Giving and Receiving Feedback

In many writing classes, students are expected to learn how to give feedback to their peers. This task is usually called peer review, a concept you will also learn about when you begin to use academic research. At first, this may seem intimidating. Writers may think, “I’m not a teacher–how can I give useful feedback to another writer?” What writers CAN do is give their peers an honest reaction as a reader and give advice based on their own experience. It is ultimately up to the writer to decide if they want to make sure of the feedback given. If you feel unsure of your ability to give feedback, remember that you are learning from the process. In a class, the other students will also receive feedback from the instructor.

This understanding may also help students who don’t feel that other students are qualified to give feedback. If you feel that the advice given to you by a peer isn’t right, you can choose to ignore it or decide to check with your instructor first. Remember that your peers are learning how to give feedback, just as you are.

Giving feedback on writing is a powerful skill that you may use outside of school for work projects, for personal writing, or even to help your children with their homework.

Giving Peer Feedback

When your role in peer review is to give feedback, your job is to help the writer by giving your reaction as a reader to the writing. Think about the kind of feedback you would like to get and also how you would like that feedback to be given. What follows here are some basic rules to follow for responding to someone else’s writing.

First, listen to the writer. What kind of feedback are they asking for? Do they want to know if their thesis is clear? Do they have questions about citing sources? Make a note about what kind of feedback the writer has requested and keep that in mind as you respond.

Be kind. When you are receiving criticism, isn’t it easier to hear if the person giving the criticism is kind and respectful to you? Do the same for your peer.

Comment on the higher order concerns first. That means asking questions about anything that confuses you, checking to see if the writing did what the assignment called for, and considering if the order of the paper

makes sense. Sometimes your instructor will give you specific things they want you to comment on; if so, be sure you do so.

Use "I" statements to help stay focused on your reaction to the writing. For example, instead of saying, "You aren't clear in this paragraph," try saying, "I'm confused in this paragraph. Did you mean X or Y?"

Be specific. Never say "I liked it" or "It was good" unless you follow up with an explanation of exactly what you liked or thought was good. The same goes for criticism; say exactly what confused you or what was missing.

Ask questions. Use questions to clarify what the writer means, what the resources given are saying, and what the writer is trying to do.

Offer advice based on your own experience. For example, you could say "if this were my paper, the two things I would do next are A and B." Provide options such as, "If you wanted to expand this, you could do A, B, or C."

Don't try to make the writer sound like you. If a word is the wrong word, note that, but if you just think of a word you like better, that's just a matter of style and voice.

Don't edit your peer's writing for them. Only comment on editing when the writing is a final draft or when your instructor has included checking for errors in the instructions for peer review. Correcting errors is important at some point, but it makes no sense to spend time editing a paragraph if that paragraph may needs to be deleted or changed. It's okay to remind the writer to run spell check and grammar check if you notice minor errors. Otherwise, only ask about editing errors if you have trouble understanding the sentence because of the mistakes. If your instructor does want you to comment on editing, be sure to follow the instructions. Remember that the responsibility for correcting the errors lies with the writer, not with you.

When providing peer feedback, it can be helpful to have an understanding of higher order and lower order concerns. See "Higher vs. Lower Order Concerns" in the "Revising" section to learn more.

Make the Most of Peer Feedback

Now let's consider your role in receiving feedback, not giving it. Are you eager to get feedback? Scared to share your work? If you are receiving feedback from your peers, remember that ultimately you get to decide what feedback to accept. If you don't think the feedback is correct, ask your instructor what they think. And give your peers a break; they are also just learning how to give feedback.

One way to improve the feedback you get is to ask for the kind of feedback you want. Don't be afraid to give your peer reviewer some direction.

Listen to or read the feedback with an open mind. Consider that the peer reviewer is your reader. It's good to know what a real reader got out of your writing.

If you aren't sure about the feedback or feel upset about it, reconsider the suggestions after a break. It's okay to say, "I'll think about that." If you feel that the reviewer is trying to change your style so that the paper doesn't sound like you anymore, consider whether the feedback helps you make the paper better. If not, feel free to set that feedback aside.

Why Meet with a Writing Tutor?

Sometimes your instructor may ask you to visit the Writing Center, or it may even be a requirement for your class. Or you may just be curious about what a writing tutor has to offer. Many colleges have writing centers or subscribe to online services that provide tutoring in writing. What's the benefit?

Writing tutors offer you another perspective on your writing. They serve as a real audience for your words and ideas. In addition to that, they have some additional expertise either because they are more experienced writers or they are writing instructors. Writing tutors also have experience with resources for writing that you may not be aware of.

What about Getting Help from a Friend or Family Member?

Getting feedback from a reader outside of your class can sometimes be a good idea. If you want to ask a friend or family member for feedback, set some ground rules. They should follow the same rules as a peer reviewer. At the very least, asking a friend or family member to read your paper aloud will help you hear how your paper sounds. You will probably catch more errors, too.

Example of constructive critique

An example of constructive writing feedback using this approach for the classic fable Cinderella:

[The 'top slice' of kudos]
I enjoyed how you showed the complex family dynamics between Cinderella and her step-mother and mean step-sisters

– this rang true of an adjustment phase that often does happen in blended families.

[The 'middle slug' of suggestion]
The fairy godmother could read like a *deus ex machina* to some – something that comes in and saves the day, making success a little too certain or easy for Cinderella. Is there perhaps a further challenge she might have where the godmother is unable to assist her, like a 'dark night of the soul', something that truly tests her and she has to stand alone and 'figure it out' for herself?

[The 'bottom slice' of encouragement]
You've captured the relationships within the family well. Perhaps consider cutting off the godmother's support in the rising action towards the end so that the stakes and suspense are even higher. Keep going!

Example of three-part, constructive feedback

Common criticisms of this feedback approach (often shared in the business world) are:

1. People come away only remembering the 'bread' of kudos and encouragement (criticism gets lost in the mix).
2. It may seem inauthentic due to having a somewhat 'templated' format that can seem impersonal.

These are valid objections to this approach. However, if you keep each part to the point, and strive to **fill your feedback with empathy, purpose and tact** (authentic connection, in other words), your feedback should still be effective.

It's better than harsh feedback which shuts down openness and discussion.