

Feedback Looping¹

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Giving feedback about art is an art unto itself. It requires us to engage our empathy, humility, critical thinking, creative instincts, and focused attention. Also like creative work, it's something we have to *practice* to get better at. Luckily, there are strategies we can employ to help us when we encounter anxiety or mental blocks while giving feedback.

Here are some steps you can follow (in order!) to get a good feedback loop going:

1. Point out something specific you like about the work and why.
2. Ask curious questions.
3. If part of the work sticks out to you as not “fitting” or it feels less effective, ask a question about it.
4. Finally, you may offer direct critique about a specific aspect of the work **ONLY IF** you can say why **AND** that “why” is contextualized within the artist’s goals.

It is important to follow these steps in order to create an atmosphere of **trust**.

Step 1: demonstrates that you are intentionally engaging with the work.

Step 2: shows that you are earnest in wanting to support the artist’s goals.

Step 3: gives the artist a chance to reflect on their work before you offer any opinions.

Step 4: offers your opinion humbly, honestly, and in good faith.

Note that step 4 is not the goal. A feedback loop might never make it to step 4 and still be of value. Each of these four steps is valuable in its own right:

Step 1: points out the most effective parts of the work from your perspective, which can inform the artist about what’s working (“I should do more of that!”).

Step 2: encourages the artist to think and talk about their work, possibly in new ways, which can stimulate the creative process.

Step 3: draws the artist’s attention to a potential problem area, prompts them to think about it critically, and may draw a solution out of the artist (best case!).

Step 4: presents the artist with a third-person point of view, which they can take into account as they develop the work.

¹ This document is a distillation of my personal views on feedback. It is based on years of observing teachers, students, peers, and myself. There are surely other perspectives on the matter. This is just a compilation of best practices based on what I’ve seen to be effective in practice.

Elaboration on the four steps:

1. Point out something specific you like about the work and why.
 - *Specific* as in a specific section OR a specific layer/element of the work
 - Avoid just saying you like something. Instead, describe what it felt like to you, what it evoked, or what is effective about it.
 - This isn't just for praise and adulation, it's meant to give the artist a sense of what is working well from an outsider's perspective.
2. Ask curious questions.
 - Curious questions show your genuine interest in the work and the artist's goals
 - Be mindful that your question doesn't sound like veiled criticism or passive-aggression
 - If you aren't well versed in the tools/techniques/media the artist uses, you might feel like your questions are naive. But cross-disciplinary perspectives are valuable. Approach the task with humility and child-like inquisitiveness.
3. If part of the work sticks out to you as not "fitting" or it feels less effective, ask a question about it.
 - The point is to draw attention to the parts of the work that stood out to you.
 - This isn't about hedging or trying to be overly gentle. It's about recognizing that the artist likely already knows what parts need work. By asking questions, they might address the issue.
 - The goal should always be to let the artist come up with solutions or at least to get them thinking differently about the problem.
4. Offer direct critique about a specific aspect of the work ONLY IF you can say why AND that "why" is contextualized within the artist's goals.
 - If the artist asks for suggestions, offer one or two, but frame them as examples. There is more than one way to solve most problems. The artist might not use your suggestions, but they could at least spark a train of thought that leads to another solution.
 - Remember to frame the critique within the context of the artist's vision (this is why asking questions to ascertain that vision is important!). It's not about bad or good work, it's about shaping the work to better align with the artist's goals.
 - Be humble. It's not a bad thing to say
 - Remember, you don't even have to get to this fourth step. Maybe there aren't any overt "issues" in the piece that need addressing. That's why the first three steps are there, so that a feedback session can be valuable even without concrete problem-seeking and solutions.

Examples:

1. *Point out something specific you like about the work and why.*
 - I really love the lighting and composition of this picture because it highlights the subject in an unique/unexpected way.
 - The field recordings in this work are very crisp and clear and they really immerse the listener in a beautiful soundscape.
 - This section at X really drew me in because of the delicate sounds and the way they interact.
 - The form of the work is really compelling, I think it had a good balance of repetition and novelty.
 - This video has a great pacing and flow. The editing really supports a coherent narrative.
 - The material and arrangement in the first section of the work was really beautiful.
2. *Ask curious questions.*
 - What is your intended message or narrative with this work?
 - How do you intend for this work presented? In what context or setting?
 - What is that (sound/image/material) at X part in the work?
 - What tools/techniques/media are you using? How do they support the goal of the work?
 - On what levels do you hope people engage with the work? Is there anything in particular you want people to notice?
 - What is/was your process in creating this piece like?
 - Do you feel this piece is almost finished? What else do you think it needs?
3. *If part of the work sticks out to you as not fitting or it feels less effective, ask a question about it.*
 - What is your goal with section X? Where does it fit in the broader narrative?
 - Do you think the piece has a good balance of novelty vs. repetition?
 - What is the role of the violin part in this work?
 - Is this sound intentional, or was it a glitch or incidental side-effect?
 - Are there any parts of the work that you feel aren't supporting your goals?
4. *Offer direct critique about a specific aspect of the work ONLY IF you can say why AND that why is contextualized within the artist's goals.*
 - I know that you want this part to be a reprieve from the very active previous section. To me, it seemed to almost change pace too abruptly, so it feels more like a totally different piece, instead of a reprieve. Maybe it needs a throughline?
 - I feel like this element isn't quite doing what you want it to do. It seemed a little out of place next to these other elements to me.
 - I think that the narrative gets a little bit lost at this part. It might be too ambiguous. You could be more heavy-handed if you want.

Things to avoid:

- Comparing the work to other artists/works. This is unproductive and subtly implies that the work is derivative.
- Basing your feedback on personal taste. Try to meet the artist where they are at.
- Criticizing the artist or their vision. Stay in your lane.
- Assumptions. Ask a question to confirm or reject any assumptions you have.
- Saying nothing. Engage in the discussion! Even if you're just asking questions, that is a valuable contribution!

General guidelines for giving feedback:

- Point out effective or compelling parts of the work.
- Highlight issues in the work within the context of the artist's goals.
- Draw solutions to issues out of the artist (example solutions may be given to the artist if they ask).
- Offer your honest perspective as one of many possible viewpoints.
- Questions are usually better than statements.
- Build the artist up.
- Be humble.