**Giving and receiving feedback**

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**Introduction**

Giving and receiving feedback is critical to effective writing, to successful writing groups, and to a good supervision relationship. The feedback cycle is also central to the academic publication process (for writers, reviewers, and editors), and to participating in academic conferences and other peer review work (like research funding processes). Feedback is so important to successful academic work because it enables writers to see their texts through readers' eyes, and to thereby ensure the key messages of their research reach their audiences to achieve maximum impact.

The ability to give and to receive (or maximise the benefits of) feedback are skills that can be developed and honed. In its first part, this resource summarises commonly agreed principles about what constitutes effective feedback, as well as how feedback can be received skill-fully. The second part of this resource provides some activities for facilitating peer feedback within writing groups and other academic contexts.

**Effective feedback:**

* is specific, concrete and constructive;
* offers alternatives and solutions wherever possible;
* offers solutions or alternatives as suggestions;
* focuses on the writing, not the writer;
* is delivered in a spirit of humility;
* is offered as a point of view;
* is delivered concisely, enabling others to contribute to the conversation;
* involves negative, neutral and positive points;
* is grounded in the knowledge that one's feedback, when delivered thoughtfully, is valid and useful;
* is grounded in the knowledge that the writer will weigh up the comments and make up their own mind about what to use;
* focuses for the most part on substantive issues in the writing.

**Positive feedback**

Positive feedback is equally, if not more important, than critical feedback because it:

* builds confidence;
* encourages the writer to keep going;
* helps the writer to see what is working for the reader, and to avoid revising those sections;
* can coax more ideas from the writer, and from the readers to build on strengths in the text;
* helps others to identify and model good examples.

**Neutral or reflective feedback**

Useful feedback involves both critical/constructive and positive points, as well as more neutral comments. Neutral points can include:

* general reactions,
* your first impressions,
* thoughts about how a draft has changed from a previous draft,
* areas of agreement and disagreement with other feedback and your reasons for this,
* a description of what you took from the text.

Neutral feedback helps the writer to know how the text has been received, or what the reader understood from the text.

**Phrases for giving feedback**

* Use ‘I’ language:
	+ I really liked ....’,
	+ ‘I thought ... read well and I understood that your project is about ... .’
	+ I wonder if you could delete the bit on page ... from the second paragraph to the … paragraph? There seems to be repetition of the point about ... ’.
* ‘Could you try ... ’?
* ‘A few sentences to explain ... on page ... would have helped me to clarify ... ’.
* ‘Could you move the second from ... to ... to the ... section of the text? It seems to work there better because ... ’.
* ‘I loved the section on ... such and such writes about that, would you like the reference?’
* ‘I was impressed by ... I thought it would be good to explain how you dealt with ...?’
* ‘Your text made me think about ... I wanted to share that in case it was helpful for your section on ... .’
* ‘I felt really persuaded by ... in the second paragraph in the second section I found ... .’
* ‘I think it would make it even better if you ... .’

Avoid ‘you’ language:

* ‘You should … .’
* ‘You need to … .’

Speak directly to the person you are giving the feedback to, not the facilitator or the group. (‘I thought …’, not ‘she should … .’)

**Tips for processing feedback**

**Make the most of it—**don't waste this opportunity; listen carefully and take notes.

**Be open—**resist the temptation to defend your work; try not to talk too much.

**Resist the urge to explain—**explanations can make it difficult for the reader to separate what you have told them from what they have read reducing the value of the feedback on the written work.

**Respect others’ opinions—**rememberall feedback is useful even if you don't agree with it. Feedback reveals how your work can be read or misread. Considering how others have read your work will enable you to ensure it is not misunderstood and help you to get your point across better next time.

**Prompt for constructive suggestions—**if the feedback is vague or you don't understand, consider asking the reader for more specific information; reflect their comments back to them to check you have heard correctly; or try to draw them out further.

**One comment at a time—**to avoid being overwhelmed after a feedback session, sift through the comments then put them aside and work through them one at a time.

**Phrases for receiving feedback**

Listening and taking notes is most important, but you might also help to create a relaxing and positive atmosphere, and maximise the quality of the feedback you receive, by using phrases like those below.

* ‘That's a good idea, thanks.’
* ‘So you're saying ... ?’
* ‘Can you give me an example?’
* ‘Can you be more specific?’
* ‘What page was that on? What section was that in?’
* ‘Could you suggest a word/phrase/sentence I could use instead?’
* ‘Where do you think it would be good to insert that?’
* ‘How did you find the section on ... ?’
* ‘Do you think it would work if I ... ?’

It may be useful to briefly consider the kind of feedback we want to avoid giving others. Less useful feedback:

* criticises the writer, rather than the writing ('you are not a good writer');
* is delivered with a superior tone of voice;
* delivers the feedback as 'fact' ('this is wrong');
* is repetitive;
* focuses only on what is wrong so the writer does not learn what worked well or what was understood;
* does not allow others to contribute to the conversation;
* is negative, vague or general, and leaves the writer with nowhere to go ('this article is not good enough');
* focuses only on the positive, leaving the writer with nowhere to go ('it's fine');
* avoids sharing a point of view because the reader feels they have no 'legitimacy' to give feedback ('I have no right to criticise your work', ‘I don’t have expertise in this field’);
* assumes the writer is dependent on your feedback (and will be hurt by the feedback);
* addresses side issues and smaller points and does not engage with the substance of the work;
* presents solutions as mandates.

It is important to avoid giving this kind of feedback because it can be demoralising and does not assist the writer to move forward. It can also undermine the sense of trust and enjoyment in the group.

**Feedback activities**

**1. Writer–reader peer feedback activity (Elbow and Belanoff, 1989)**

In this activity, two people work together. The writer in the pair chooses from the feedback options below and leads the reader in the feedback they would like. Following this, the positions are switched. Within the discussion, the focus is kept on making direct improvements to the draft remembering that the goal of feedback is to improve the text, not simply the reader’s understanding of it.

During the feedback, having asked for the response, the writer should avoid defending the work, but say as little as possible, listen and perhaps take notes. Receivers will decide what to do with the feedback and therefore do not need to 'defend' the work. The reader or reviewer does not ask the writer questions about the work to help the writer to focus on hearing the feedback on what is written.

**Feedback options for pair or writing group work**

**1. ‘Sayback’**—Ask readers, 'Say back to me in your own words what you hear me getting at in my writing.'

**2.** **‘Movies of the reader’s mind’**—Get readers to tell you frankly what happens inside their heads as they read your words.

**3.** **‘Pointing’**—Ask readers, 'Which words or phrases stick in your mind? Which passages or features did you like best? Don't explain why.'

**4. ‘What’s Almost Said or Implied’**—Ask readers, 'What's almost said, implied, hovering around the edges? What would you like to hear more about?'

**5. ‘Voice, point of view, attitude toward the reader, language, diction, syntax’**—Ask readers to describe each of these features or dimensions of your writing.

**6. ‘Center of gravity’**—Ask readers, 'What do you sense as the source of energy, the focal point, the seedbed, the generative center for this piece [not necessarily the main point]?'

**7. ‘Believing and doubting’**—Ask readers, 'Believe (or pretend to believe) everything I have written. Be my ally and tell me what you see. Give me more ideas and perceptions to help my case. Then doubt everything and tell me what you see. What arguments can be made against what I say?'

**Writer–reviewer–editor feedback activity (Bruffee, 1985)**

**Writer 1ST cycle**

1. Before the meeting, the writer produces a draft.
2. The writer writes a descriptive outline of their own draft, describing what each paragraph or section says, and how each paragraph or section functions in the draft as a whole.
3. The writer gives their draft to the reader.

**Reviewer 2nd cycle**

1. The reader provides feedback on the draft before meeting.
2. Feedback can be provided in two parts. The first provides a description of the core messages of the text, to show that the reader has closely read the draft and understands its form and content. The second provides an evaluation and response to the substantive issues in the paper. This can be provided in written form modelled after a professional peer review. Here the emphasis should be on making suggestions for improvement.
3. The writer and reader meet and compare descriptive outlines, discussing the reasons for any differences as well as how the text can be improved.
4. The writer can then revise the draft before submitting to another reader (or their supervisor).
5. The third reader may also then offer feedback on the draft, as well as on the reader’s feedback on the draft.

**Editor 3rd cycle**

1. Another layer can be added by asking another reader or reviewer to read the draft and the responses from the two readers. The third reader acts as mediator, much like an editor, who reads both perspectives and writes a critique of the original paper and responses to it. The editor may mediate between the two readers, responding to and evaluating the skills of both writer and readers, becoming a fourth voice in the conversation.
2. The third cycle can end with a final writer response, enabling the writer to have the last word. The writer says what they will choose from among the criticism offered and why. This helps writers to be less defensive in receiving feedback because they understand they are the final arbiters in the draft. It also highlights their own role as critic of the critics, and to reflect on what is useful within criticism.
3. Supervisors or facilitators can then offer feedback to writers, readers and editors about how they responded to and influenced one another.

**References**

Bruffee, K. A. 1985. *A short course in writing: Practical rhetoric for teaching composition through collaborative learning*, Little, Brown.

P. Elbow and P. Belanoff. 1989. *Sharing and Responding*, McDraw Hill.