

## **GIVING—AND RESPONDING TO—CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK**

Writing is a communicative act. It is a reflection of the communication process and represents each of the process's components in many ways. Yet, because many people tend to think of writing as a one-way communication, feedback can be particularly challenging for a writer to assess. The best praise for your work may be the sound of silence, of the document having fulfilled its purpose without error, misinterpretation, or complaint. Your praise may come in the form of increased referrals, or sales leads, or outright sales, but you may not learn of the feedback unless you seek it out. And that is what this section is about: seeking out feedback because it is an opportunity—an opportunity to engage with your audience, stimulate your thinking, and ultimately improve your writing.

You ask a colleague, “How was your weekend?” and he glances at the floor. Did he hear you? Was his nonverbal response to your question one of resignation that the weekend didn't go well, or is he just checking to make sure his shoes are tied? Feedback, like all parts of the communication model, can be complex and puzzling. Do you ask again? Do you leave him alone? It is hard to know what an action means independent of context, and even harder to determine without more information. Feedback often serves the role of additional information, allowing the source to adapt, adjust, modify, delete, omit, or introduce new messages across diverse channels to facilitate communication. One point of reference within the information or response we define as feedback may, in itself, be almost meaningless, but taken together with related information can indicate a highly complex response, and even be used to predict future responses.

Constructive feedback, sometimes called constructive criticism, focuses on the process and outcomes of communication, not on the people involved (see Table 2.1). In contrast, destructive feedback delivers criticism with no effort to stimulate improvement.<sup>18</sup> For example, “This proposal is a confusing mess, and you failed to convince me of anything” is destructive feedback. Your goal is to be more constructive: “Your proposal could be more effective with a clearer description of the manufacturing process and a well-organized explanation of why the positives outweigh the negatives.” When giving feedback, avoid personal attacks and give the person clear guidelines for improvement. When you receive constructive feedback, resist the urge to defend your work or deny the validity of the feedback. Remaining open to criticism isn't easy when you've worked long and hard on a project, but good feedback provides a valuable opportunity to learn and to improve the quality of your work.

**TABLE 2.1 Giving Constructive Feedback**

How to Be Constructive	Explanation
Think through the implications of your suggested changes.	In documents that discuss complex relationships between ideas, isolated and superficial edits can do more harm than good.
Discuss improvements rather than flaws.	Instead of saying "This is confusing," for instance, explain how the writing can be improved to make it clearer.
Focus on controllable behavior.	The writer may not have control over every variable that affected the quality of the message, so focus on those aspects the writer can control.
Be specific.	Comments such as "I don't get this" or "Make this clearer" don't give the writer much direction.
Keep feedback impersonal.	Focus comments on the message, not on the person who created it.
Verify understanding.	If in doubt, ask for confirmation from the recipient to make sure that the person understood your feedback.
Time your feedback carefully.	Respond in a timely fashion so that the writer will have sufficient time to implement the changes you suggest.
Highlight any limitations your feedback may have.	If you didn't have time to give the document a thorough edit, or if you're not an expert in some aspect of the content, let the writer know so that he or she can handle your comments appropriately.

Carl Rogers, the famous humanistic psychologist, divides feedback into five categories:

1. Evaluative
2. Interpretive
3. Supportive
4. Probing
5. Understanding

These five types of feedback vary in their frequency and effectiveness..

### Evaluative Feedback

This type of feedback is the most common. Evaluative feedback often involves judgment of the writer and his or her ethos (or credibility). We look for credibility clues when we examine the letterhead; feel the stationery; or read the message and note the professional language, correct grammar, and lack of spelling errors. Conversely, if the writer's credibility is undermined by errors, is perceived to be inappropriately informal, or presents questionable claims, the reader's view of the writer will be negative. The reader is less likely to read or respond to the message communicated by a source judged to lack credibility.

In an interpersonal context, evaluative feedback may be communicated as a lack of eye contact, a frequent glance at a cell phone, or an overt act to avoid communication, such as walking away from the speaker. In written communication, we don't have the opportunity to watch the reader "walk away." As a business writer, your ethos is an important part of the message.

In aspects of interpersonal interaction, behavioral evaluations are one type of evaluative feedback. A behavioral evaluation assesses the action and not the actor, but the business writer lacks this

context. You don't always know when or where your content will be read and evaluated, so it is in your best interest to be consistently professional. Fact checking, elimination of errors, and a professional image should be habits, not efforts of will. They should be an automatic part of the writing process for any business writer.

## **Interpretive Feedback**

In the course of a conversation, you may not be completely sure you heard correctly, so it is often a good idea to paraphrase or restate what you heard as a way of requesting confirmation or clarification. You may also understand what was said, but restate the main point as a way of communicating attention. Listening is hard to assess in any conversation, and interpretive feedback allows the speaker to hear a clear demonstration of feedback that confirms that the message was understood or needs correction. Interpretive feedback requests confirmation or clarification of a message, and is often expressed in the form of a question.

In hard copy documents, we normally lack this feedback loop, but online documents increasingly allow for this form of exchange. You may find a "Comments" button at the end of an online article. When you click on the button, a text box will appear, providing a space and a medium for feedback from readers to the author, allowing an opportunity to respond with opinions, interpretations, and questions sparked by the article. Blogs incorporated this feature early in the development of Web content, but you can see variations of this feedback style all over the Web. This form of feedback is increasingly common in Facebook's wall, in MySpace's comment box, and even in an article published in the online version of the *Wall Street Journal*.

## **Supportive Feedback**

You come in second in a marathon to which you have dedicated the better part of a year in training. It was a challenging race and you are full of mixed emotions. The hug from your partner communicates support and meets your need in ways that transcend language and the exchange of symbolic meaning. In an interpersonal context it is easy to identify, describe, and even predict many representations of supportive feedback, but in other communication contexts it can prove a significant challenge.

You may give yourself encouragement as you mentally prepare for the race, and may receive backslaps and hugs after the race, but when you write about your experience, how do you experience supportive feedback? In the same way you receive evaluative or interpretive feedback via comments or to your Facebook wall, you may receive supportive feedback. Supportive feedback communicates encouragement in response to a message.

## **Probing Feedback**

As you've read an article, have you ever wanted to learn more? Increasingly, embedded links allow a reader to explore related themes and content that give depth and breadth to content, but require the reader to be self-directed. Probing feedback communicates targeted requests for specific information. As an author, you've crafted the message and defined what information is included

and what is beyond the scope of your document, but not every reader may agree with your framework. Some may perceive that a related idea is essential to the article, and specifically request additional information as a way of indicating that it should be included. Rather than responding defensively to requests for specific information and interpreting them as challenges to your authority as the author, see them for what they are: probing feedback. They are opportunities that you should respond to positively with the view that each is an opportunity to interact, clarify, and promote your position, product, or service.

Keeping a positive attitude is an important part of writing in general and feedback in particular. Not everyone is as skilled with words as you are, so their probing feedback may appear on the surface to be less than diplomatic; it may even come across as rude, ignorant, or unprofessional. But it will be to your advantage to see through the poor packaging of their feedback for the essential request, and respond in a positive, professional fashion.

## Understanding Feedback

Rogers discussed the innate tendency for humans to desire to be understood. Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. Rogers, C. R. (1970). *On encounter groups*. New York, NY: Harper & Row. We, at times, may express frustration associated with a project at work. As we express ourselves to those we choose to share with, we seek not only information or solutions, but also acceptance and respect. We may not even want a solution, or need any information, but may simply want to be heard. Understanding feedback communicates sympathy and empathy for the source of the message.

As a business writer, you want your writing to be understood. When you receive feedback, it may not always be supportive or encouraging. Feedback is not always constructive, but it is always productive. Even if the feedback fails to demonstrate understanding or support for your cause or point, it demonstrates interest in the topic.

As a skilled communicator, you can recognize the types of feedback you are likely to receive from readers and can recognize that your readers may also desire feedback. Sometimes an author may communicate respect and understanding in a follow-up message. By providing a clarification, the writer can develop the relationship with the reader. Being professional involves keeping your goals in mind, and in order for your writing to be successful, you will need a positive relationship with your readers.

## References:

Bové C. L., & Thill, J. V. (2019). *Business communication essentials : fundamental skills for the mobile-digital-social workplace*. New York, NY Pearson.

<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-geneseo-businesscommunication/chapter/feedback-as-an-opportunity/>

