

Play Reading Talkback Format

Notes from Amy Steele Wernig

General Recommendations:

- Talkbacks work best when a moderator leads the discussion. That way, the conversation maintains structure and order; a well-formatted conversation provides the playwright with the most useful feedback.
- Introduce the talkback format before beginning the talkback (don't introduce it section by section), and then remind the audience of the expectations for each section as you transition from one section to the next.
- Among the moderator's most important tasks are to keep an eye on the time (I personally recommend that talkbacks last no longer than 20-25 minutes), ensure that the audience is following the talkback structure (for example, if someone tries to ask a clarifying question during the popcorn positive comments section, thank them for their question and say that we'll return to their question when we get to the clarifying questions section; or if during the clarifying question section, someone asks a question that is loaded with opinion or judgement, rephrase it in a way to make it a neutral, clarifying question).
- Watch out for those audience members who just want to hear themselves talk. Find a way to cut them off to keep the conversation flowing. Along these lines, try your best to call on each person who wants to share their thoughts.
- If the comments start to get repetitive, that's a good signal that it's time to move on to the next phase of the talkback.

Talkback Structure:

1. Quick, "popcorn" positive comments
 - These can be about images that really struck you, characters you found particularly interesting or engaging, lines or moments that stood out to you, etc.
 - This part of the talkback works best when the comments are brief. It's a low-threat way to help the audience feel comfortable with talking.
2. Question(s) from the playwright
 - If there's something about which the playwright is particularly curious or with which they're still struggling, the playwright can ask the audience about those things.
 - The playwright should typically ask no more than two questions and should run them by the moderator first. The moderator may help to shape the question(s) in a more precise way to get the best feedback.

- The moderator should also clarify with the playwright before the talkback if the playwright is ok with receiving audience member's opinions. More than likely, an audience member will share a way to "fix" the issue. If a playwright doesn't want that kind of feedback, the moderator needs to make that clear before beginning this section of the talkback.

3. Clarifying questions from the audience

- These questions are meant to provide clarity about the play, NOT provide opinions about how the playwright can rewrite or "fix" the play. So, basically, don't do the playwriting for the playwrights. (Again, if this happens, it's the moderator's job to stop the audience member and redirect the question.)
- Example of a bad question: Why was the ending of your play so confusing? Why don't you end it like this instead...
- Good question: What did you intend the audience to think or feel at the end of your play?
- Clarifying-question sentence starters:
 - What is the significance of...?
 - Could you explain why...?
 - Where is...?
 - When does...?
 - How does... ?
 - Where did the idea for _____ come from?
 - How will you...?
 - I'd like to learn more about...
 - What did you intend...?

4. Wrap it up

- It's the moderator's job to determine when enough questions have been asked and, again, to keep track of time.
- It's helpful to signal that the talkback is almost over by saying, "This will be our last question."
- Thank the audience for their feedback.