Giving and Receiving Feedback

by Sophia

1. Feedback in the Writing Process

Feedback is advice given in response to reading an essay or other writing project and is typically intended to lead to revision and a second or third draft that shows improvements over the first draft. This means that feedback can be part of the writing process when a reader offers a writer reactions and suggestions to the piece of writing in question.

In college, often a piece of writing will receive feedback from instructors, peers, and even tutors or graders. But even when you're not being offered feedback as part of a course's requirements, you may still seek it out from your trusted friends and family, using their intelligence and expertise to improve your own work. Moreover, if you're in a professional space, you may end up getting feedback from coworkers, supervisors, and other interested parties.

HINT

Feedback often works better if you ask specific questions rather than just handing somebody an essay. Questions you might ask include:

- Do you find the tone appropriate to the topic?
- Is the style appropriate to the audience?
- Are the claims made in the essay accurate and current?
- Is my purpose clear, and do I achieve it?

Regardless of where and when you're getting feedback on your writing, it's probably best to have really good feedback from just a few people instead of lots of feedback from many people. That way, you can be sure that you're seeing a diverse set of perspectives on your writing, but aren't getting overwhelmed by an avalanche of other people's opinions.

Feedback may arrive in a few ways. Perhaps you'll have a conversation about a writing project with a boss, teacher, or friend. Or you may receive physical notes on your writing, either digitally or on paper from a peer or an instructor. Or you may just get a note at the end of the paper summarizing the reader's feedback and thoughts about what you've written.

> 📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

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2. Constructive vs. Non-Constructive Feedback

However you receive feedback, it's important to learn how to assess if that feedback is constructive or not and how to incorporate it into your writing.

Here is a short piece of writing with some feedback on it:

> *Many people* **(who)** *in today's society are victims of discrimination, which is a sad fact. It often starts with prejudices that are formed by a person's ignorance, based on thoughts or knowledge about someone's race, appearance, disability, or social group.* **(I don't understand this spot. What do you mean "it often starts"? Also, What about stereotypes? Won't they make it worse?)** *When these thoughts transfer to action and behavior, they become discrimination. So in order to reduce discrimination, we need to change the prejudiced ideas that people have. The only way to do this is to create more social narratives, like television shows and movies, that feature characters who are usually discriminated against.* **(Is this a long or short-term solution? I worry it would take a long time.)** *Seeing these characters will help teach all people about what the lives of these characters are like. Knowing more about, say, disabled people will help change the kinds of prejudicial and discriminatory beliefs about them that some people have.* **(I'd like to know more about how more knowledge will lead to more action.)**

What do you notice here? This reader has a lot of questions about the ideas in this essay. The reader is posing those questions to the author in a respectful tone and is pushing the line of reasoning forward in a positive, constructive manner.

In the places where the reader doesn't understand something that the writer has written, she frames her confusion as a personal experience, not as the fault of the author. Overall, this feedback conforms to the ideals of constructive feedback.

The best, most constructive feedback will:

- Offer insights into your ideas, organization, and style that can be implemented.
- Ask probing questions that help you reconsider and enrich your own ideas.
- Stick with personally focused, I-based comments, such as "I don't understand."

Now here's the same paragraph with feedback from a different reviewer:

> *Many people in today's society are victims of discrimination, which is a sad fact.* **(People should stop being so sensitive. Not everything is discrimination.)** *It often starts with prejudices that are formed by a person's ignorance, based on thoughts or knowledge about someone's race, appearance, disability, or social group.* **(This doesn't make sense.)** *When these thoughts transfer to action and behavior, they become discrimination. So in order to reduce discrimination, we need to change the prejudiced ideas that people have.* **(Stereotypes are based in truth, so you're wrong. You also can't control free speech. This is dumb.)** *The only way to do this is to create more social narratives, like television shows and movies, that feature characters who are usually discriminated against.* **(Is this a long or short-term solution? I worry it would take a long time.)** *Seeing these characters will help teach all people about what the lives of these characters are like. Knowing more about, say, disabled people will help change the kinds of prejudicial and discriminatory beliefs about them that some people have.* **(Totally unrealistic. TV isn't going to change anyone's beliefs!)**

Notice how different the tone is. Right away, the reader seems to be making judgments about whether or not this is a valid argument, not about how the argument is constructed. This reader disagrees with the values that the author is espousing, and that's really all she's commenting on here. This is based on her own opinion, not on what the author has presented in this piece of writing.

Moreover, the reader uses words such as "unrealistic" and "dumb," which aren't helpful to the author, and are even kind of mean. Overall, these aren't notes that an author can incorporate into a new draft; they're personal attacks. This just isn't constructive.

Like this example, non-constructive feedback may:

- Be so critical that making the suggested changes would be very difficult.
- Contain personal attacks against the author.
- Place a judgement on the values of the piece instead of on the way the piece was written.
- Be so non-critical that it doesn't demonstrate any meaningful changes that the author can make, such as if someone just writes, "I like it," "It's fine," or even "I don't get it."

None of that is feedback that you can use to enrich your arguments.

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3. Incorporating Feedback

Obviously, you want to avoid non-constructive feedback, both when you give and receive comments on writing. But whether it's constructive and substantial or non-constructive and vague, feedback can still help improve your writing.

Because it can be hard to read someone's reactions to your work, whether those reactions are positive or negative, it's important to approach feedback as neutrally as you can.

If you find that on first review, you're responding to feedback angrily, you're feeling defensive, or you're getting upset, go ahead and take a break to clear your head, and return when you're ready to approach the feedback dispassionately.

Once you're in that mindset and ready to assess your feedback, start by asking yourself how can you use it to make your writing better. If your feedback is full of useful notes and questions, then you'll have lots of material to work with.

But even if the feedback isn't very helpful, you can still use it to make your work better. If you get non-constructive feedback about a particular idea or passage, you can still reread and review that passage, even if you don't have helpful notes on how to change it.

Here's a short paragraph that has received some feedback:

> *If TV shows and movies include more characters with disabilities, there will be less prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities in this country.* **(What an interesting potential solution!)** *Most prejudice arises from ignorance; people don't know anyone who is blind, so they make assumptions about blind people. But if we saw more blind characters,* **(What kinds of characters? What kinds of shows?)** *we would all know a blind person in the same way that we all know Harry Potter or Spock.* **(If these characters are depicted stereotypically, couldn't that increase discrimination?)** *Knowing that character would reduce our prejudice against people like him or her in the real world.* **(I'd like to know more about how this will change people's beliefs.)**

You can see that the feedback is mostly interested in the highlighted part of the paragraph, where the author proposes a solution to discrimination by creating more characters with disabilities. The reader is curious about how these characters will be written and is concerned that certain portrayals of blindness might lead to more discrimination.

As an author, how could you incorporate this feedback? You might start by writing out an answer to this question:

> *Stereotypical characters might increase prejudice, however.*

Then you would think about how this idea changes your argument by adding in a caveat or a wrinkle to the proposal that you're making:

So for this proposal to work, such depictions would need to be nuanced and carefully written. Characters with disabilities would need to be written the same as any other character, demonstrating that people with disabilities are the same as everyone else, too.

Adding in these ideas improves the overall argument, making this a stronger piece of writing. But what if, instead of responding positively, you read this feedback and said, "Ugh, this person has no idea what I'm trying to propose. Of course, stereotypes will do more harm than good. That is so obvious. I just don't think she's even paying attention to what I'm saying."

That might not be a very productive or positive response, but it can be illuminating anyhow. As that outburst showed, you as the author assumed that your readers would know that you don't want stereotypical characters. But the reader's line of questioning shows that she didn't know that by the time she finished reading your argument.

That means that you didn't do a very good job of addressing that issue and that your assumption needs to be addressed. Therefore, this feedback and your negative response to it may still have shown you that there is a gap between what you think your essay is saying and what your essay is actually saying. That tells you that you should add those ideas.

☑ SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that **feedback in the writing process** occurs when advice is given in response to reading an essay or other writing project and is typically intended to lead to revision and a second or third draft that shows improvements over the first draft.

You then learned that there is a big difference between **constructive feedback and non-constructive feedback.** While constructive feedback offers insights into your ideas, organization, and style that can be implemented, non-constructive feedback places a judgement on the values of the piece instead of on the way the piece was written, or is so non-critical that it doesn't demonstrate any meaningful changes that the author can make.

Finally, you practiced **incorporating feedback** into writing by considering how you might answer questions posed by the reader. Approaching feedback with a neutral mindset is key because this will allow you to evaluate your writing objectively.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Martina Shabram.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

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