GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK
ON ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL WRITING

Feedback is at the core of academic and professional life. Learning to effectively give and receive writing feedback will enhance the quality of your writing projects, the depth and efficiency of your writing skills, and your relationships with the colleagues you exchange feedback with. When feedback is clear and respectful, it helps establish a culture of trust within those relationships.

But **requesting and receiving feedback is vulnerable**, in part because it can create a tension between our desire to learn and our desire to be accepted. In this guide, we offer specific best practices for requesting, giving, and receiving feedback, as well as positive mindsets for each stage of that process.

The feedback conversation will look different in different contexts: within writing groups, between peers and colleagues, within a mentor-mentee relationship, etc. This guide was mainly written with peer-to-peer writing groups in mind, but many of the principles apply broadly. In any context, it is important to start the feedback conversation by clearly establishing expectations, including timelines and methods of communication.

Requesting Feedback

Writers request feedback for a wide range of reasons: to improve their ideas, to check their clarity, to get unstuck, or to make the writing process feel less isolating. When requesting feedback:

I. Consider what would be most helpful to you at this stage.
Generally, it's most helpful to ask for big-picture feedback near the beginning or middle stages of the writing process, and more detail-oriented feedback (e.g., grammar and formatting) near the end stages of the writing process.

II. Consider what kind of feedback this feedback-giver is best poised to give you,
whether because of their inclination to notice certain writing elements or their familiarity with your writing topic, and consider targeting your request to their strengths. No one can provide comprehensive feedback on every aspect of your writing at one time.

III. Explain your goals and focus areas within your document or in an email:
1. <u>Summary and goal</u>: *Briefly* summarize your argument and what you would like to accomplish in this piece or in this stage of writing. If relevant, explain the target audience, your timeline for writing/submission, and where you are in the writing process.

2. <u>Biggest weakness</u>: Explain what you've been struggling with in this piece and/or the biggest weakness you feel this piece has.

3. <u>Prioritized feedback list</u>: Provide a short list of the elements you'd like feedback on. In many contexts, including writing groups, the most effective feedback requests are on big-picture writing issues involving ideas, structure, sources, or field-specific conventions. Highlight specific sections of the text you'd like the most help with. Keep your requests realistic given the time your feedback-giver will have, and if you're in a writing group, stick to your group's ground rules!

Giving Feedback

When giving feedback, the key things to strive for are 1. understanding the writer's goals for their piece and 2. helping them achieve those goals. Try to set aside what *your* goals for this piece would be if you were the writer.

An effective way to orient your feedback towards the writer's goals is to start with ***description*** (what did you experience as you were reading?) before moving to ***evaluation*** (how well did the piece achieve its intended reader experience?) and only then moving to ***suggestion*** (articulate possible strategies/edits the writer could use to get closer to the intended reader experience).

I. Consider the following questions as you're reading:
- What are the writer's goals and audience? What are the conventions of this type of writing?

- What is the piece's main question and main claim? How is the significance of that question/claim explained? Are these clear and convincing?

- What is the most compelling evidence presented? Where does the writer's analysis deepen the reader's understanding of the presented evidence? Where was the relevance of presented evidence unclear?

- How is the piece structured? Where did the flow and logic feel clear, and where did you lose the flow/logic? Where does the argument move forward and where does it feel stagnant?

- Is there anything that got in the way of your understanding or motivation to keep reading?

II. Deliver feedback in a way that builds trust, respect, and engagement with the writer. Remember that *how* you deliver feedback is just as important as the feedback itself.
- <u>Supportive</u> feedback delivery: Engage thoughtfully with the piece ("I realize your main point was ..." ; Here you're arguing ...") and help the writer see what is working best ("To me, the best-written part of this piece was ..." ; "the most interesting idea in this chapter was ...")

- <u>Reflective</u> feedback delivery: Speak from a reader's perspective, either yourself ("This conclusion wasn't very clear to me ..." ; "My reaction when I read this was ...") or another imagined or real audience ("Your dissertation committee might understand this line like this ..." ; "Scholars in this field might question some assumptions here ...")

- <u>Specific</u> feedback delivery: Explain issues by pointing to specific sections of the text and provide possible solutions.

- <u>Prioritized</u> feedback delivery: Prioritizing helps avoid overwhelming the writer while also addressing their main concerns. This might look like highlighting 2–3 major points to discuss verbally or at the top of your written feedback, then listing a few other points the writer could take away with them to work on later. Make sure your feedback covers at least some of the priorities the writer expressed when they requested feedback.

Receiving Feedback

You'll get the most out of feedback if you keep in mind that **your feedback-givers are trying to help you grow.** Try to operate from this assumption even if you experience the feedback as unhelpful.

Also consider how you generally respond to feedback. We each tend to respond somewhere on a spectrum from defensive (tends to reject feedback) to deferential (tends to accept feedback). Consider where you generally fall on this spectrum. This will help you recognize patterns within your reactions and, if needed, re-direct towards the middle of the spectrum—open to and curious about new ideas and suggestions, but filtering them to focus on those that fit your own goals and style.

I. Listen.
- Resist responding until you've given the feedback-giver time to fully explain their feedback.

- Notice if / when you feel threatened by any feedback, which often happens when it activates some larger worry or insecurity. When that happens, try to focus on what the feedback-giver said about the writing rather than extrapolating what this feedback could mean about you as a scholar or person. You are not your writing.

II. Ask follow-up questions. For example,
- What about the piece led you to that suggestion? Can you point me to a specific passage?

- What have you done or seen done in this kind of situation in the past?

III. Disentangle the suggestion from the reaction & come up with alternative solutions
- Especially when you disagree with a suggestion, use questions like those listed above to identify what the reader is *reacting to* in your writing. Perhaps your intention or logic was unclear, or perhaps they're coming from a different perspective than you.

- To find alternative solutions to an issue, consider the reader's reaction and your goals for the piece, and see if there's a solution that accounts for both.

IV. Assess the feedback
- *What feedback is most actionable and impactful with the time and energy I have?* Prioritize this.
- *What feedback is non-negotiable?* Most feedback is negotiable, but in some cases, feedback may be non-negotiable because it reflects true requirements (e.g., from a journal, grant agency, department) or because of your relationship with the feedback-giver (e.g., your advisor).
- *What feedback is consistent?* If multiple readers point out similar issues, prioritize those.
- *What feedback is contradictory?* This indication that there is no one "right" choice affirms your authority to make the final choices about your project.
- *What feedback am I willing to try?* Experiment with suggestions that don't feel quite right, especially if you tend to be on the defensive side of the feedback-receiving spectrum. You can always set them aside again later, but you might end up liking some of them after all!

- *What feedback do I not need to act on right now?* If it isn't relevant to your current writing stage or you lack resources to address a suggestion, make a plan for returning to it at a later date.

- *What feedback do I not want to act on?* Give yourself permission to set aside feedback that is irrelevant or doesn't fit core aspects of your goals or style, especially if you tend to be on the deferential side of the feedback-receiving spectrum.

Bibliography and Further Reading

Stone, D., & Heen, S. (2015). *Thanks for the feedback*. Portfolio Penguin.

> This book offers a framework for improving the skill of receiving feedback—creating conditions so that others give you open and useful feedback, seeing the valuable parts of the feedback you receive so that you can act on them, and understanding your own psychology and what might be holding you back from receiving feedback well. It discusses these topics in many different professional and personal contexts and types of tasks.

Calarco, J. M. (2020). *A field guide to grad school: uncovering the hidden curriculum*. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

> This book discusses many aspects of the graduate school experience, including how to deal with feedback you receive on your academic writing (whether that be in courses, from academic mentors, or from editors and reviewers at academic journals). It also discusses how to communicate productively with your advisor, and how to develop a network of academic mentors.