

Tips for giving and receiving feedback on writing

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Giving feedback

1. Avoid copyediting – correcting grammar, punctuation and spelling – unless you’re explicitly asked to do this. Focus instead on “global” issues, especially when reviewing an early draft. For example, is the text well organized? Is the main point, question or problem obvious and clear? Are you able to follow the author’s logic? What is the author trying to say exactly? If you do spot grammatical errors, point out only those that interfere with the author’s meaning.
2. Nobody likes to have his or her text completely rewritten by someone else. So, rather than reworking things yourself, identify the problems and let the author take a shot at fixing them.
3. Be as specific as possible with your feedback. Comments such as, “Your abstract just doesn’t flow” or “I got lost in your results section,” are almost useless. Pinpointing precisely where you got lost (“I followed you until here, and then this sentence confused me”) or what isn’t flowing (“The connection between these two paragraphs isn’t clear to me”) gives authors a lot more to work with when they sit down to revise.
4. Tell people what they’ve done well in addition to what they can improve. This isn’t a “feel-good” technique. People learn as much from recognizing their successes as they do from trying to correct their failures.

Getting feedback

1. Accept critique as an integral part of the writing process – a part no good writer can do without. So, the next time someone offers suggestions or marks up your text, view it not as a criticism of your abilities, but as the natural process all writers go through to strengthen their work.
2. At the same time, many people are fairly inept at giving feedback, so try to separate *what’s* being said, from *how* it’s being said. Poorly delivered criticism is hard to take, but if you ignore it outright you could miss a valuable chance to improve your work.
3. Resist the urge, when someone is talking with you about a draft, to argue back or justify what you’ve written. Instead, listen closely and ask for clarification if needed. You can decide later whether or not you want to follow the suggestions.
4. Getting feedback can be a confusing experience, especially when the comments of one reviewer conflict with those of another. In this situation, it’s perfectly acceptable to ask for a third or fourth opinion. Know, too, that with time and experience you’ll become more comfortable with this kind of uncertainty and learn to decide for yourself what changes are needed.
5. Find people you can trust to give you an honest, constructive critique. Avoid those who don’t exert much effort, or who focus on picky details rather than on the larger picture of what you’re trying to say.

