the consequences of what is said? How does the text ask you to see the world?)
- What are some local "centers of gravity" or "focuses of energy" (not main points)?
- Believing feedback: be an ally or pretend to believe fully the writer's view--and find further points, support, or evidence. What would a person do who believed what is said?
- How is the text organized or structured? How does the arrangement of parts relate to what the text says and what it does?
- Describe the writer's voice, tone, stance.
- Who does the text speak to or imply as reader?
- How does the writing relate to things in our culture?--to other texts around us?
- How does this piece relate to other things the writer has said or written? How does it relate to events in the writer's life? Why did the writer write these thoughts?

Describing your response--**but omitting evaluative responses:**

- Which words or sections do you like or remember?
- What do you want to hear more about?
- As reader, what are *your* thoughts on the topic? Where do you agree or disagree? (This is not evaluative: we often agree with bad writing and disagree with good writing.)
- Give "movies of your mind" as you were reading: tell the story of the actual thoughts, feelings, and reactions that went on in your mind as you were reading. This is easiest if you periodically interrupt your reading and tell or write what has been going on in your mind. (But leave out evaluative reactions.)

"Skeleton" process for giving structural feedback to yourself or someone else. This process of "finding the skeleton or backbone" permits you to start a project by just writing a series of disorganized freewritings on the topic--and then turning them into a coherent, organized draft.

- Read the draft or collection of freewritings slowly. Simply summarize the main "bits" as you get to them--in the order they occur:
  - If a bit is an idea or "point" or notion, summarize it in a simple sentence. (It's important to force yourself to create a sentence, with a verb--not just a phrase. This forces you to clarify your point.)
  - If a passage is a story or example or piece data, summarize it in a phrase.
- Look through your list and decide what should be the main idea.
- Figure out the best order or sequence for all the points, examples, or stories.
- This process often leads you to see that you need to add some points.

Descriptive outline. This is most powerful, disciplined way of describing a text.

- Global "says": summarize what the whole piece says in one sentence. What is the message or claim?
- Global "does": summarize what the whole piece does in one sentence. What effect does it have (or try to have) on readers?
- Local "says": summarize what each paragraph or small section says in one paragraph.
- Local "does": summarize what each paragraph or small section **does** in one paragraph.
    Here's a knack for writing "does sentences": Don't let them contain **any** reference to the actual subject of the piece. Reading a "does" sentence, we shouldn't have a clue whether the piece is about cars or contraceptives. (Ken Bruffee devised the descriptive outline.)