University of South Australia

Learning and Teaching Unit
Research Education

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Introduction

Giving and receiving feedback, like all good communication is a skill that can be developed. This resource outlines how to provide and receive feedback, the benefits of participating in writing groups, and some tips for running successful writing groups. The advice is relevant for a variety of research contexts including writing groups of all kinds, research supervision, reviewing academic work, editorial negotiations with publishers, and other forms of scholarly networking.

The advice in this resource represents a distillation of Joni Cole's (2006) book *Toxic Feedback*, and comments in the appendix of Ursula Le Guin's (1998:151-156) book *Steering the Craft*.

Effective feedback:

- criticises the writing, not the writer;
- is delivered in a spirit of humility;
- avoids phrases like 'you need to' and 'you should';
- is offered as a point of view;
- is delivered concisely enabling others to contribute to the conversation;
- is specific, concrete, constructive, offering alternatives and solutions wherever possible;
- involves both negative 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;
- provides corrections for the first few minor errors and leaves the writer to correct the rest;
- focuses upon substantive issues in the writing;
- offers solutions or alternatives as suggestions.

In addition to constructive criticism and positive comments, it is also useful to share more neutral or ambiguous comments. For example: general reactions, 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. This kind of feedback is useful because it gives the writer a sense of how the text has been received.

Positive feedback

Some people think that feedback consists purely of pointing out what's wrong with a piece of writing. Positive feedback is equally important 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 it;
- helps others to identify and model good examples.

Phrases for giving feedback

- I really liked ... but you might consider adding a bit about ... to explain why ... .
- I thought ... read well and I understood that your project is about ... .
- I wonder if you could delete ... bit on page ... ? There seems to be repetition of the point about ... with the content at ... .
- Could you try ... ?
- A few sentences to explain ... might be helpful on page ... 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 ... but in the second paragraph in the second section I found ... .
- I think it would make it even better if you ... .

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 and can reduce the value of any feedback offered.

Respect others opinions - all 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 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 back their comments to check you have heard correctly.

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

Phrases for receiving feedback

- 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 on?
- 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 consider the kind of feedback we want to avoid giving others. Bad feedback:

- criticises the writer, rather than the writing ('you are not a good writer');
- is delivered with a superior tone of voice;

- uses words like 'you need to' and 'you should';
- 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');
- assumes the writer is dependent on your feedback ('you will be too hurt if I comment on your work');
- pedantically picks only on small grammatical errors and does not engage with substantive content;
- 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.

Writing groups

There are many benefits of writing groups. Writing groups can:

- reduce isolation
- allow participants to learn from others in the same boat
- stimulate critical thinking and research clarity
- provide writing deadlines
- provide encouragement to motivation
- improve writing and research quality
- provide opportunities to prepare for seminars, publications, and other important writing deadlines
- improve confidence
- provide contacts
- provide support in solving problems arising in the research and writing process
- provide editing support
- provide people to celebrate your successes with
- provide opportunities to practice giving and receiving criticism.

Operational norms

At the first or second meeting of a new writing group it is useful to decide upon and record how the group intends to operate. A list of operational norms is provided below to act as a discussion starter for new writing groups. Experienced group participants recommend:

- six to eleven members (which allows for different opinions without getting too big to manage);
- fortnightly or monthly meetings;
- members be at a similar level of accomplishment;
- manuscripts circulated before the meeting to allow everyone to provide thoughtful criticism;
- feedback provided in writing on the draft with the reader's name on the top of the page;
- all decisions made collectively;
- designated time before the feedback session to share news and raise any concerns;
- everyone takes a turn to provide and receive feedback;
- participants arrive on time;
- participants let the group know if they will not be able to attend (to prevent others feeling the group is flagging);
- drafts submitted within an agreed lead time;
- strict confidentiality (no one outside the group to have access to drafts);
- concise feedback, in turn, and without interruption from others;
- feedback to address substantive issues (nitpicks addressed briefly or only in writing);

- avoid asking the writer questions that will elicit long explanations;
- the writer says nothing, or as little as possible during feedback;
- the writer takes notes of what others are saying;
- feedback be kept concise, to allow time for open discussion.

Role of the facilitator

Writing groups, especially those with more than four members, will usually run better with a facilitator. The facilitator can be the same person every meeting, or group members can take it in turns to facilitate group meetings. The facilitator's role is to foster a sense of community, rather than one of competition by keeping the discussion positive and task focused.

The role of the facilitator is to:

- raise operational matters (meeting times, food, submission turns and dates, minutes);
- ensure writer's get equal time, or that time is negotiated in the group;
- ensure everyone gets a turn to talk (by calling upon members one at a time, or calling upon quieter members directly);
- use humour and positivity manage digressions, arguments, rehashing, dominating, side conversations and put downs and keep the discussion on track;
- reiterate key points before the group moves on to a new tack;
- stimulate discussion if the group flags (ask open ended questions 'Tell me more about ...');
- remain impartial (no favourites, encourage members to work out any issues with one another directly).

The 'world's worst' workshop participants

Joni Cole (2006:134-137) provides a characterisation of the 'world's worst' workshop participants. Cole's descriptions are provided here to help us to reflect on how we can participate in a positive manner.

The shadow - shows up to meetings, but rarely shares or takes a turn.

The dominator - doesn't draw breath, likes to talk about self and pads comments with irrelevant detail.

The star - assumes their work is the best, brags about their achievements, doesn't read other people's work.

The grammarian - obsesses with minor errors, avoids being involved in discussion about substantive themes.

The devil's advocate - contradicts for the sake of contradiction, enjoys stirring up trouble.

The interrupter - impulsive, impatient, cuts people off, runs away with others' ideas.

The outpatient - wants to work out issues and connect with others, not work on writing.

The gossip - talks about other members behind their back, poisons group members against one another.

Constructive group behaviours

- Take your turn.
- Enjoy equal time on the floor.
- Encourage and support others.
- Read and comment on the substance of submitted work.
- Offer alternatives and solutions.
- Build on the comments of others.
- Stay task focused.
- Raise issues about the group dynamic with the group.

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References

Cole, Joni B 2006, *Toxic feedback*, University Press of New England, Hanover.

Le Guin, Ursula 1998, *Steering the craft: Exercises and discussions on story writing for the lone navigator or the mutinous crew*, The Eighth Mountain Press, Portland Oregon.

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