

Reader Feedback Training



Writing is easy: All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead. –Gene Fowler

What’s the point of getting feedback from a reader?

Everything stinks until it’s finished. –Dr. Seuss

All writing is for readers, whether that reader is yourself, a teacher/evaluator, a general public, or others in your field. Learning more about how your writing affects readers allows you to make more strategic choices.

What should I keep in mind as a writer seeking feedback?

- Your goal is to get every word, every punctuation mark, every sentence and every transition working to support your point.
- There’s no way to do this alone, or in one pass.
- With luck, some of what you wrote will be close to what you want.
- Most of what you wrote can be better than it is.
- Taking your writing apart will hurt, but you and your writing will be better for it.
- You are writing for an audience, so any feedback from a reader, whether or not you agree with it, is worth considering seriously.

What should I keep in mind as a reader offering feedback?

- Your goal is to help the writer get every word, every punctuation mark, every sentence and every transition working to support their* point.
- There’s no way to do this in one pass, so you’ll have to prioritize your feedback.
- The writer will care about what they wrote, so be kind while being constructive.
- The writer is the best source of what they want to say, so ask.
- The writer is the final judge of the usefulness of your feedback, so avoid getting emotionally invested in any particular suggestion.
- Saying you like it (or don’t) without explaining why (or why not) is only helpful (or harmful) to the writer’s ego.
- You and your writing will benefit from helping other people improve their writing.

*I use the singular “they” as a gender neutral pronoun to refer to an individual whose gender is unknown and/or not relevant to my point.

What should I do to provide effective feedback?

- If the writer has provided questions or concerns, make a note to address them in some way.
- If you're providing feedback asynchronously, read the draft all the way through before marking it up; you may find answers to your early questions in the conclusion, and can say so when you make comments.
- Write comments in the margins. For longer comments, use the back of the page.
- The most effective comments have three components: 1. Identify what you're reacting to as a reader; 2. State your response as a reader; 3. Ask fruitful questions and make suggestions.
- Have the course or assignment rubric with you, as well as the assignment. You can use the language in the rubric to indicate where the draft is working, and where it could be improved.
- The rubric can also help you prioritize your feedback: though it's easy to circle typos, if the draft is missing crucial elements in the argument category, your time is better spent there.
- If something jumps out at you, you don't have to try to "fix" it; instead, mark it and ask about it: "I'm a little confused here. What were you trying to say?"
- Be specific about how you responded, and offer specific suggestions for how to work on revising any aspect you suggest should be revised—not what to put instead, but what to keep in mind or ways of developing improvements (for example: clarify your logical connections in these sentences, analyze these data to connect to your point, make sure these ideas are all set up in your intro, etc.).
- In your closing notes, summarize your feedback. You can use the rubric to organize; if you don't have a rubric, use the following areas. These areas are interconnected; while they usually impact each other in the order listed, you may need to think about how they relate in order to give the most useful feedback.

Argument: Does the thesis respond to the prompt? Does it fit the degree of argumentativeness the assignment calls for? Is it sustained throughout the essay—that is, does each paragraph connect to the thesis in some way? Is the argument specific and complex?

Development: Does the paper cite enough evidence? Is evidence used fairly, with respect for its context? Does analysis of the data clearly connect it to the paper's claims? Is evidence integrated into the writer's prose?

Organization: Does the paper's organization make sense for the argument? Is the organizing principle clear, and does it advance the argument? Does each paragraph use topic and closing sentences that capture the main goal of the paragraph? Do sentences within paragraphs fit the paragraph's goals? Do transitions between paragraphs and between ideas within paragraphs capture the writer's logic? Does the conclusion convey the progress of the essay, rather than repeating the intro?

Mechanics, Usage, Grammar, Spelling (MUGS): Are ideas clearly conveyed? Does the language fit the conventions of the assignment (academic or informal, personal response or scientific objectivity, etc.)? Are there places that are clear, but awkward?

How can I dig into a draft to provide more helpful feedback?

- **Argument List**: list the elements that the writer must logically prove in order to thoroughly prove the thesis. This can tell you how argumentative the thesis is, whether the scope is appropriate for the assignment, etc. A good argument list also is readily translated into topic sentences.
- **Post-Draft Outline** (sometimes called a “reverse outline” or a “function outline”): briefly summarize each major concept in the paragraphs. Are there elements in the body of the draft that should be in the thesis? Does the thesis promise a discussion of an element that is not addressed? This pdo can also contribute to organization: are there too many ideas in a paragraph? Would there be a more effective order in which to present the ideas?
- **Close Reading**: look for patterns in the language or concepts the writer uses in the draft. Anything repeated is probably an important part of the thesis, and can help writers establish needed info in intro paragraphs or revise a thesis to better capture what the draft really talks about. [This is, by far, the tool I use most often.]
- **Thesis-Topic-Closing List**: easiest with electronic files: copy the thesis, then each topic and closing sentence so they’re in a list—easy to check logical organization, signposting, and “flow” between paragraphs.
- A good MUGS guide or two: circle any “sentence-level” issues—if you’re not positive it’s right, go ahead and call attention to it. If you know for sure something is wrong (you know the rule), suggest how to fix it. If it “sounds wrong” or “looks wrong,” use a guide (and/or a dictionary, and/or thesaurus) to check the rule, the spelling, the definition, the usage, or for a synonym.

Final Thoughts

“Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it — whole-heartedly — and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.” –Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch
