Embracing the Feedback Process[1]

I like criticism. It makes you strong.

—LeBron James

Understanding the Psychology

If liking criticism is how we need to feel to be stronger writers, then that might be a tough pill for some of us to swallow. At its best, criticism can identify challenging or unpleasant work for us to do to improve our writing; at its worst, criticism can break our hearts. So, sometimes, ignorance really might seem like bliss. In one psychological study of the human appetite for ignorance, students watched a fake educational film about a serious disease (Howell & Shepperd, 2013). While watching, students were unaware that the serious disease was actually fictitious. After the film, all study participants were given the opportunity to provide a cheek swab to assess their risk of developing the disease. While half of the group was told that if they ever developed the disease, then treatment would entail a two-week course of pills, the other half was told that treatment would involve taking the pills for the rest of their lives. The findings? Whereas over half of the two-week treatment participants agreed to the diagnostic cheek swab, fewer than a quarter of the pill-for-life group agreed to the swab. In this study, the pill-for-lifers would just rather not know the news, thank you very much. Like a diagnostic swab, honest criticism can be precisely the thing that identifies how we can make our work better—even great. And, in ways similar to medication, feedback—both praise and criticism—is effective only if we actually use it.

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[1] Go on now, give feedback a little hug.

Throughout this chapter, we will focus on what makes feedback effective and the factors that can get in the way of writers using the feedback they receive. Sometimes the factors relate to those who offer us criticism on our work—*feedback givers*, but often we're not aware that we—the *feedback receivers*—are the ones in our own way.

Not All Feedback Is Created Equal

Feedback can be one of the most powerful influences on learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and few would disagree that feedback is essential to improving our writing. Effective feedback allows us to compare our performance to that which is expected and make gains on closing the gap.

However, not all feedback is equally effective. Feedback scholars characterize criticism in many ways, but two categories of note are evaluative and directive. Whereas evaluative feedback is past-oriented and focuses on what was done well or badly within the work, directive feedback is focused on the future and what can be done to improve the work. Of course, feedback can also be either positive (feels good) or negative (doesn't feel so good). Perhaps surprisingly, not all positive feedback is particularly effective or motivating and not all negative feedback is ineffective or demotivating. So, what ingredients might the magic feedback sauce include?

Just kidding. There isn't a perfect feedback recipe for every human in every situation. There is, however, quite a bit of evidence to suggest some basic ideas for improving feedback in many scenarios. In a recent meta-analysis of 78 studies exploring the effects of feedback on motivation, Fong et al., (2019) found that compared with positive, neutral, and negative feedback without instruction, negative feedback with instruction (directive feedback) had positive effects on motivation. Not surprisingly, negative feedback without instruction[2] reduced feedback receivers' motivation, and negative feedback with or without instruction had a negative effect on perceived competence (see Chapter 4 [Writing Self-efficacy] for more on the role feedback can play on our writing efficacy beliefs). However, evidence showed that receiving negative feedback had a positive effect on motivation when it was delivered in person, used noncontrolling language, and openly and honestly communicated high standards and potential.

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[2] More of a feedslap than feedback.

Although across the studies positive feedback increased feedback receivers' motivation, it's essential for feedback to be genuine, because overpraising mediocre work can create mistrust between the feedback giver and receiver (Yeager et al., 2014).

So while feedback givers and receivers alike seem to prefer directive feedback because of its superior usefulness (Winstone et al. 2017), the effectiveness of feedback is nuanced by the feedback itself, the way in which it was sent, the way in which it was received, and the relationship between the giver and receiver. Among these complexities, writers have the most control over the ways they react to and use the feedback they receive.

Behavioral Reactions to Feedback

Receiving criticism about our hard work is never easy, really. Picture this: Lucy, your baby goat, is finally ready to show at the county fair. After months of daily training, grooming, and trimming, the big day is finally here and you can hardly contain your excitement. So much time and effort went in to caring for her and preparing for this moment—the moment for Lucy to be seen as the prized, gorgeous goat specimen that she is. And you, my friend, you feel like an actual goat whisperer because Lucy would not be this goat goddess without you.[3]

After rolling up to the fair, smelling all the smells, stepping in all the nasties, and getting Lucy to stand just so, you see the steely eyed judges approaching. They make it to your booth and you can tell by their expressions that they do not think Lucy is quite as remarkable as you do. You see them marking all the marks and you know it's not good. In the end, the scorecard clearly shows that you and the judges are not on the same page about Lucy's appearance and this news comes like a sledgehammer.

Now, let's for a moment pretend that Lucy is not a goat but instead is your prized piece of writing, perhaps your dissertation or a manuscript detailing some component of your life's work to date. What if you and Lucy get critical feedback that is unexpected, frustrating, disappointing, or all of the above? What do you do with it? Do you get a case of scrollitis, where you simply scan over the comments, only pausing to roll your eyes or sigh deeply? Perhaps you actively read the comments, but because you're

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[3] Stay with me here, friends. I know it's getting a little weird, but I'm hoping it will come together in a bit.

so discredulous,[4] you decide to stop there. Or maybe you had a feeling all along that Lucy wasn't going to be perceived well so you devade[5] by refusing to even peek at the comments.

Research notes that levels of engagement with feedback can vary quite a lot from one person to the next (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Robinson et al., 2013). Of course, the healthiest and most productive response to criticism is to actively engage, make sense of the feedback, and use it to improve our work, but because of the garden variety of negative feels and the overall psychological experience of criticism, this isn't always possible (Winstone et al., 2017).

Emotional Reactions to Feedback

Going back to Lucy from the last section, receiving low scores on the dedicated caretaking of your prized goat would likely feel pretty horrible. Across settings, receiving criticism about our work can evoke strong emotional reactions, and reactions such as disappointment, frustration, shame, guilt, and embarrassment can lead to counterproductive behaviors and disengagement (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Emotions can also run high when we receive performance feedback about our writing (Fong et al., 2016, 2018a). Whereas honest praise can make us feel like we're walking on a cloud, criticism can feel destructive—despite the degree to which it's actually constructive.

Sometimes even the anticipation of receiving feedback about our work is enough to send us into a psychological black hole of worry and dread. In a recent study, we measured eye tracking and physiological responses during the writing process and there was a marked increase in participants' stress levels immediately after they learned they would receive feedback from their instructor on the essay they just wrote (DeBusk-Lane & Zumbrunn, 2019). I know that whenever I get the ping of an email with any indication that it includes some review of my work, I personally issue a silent prayer to the universe that the feedback isn't terrible. I've been in the publishing research game long enough to know that asking for the reviews to be overwhelmingly positive is laughable— academics, perhaps by both nature and training, are a fairly critical bunch.

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[4] Discredulous = disappointed + incredulousness: *adj.* (of a person) shocked/confused by one's failure to understand something valued (Sher & Wertz, 2016).

[5] Devade = devastation + evade: *v.* to purposely avoid a situation because you're sure the outcome will be distressing (Sher & Wertz, 2016).

The feedback funk can hit pretty hard even when you're pretty sure that the person reviewing your work and giving you feedback is just trying to make your writing better, and they're not in fact some horrible demon not so secretly trying to suck your soul. However, our interpretations of the feedback given our goals, beliefs, and sensitivities, can make a difference in the emotions we feel in feedback situations (Lazarus, 1991; Pekrun, 2006). For example, Fong et al., (2019) found that shame was more likely to arise when participants blamed themselves for the negative writing feedback they received. On the other hand, anger was a more likely result when participants believed that negative feedback was attributed to external sources such as unhelpful feedback or feedback delivered negatively.

Your writing is so personal. They're your ideas. Your words. You. And when someone says your words are wrong, it can feel like you're the one who's wrong. However, a strong relationship with the person giving us criticism can buffer the blows of what otherwise might feel like a feedsmackdown.

Considering the Feedback Context

Giving and receiving feedback doesn't happen in a vacuum.[6] Instead, feedback is given and received within the context of a relationship and shaped by several interactions between the feedback giver and receiver. So many factors within this relationship can alter the ways in which we perceive—and use—the feedback we receive. Among these factors, care and trust are perhaps the most important (Carless, 2013).

We're much more likely to engage in feedback when it comes from someone who we believe is a credible authority (Stone & Heen, 2014). We might ask ourselves questions like *Just what are the chops of the person reviewing my work? Does the person understand the work and the standards of quality necessary for success?* It's also important that we believe the feedback giver is someone who understands our capabilities and is someone who we believe has our best interests at heart (Can & Walker, 2011; Fong et al., 2018b). We care a whole lot about our writing and success, so it makes sense that the value of our work is reciprocated by the person providing the feedback.

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[6] It's probably good that giving and receiving feedback doesn't happen in a vacuum because the insides of vacuums are disgusting.

Equally important as our trust in the feedback giver is the belief that we are trusted to make appropriate decisions to progress our work. Such trust can be signaled through the communication of high standards and the tone of the feedback delivered. Our sense of autonomy throughout the writing process is essential and we're often more resistant to feedback that uses controlling language (e.g., "Change this word") than feedback suggestions that allow for autonomy (e.g., "Consider changing this word"). A subtle change in wording sometimes makes all the difference.
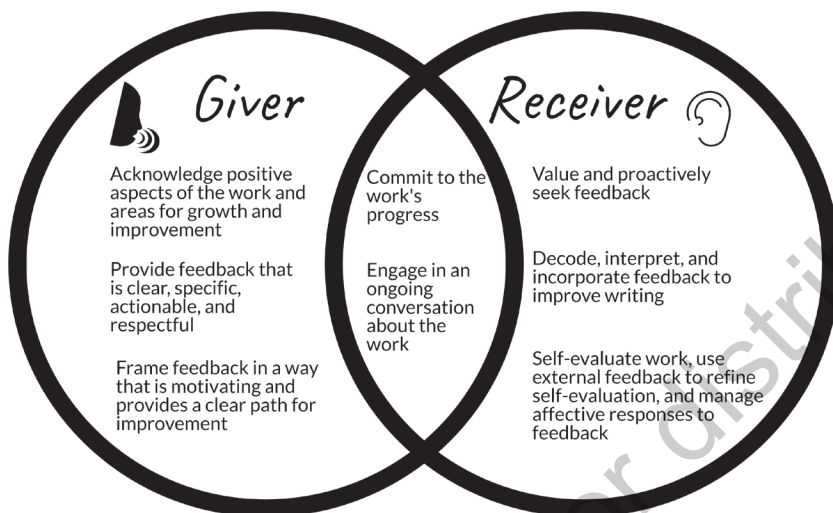
Feedback Roles: Whose Job Is It, Anyway?

When feedback goes wrong, we're often quick to identify why it went so wrong and point the finger at who's responsible. In one recent study asking feedback receivers how they might make better use of the suggestions and guidance they receive, 66% of those surveyed focused solely on the things feedback givers could do differently, such as ensuring that comments are more specific and detailed (Winstone & Nash, in press). Then, in the same study, nearly half of the feedback givers identified weak motivation or volition to be the single biggest factor preventing feedback receivers' effective use of their suggestions and guidance. It seems difficult for many of us to share the blame when and where feedback goes awry, and when learning and progress aren't, well, progressing.

In actuality, the process of feedback involves two primary players—the giver and the receiver—and both have critical roles to play. Whereas the giver provides opportunities for improvement, it is the receiver who must take advantage of those opportunities. The player to hold the power first is the feedback giver. It's the giver's responsibility to ensure that feedback is poised to guide the receiver's next steps. To be effective, feedback needs to be: (1) frequent, timely, respectful, and sufficiently detailed, (2) purposefully related to the task, (3) transparent and understandable, and (4) focused on learning and future improvement (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). However, even the most helpful feedback can be lost on deaf ears if those ears belong to a human that is not motivated to digest and act upon it to progress the work (Fong et al., 2018b).[7] This is when the power and responsibility of feedback shifts from the giver to the receiver. Truly engaging in feedback requires that the receiver: (1) review and make sense

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[7] All too often, I've treated the feedback that I've received on my writing the same way I did when I received wrapped socks and underwear as a gift as a child—with a fake smile and a "thanks."

Figure 7.1 Feedback Roles

Giver

Acknowledge positive aspects of the work and areas for growth and improvement

Provide feedback that is clear, specific, actionable, and respectful

Frame feedback in a way that is motivating and provides a clear path for improvement

Commit to the work's progress

Engage in an ongoing conversation about the work

Receiver

Value and proactively seek feedback

Decode, interpret, and incorporate feedback to improve writing

Self-evaluate work, use external feedback to refine self-evaluation, and manage affective responses to feedback

of the feedback, (2) seek clarification as necessary, (3) select strategies to implement feedback, (4) critically self-evaluate their own work, and (5) manage any negative feelings, emotions, and attitudes that might arise as a result of receiving feedback and stand in the way of motivation and progress (Nash & Winstone, 2017). It's also important to note that effectively engaging in the feedback requires the receiver to not rush the process. Some welcome feedback but are reluctant to actually process it. When we receive feedback only to then process it on a surface level, we don't think deeply about the work to make it our own. Some call this the "just tell me what to do and I'll do it syndrome." To really learn and grow from feedback, we need to take time to digest the suggestions of the feedback giver.

Each of the feedback responsibilities aligned with the giver and receiver roles are illustrated in Figure 7.1. Here, it's critical to note that both the giver and the receiver have the shared responsibilities of committing to the work's progress and engaging in an ongoing conversation to see it forward (Carless, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Without such commitment and dialogue, it's easy to see how learning, growth, and progress can be stalled.

TL;DR Summary

- Feedback can be a powerful influence on our writing, but it's only effective if we use it.

- There are a host of things that can stand in the way of our productive use of the feedback we receive about our writing.

- Directive feedback, or feedback that is focused on what can be done to improve the work, can be particularly helpful and motivating.

- From ignoring criticism altogether to actively engaging with feedback and using it to improve our work, people react to criticism in a variety of ways.

- Receiving criticism about our work can evoke strong emotions, which can lead to counterproductive behaviors and disengagement with the writing process.

- Feedback is given and received within the context of a relationship and shaped by several interactions between the feedback giver and receiver. Trust and care within the relationship are crucial components to the uptake of feedback.

- The effective use of feedback involves both the feedback giver and the feedback receiver. Whereas the role of the giver is to provide effective feedback, the role of the receiver is to actively seek and engage in the feedback process, and manage any negative affective responses that might arise during that process. Ongoing dialogue and commitment to the work lies on the shoulders of both the feedback giver and receiver.

Essential Strategies for Productive (and Sane) Writing

Waiting around for feedback that might never come or receiving negative criticism about our work can no doubt be difficult, but there are strategies for getting the effective feedback you deserve in ways that align with your needs and preferences. Choose one to two ideas from the following sections to begin.

Exemplars: The Hidden Feedback Source

What if I told you that low-risk (i.e., no human interaction necessary) feedback for your writing was freely available . . . if you're able to solve the mystery of where it's hiding. Rather than a twisted candle, an ivory charm, or an embellished jewelry box, the clue that unlocks this mystery is an exemplar.[8] That's right, you can avoid the dastardly peril of harsh writing feedback by sleuthing out expectations with exemplars. The definition of an exemplar is a quality piece of writing in a specific *genre*, written for a specific *audience* in a determined *outlet*.

The mystery within the mystery is to find the right exemplar, so let's break it down by the primary clue components: genre, audience, and outlet. For the first clue, determine the genre. For example, your project might be a graduate research thesis, a literature review, an empirical article, or a book proposal.

After cracking the genre code, you need to decide on your audience, your second clue. If you're writing a doctoral dissertation, then your audience is fairly given—it's, at least in part, your committee. However, if you're writing a journal article manuscript, then you will need to decide who you want to read the work when it's finished. Will it be for practitioners in the field? Researchers? Another group altogether? Deciding the audience up front is important, because this will set the style, tone, and content of your writing.

Once the primary components of genre and audience are determined, then you're ready to put the clues together to figure out the final clue of the finding exemplars mystery: the outlet. This is where your piece of writing will live out the rest of its days. An appropriate outlet will match both the genre and audience that you've already determined. For instance, if you are writing an empirical article on the elaborate mating rituals of male sparklemuffin spiders,[9] then you might search journals that have published similar articles on our eight-legged friends. A careful read of the mission/aims of the journal will also give you clues as to whether or not your audience aligns with the readership of the journal. After you've identified a potential outlet,[10] you can start your search for exemplars within that outlet. In general, the more recent the exemplar, the better, because

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[8] It's a shame, really. Twisted candles, ivory charms, and embellished jewelry boxes are much more whimsical than exemplars.

[9] The sparklemuffin is real, y'all. And kind of amazing. Recently discovered in 2015, the male sparklemuffin spider busts some serious moves to impress the ladies. See for yourself at https://youtube/mq-r20mlGes.

[10] Or 2, or 3, or 4—I like to have backups in the event the first outlet doesn't work out. #Next

standards and viewpoints change over time. As a researcher in the social sciences, I often like to find two types of exemplars (if applicable): (1) content and (2) methodology. Whereas the content exemplar will match the key topics of the work (e.g., construct, theoretical framework, participants) as closely as possible, methodological exemplars align with the methods you used (e.g., structural equations modeling, case study). Be careful of red herring here, or available texts that seem high in quality, but are not. You'll have to use a critical eye to determine quality (e.g., rigor, prestige of journal, etc.).

With your exemplar(s) in hand, the plot thickens as you move to solving the final mystery of the case of the Hidden Feedback Source.[11] Cracking this case entails careful examination of each exemplar. As you read, take note of the headings, subheadings, language, section lengths, and level of detail throughout. These are the primary clues that you can use to self-evaluate your work. For example, if the introduction section in the exemplar is two single-spaced pages and yours is ten, then you either have some heavy revising to do or you need to find a new exemplar, outlet, or both.

From my dissertation to publishing for an audience or outlet that's new to me, I've found that the exemplars that I've sleuthed out like Nancy Drew are the perfect type of feedback needed to start writing in the right direction. Also, self-evaluating my work against standards in my field, methodology, or the publishing outlet helps me know that I've done what I can do on my own and that I'm ready for feedback from a mentor or peer.

Bravely Seeking Feedback

As referenced earlier, one important role of the feedback receiver is to engage in an ongoing conversation about the work with the feedback giver, and as a savvy writer, it's your job to seek the feedback you need. You heard me right—don't just sit around struggling in Writing Stuckville,[12] hoping and wishing help will magically appear. It usually doesn't. Like most things in life, if you want something, you might have to ask for it, and maybe work for it, too.

Now, how do you ask for this kind of support? Start with an email to your writing buddy or mentor (for more on finding mentors and other

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[11] *Cue dark and twisty mystery music*

[12] One of the worst places to get a flat tire, really.

Box 7.1 Examples of Feedback-Seeking Questions

☐ Where in the draft am I on the right track?

☐ Is there a rubric or an exemplar that might get me started in the right direction?

☐ I'm interested in understanding what I need to do to make progress. Will you show me specific areas where I might improve and how?

☐ To continue improving as a writer, what approaches might I consider?

☐ Do you have any personal writing pet peeves that I might avoid?

☐ I'd like to meet in person to discuss your feedback. Is there a day and time that might work best for you?

supporters, see Chapter 8 [Finding Social Support for Writing]). If, when writing this email, you find yourself back in Stuckville, Box 7.1 shows a list of questions that you might include in your message. Of course, there are several different ways to ask for feedback, but the most important thing to include in your message—either implicitly or explicitly—is your desire to become a better writer. Directly asking for feedback relates to the #ExpectationManagement conversations discussed in Chapter 5 [Maladaptive Perfectionism]. Recall that the purpose of these discussions is to establish quality communication with your writing mentor, clarify the expectations that will guide your work, and maintain a clear path toward continuous improvement.

An important aspect of bravely seeking feedback is to prepare for the hard advice you could hear and how it might make you feel. Reminding yourself that it likely won't be all hearts and smiley emoticons *before* you open the email that contains the feedback about your writing might somewhat steel your nerves and help you remain open to seeing the criticism as helpful guidance rather than a personal attack.

Also, remember that journal rejection rates can vary widely in academic publishing. For example, the American Psychological Association (2018) reported that its top journals average a rejection rate of about 70% with some journals rejecting up to 90% of submissions. With that in mind, it's important to see the decision of "Revise and Resubmit (R&R)"

as a win. Though almost all R&R decisions come alongside a mass of criticism and suggestions for change, they also come with the opportunity to try again. Finally, don't let review delays derail you. I once had a journal article manuscript under initial review for nine months (!) and I had nearly forgotten about the paper by the time I received feedback. It likely varies by journal, discipline, person, etcetera, but unless stated upon submission, I typically mark my calendar for three months from the day I submitted. If I haven't yet received feedback by that date, then I reach out to the journal editor to inquire about the expected timeline.

Human Yet Strategic Feedback Management System

The steps of the Human Yet Strategic Feedback Management System highlight that while the feedback we receive about our writing can be painful because humans are emotional creatures, efficient progress is most likely to occur when we are strategic in our responses to that feedback. The steps should be followed in order and each step is equal in importance. When followed, the system gives you permission and space to react to the feedback, provides a framework for preparing to address the feedback in your work, and can help you prepare for a feedback discussion meeting or manuscript revision letter.

Step 1. Read the comments.

Step 2. Put the comments away—far away.[13] Let them rest in a place where you won't be able to see them for a while.

Step 3. Go on a walk, take several deep breaths, eat some chocolate, shake your fist toward the heavens, and rant about the ways in which your brilliance is severely unappreciated. Do whatever you need to do to manage any strong emotions you're feeling (see Chapter 9 [The Importance of Wellness and Self-Care] for more ideas).

Step 4. Set a calendar reminder (for a day, or five, or more) and distance yourself from the feedback until that day. If possible, try to avoid stewing about the comments during this time.

Step 5. Return to the comments. Create a revision spreadsheet with four columns. Figure 7.2 shows an example spreadsheet. In the first column, copy and paste each specific, actionable comment. I typically copy the comment exactly so that there is less of a chance that I misunderstand

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[13] Like under your bed. Or in a hidden folder on your desktop. Or in a cardboard box buried in your backyard.

Figure 7.2   Example Revision Spreadsheet

Reviewer Comment	Plan to Address	Author Response to Include in Letter/Discussion	Location in Manuscript
Editor			
One major concern is that the literature reviewed is not always sufficiently explicated, nor is its connection to your work readily evident. Establishing how your work fits within the broader research in this area is critical for demonstrating its contribution.	Be very clear about connections across research and our project. Be very specific about how the findings of the studies described in Intro/Lit Review relate to our project	Thank you for this feedback. In this revision, we have taken care to clearly establish how this study fits within the literature reviewed. We believe this helps illustrate the contribution of this work.	pp. 4–7
Reviewer #1			
I think more effort should be put forth to describe and summarize the relationship between predictors and outcomes, both when discussing the previous findings and when discussing the findings of this study.	Describe relationship between each predictor and outcome more specifically. Provide examples and summary sections where appropriate.	Thank you for this feedback. We have described summarized the relationship between each predictor and writing outcome in greater detail, both within the introduction and when discussing our own findings.	pp. 6–8; pp. 28–32

the message. However, others find that rewriting each comment in their own words to helps them own the feedback in healthy ways. In the second column, write your plan for how you will address each comment. Consider what steps are needed to fully address the reviewer's concern. In the third column, draft a response that you could use in your letter accompanying your revised manuscript or what you might say in a meeting with the person who gave you the feedback. Finally, include page numbers in the fourth column so that reviewers can easily locate your revisions in the manuscript. Your revision spreadsheet might only include these columns, but it might also include others. For example, you might include a column that notes the specific tasks assigned to members on the author team/what you need from others. Another column could signal a rough timeline or the priority level for tackling each comment.

Step 6. Address the feedback one comment at a time. Zero in on where you can begin and remember to be realistic about what you can do with the

time you set aside for writing each session (see Chapter 3 [Writing Stress and Anxiety] for more on planning).

Feedback on the Feedback

First, two surprises. Surprise number one: most academics do not receive training on how to provide feedback to others.[14] Because of this lack of training and complexity of the feedback process, not everyone (ahem, so very few people) knows how to give constructive feedback in a way that encourages individual writers.

Surprise number two: almost all feedback =♥. The only types of feedback that don't qualify as love are sarcastic remarks or cruel criticism personally directed toward the writer rather than the writing. There's no place for feedback of this kind in the academy, because it does much more damage than good. The rest of feedback—the good, the bad, the clear, the vague, the positive, *even* the negative—definitely qualifies as love. I see you and your raised eyebrows with your *Whaaaaa?!* expression, but hear me out.

If you've never before given feedback on someone else's writing, then you need to know that it is not always easy to give. And it takes *a ton* of time.[15] That time is taken away from the feedback giver's zillions of other responsibilities, so criticism may be provided hurriedly or without the care that it deserves. As someone who often gives feedback on others' writing, I've learned that my criticism can sometimes seem overly harsh—not because I'm sadistic or mean or heartless or don't like the writer or that their work isn't good, but because I was pressed for time and wasn't as thoughtful as I perhaps needed to be.[16] Learning that a student perceived my feedback as callous was surprising at first. After all, I just spent several hours reading a draft with the sole intention of helping the writer improve, and I was annoyed at the clear underappreciation of my efforts.

However, listening to my students courageously share their experiences of receiving my feedback triggered memories of writing my master's thesis and receiving pages and pages[17] of criticism written in red felt-tip pen from my thesis adviser. I remember taking the feedback, revising the draft to the best of my ability, and resubmitting, only then to learn that he simply ran out of room for all of the criticism that he had for the original draft because the revised draft, too, came back dripping in red ink. Receiving that feedback was devastating and exhausting. Not for a single moment did I genuinely think,

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[14] I know, considering some of the feedback you've received, you're likely not shocked at all.

[15] For real, if time could be weighed, it might actually weigh a metric ton.

[16] And, honestly, because of that whole lack of training thing.

[17] And pages and pages and pages and pages and pages. . .

Box 7.2 Statement-Starters for Feedback on the Feedback Discussions

☐ First, thank you for taking the time to provide feedback on my draft. I found [*note specific feedback here*] especially helpful. I also appreciated learning that I was on the right track with [*reference praise provided here*].

☐ Overall, I felt [*note your honest feelings here*] while reading your feedback because [*note the reasons why you felt this way*].

☐ In looking over the feedback, I have a few questions about your notes that I'd like to clarify [*note areas in need of clarification here*].

☐ I'm really interested in continuing to improve as a writer. Next time, will you [*note specific things that might be particularly helpful the next time your mentor provides feedback*].

"Oh, thank you. Thank you for these suggestions and for taking the time to help me improve as a writer." No, as the recipient of that feedback, I believe there was little gratitude, if any at all at the time. It was only several years later when I realized how much care and investment really goes into giving feedback—even feedback that is difficult to hear.[18]

These potential surprises and/or faulty assumptions are all the more reason for engaged and thoughtful (as possible) dialogue between feedback givers and receivers. As the feedback receiver, consider providing feedback on the feedback that you receive (Värlander, 2008). Don't consider this a license to reprimand, but rather a right to your feelings, as well as an opportunity to politely share your reactions to the feedback you received and why receiving that feedback made you feel the way you did. If you're stuck on what to say, Box 7.2 lists potential statement-starters you might use within your conversations with your writing buddy or mentor. Ideally,

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[18] At which point, I emailed my former thesis adviser with a virtual Hallmark card and chocolates for enduring my terrible writing as a master's student and for helping me become a better writer.

these conversations happen face-to-face, because meaning and good intentions are sometimes lost in the text of written comments.

The suggested conversation starters implicitly and explicitly critique the critique, emphasizing ways that the feedback was both helpful and not helpful. Perhaps the feedback included specific examples that were (or weren't) especially clear. Or, maybe a particular suggestion provided an *aha* moment for you. The conversation starters also highlight the important role that emotions play in the writing—and the feedback—process. Again, the most important thing is that you're having the conversation in the first place, because these conversations help make the feedback process and the legitimate emotions associated with this process more transparent.[19]

Haters Gonna Hate: Keep Perspective

When you feel like you're drowning in criticism, it can be easy to lose track of the progress you're actually making along the way. However, tuning in to your fan club can help you keep perspective (see Chapter 8 [Finding Social Support for Writing] for more on building your support system). Make a list of the people in your fan club and consider keeping a box or desk drawer dedicated to housing the notes and kind words people say about you and your work. Having those notes nearby can help remind you of the people in your corner and the things that are going well on the really rough days.

And, while it's important to include peers who understand what you're going through in this club, you don't have to limit membership to your academic homies. Publishing research has been my job for a long time so seeing my work in print doesn't always seem like a very big deal, but because I am a first-generation college student, it seems like a big deal to my family. Admittedly, it's also kind of great to hear my little brother tell me how cool he thinks it is and that he's proud of me *blushes.* When criticism starts to degrade your sense of worth and the important work that you're doing, don't dismiss the kind words from your fan club. Instead, keep perspective by wrapping your arms around them like a snuggly, little puppy.[20]

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[19] #ExpectationManagement for the win!

[20] You also might check out your local SPCA to snuggle an actual puppy when feedback really gets you down.

NEXT STEPS

- Give yourself feedback! Seek out exemplars by genre, audience, and outlet in order to map out expectations before seeking feedback from a mentor or peer. Examine the exemplars to self-evaluate the standards and writing in your work compared to similar work.

- Ask for the feedback you need from a writing buddy or mentor throughout the writing process. Be specific in the type of feedback you are seeking.

- Remind yourself before reading feedback that the comments won't be all positive and that it's being given to help, not as a personal attack.

- Acknowledge your emotions and the large part they play in receiving feedback.

- Separate yourself from the feedback: give yourself a few days, and then create a strategic plan to address each comment.

- Arrange a face-to-face meeting to give feedback on the feedback and create a space for more effective feedback and improved writing in the future.

- Keep the bigger picture in mind. Keep encouraging notes from fellow academics or your proud family or friends to remind yourself of your previous progress.

EXTRA RESOURCES

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HUMOR BREAK

Quiz: Which Animal Describes Your Openness to Receiving Feedback?[21]

Choose your favorite animal from the pictures below. Then read the descriptions to learn insight into the relationship between the animal kingdom and your level of openness to writing feedback.

Credit Line: iStockphoto.com/Sudowoodo, iStockphoto.com/CSA-Archive, iStockphoto.com/Naddiya, iStockphoto.com/bartamarabara, iStockphoto.com/Sudowoodo, iStockphoto.com/Galaxy

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[21] Disclaimer: This quiz is ridiculous and in no way scientifically accurate.

Cat: Beholden to no one, you are aloof and detached from the criticism you receive about your writing. Negative feedback? "Fa-la-la," you say as you yawn and sashay away.

Raccoon: Curious and smart, you seek writing feedback with the same enthusiasm as a raccoon prying the lid off of a trash can containing chicken bones. Each comment is like the delicacy of a half-eaten animal bone.

Golden Retriever: Like the remarkable golden retriever, you are quite friendly and respond well to feedback. Eager for success, you learn new writing tricks with exceptional speed.

Bear: In the wild, you have a tendency to turn to aggression quickly and there are reports that you've occasionally attacked without reason. Your powerful jaws, sharp teeth, long claws, and proclivity for aggression makes others wary of providing you with feedback.

Bunny: Like a bunny spending its days in constant fear of being eaten, you're terrified of being eaten alive by writing criticism. High-strung, jumpy, and perpetually on high alert, you prefer to spend your days blissfully safe in an underground den.

Hedgehog: Using your prickles to defend yourself against the unwanted intrusion of harsh criticism, you roll yourself into a ball and snort at the mention of feedback.

Activity: Get It Out

Skip to the perforated pages at the end of the book. Then, fill in these speech bubbles with kind (or hateful, whatever) things to say to the people offering you feedback about your writing.
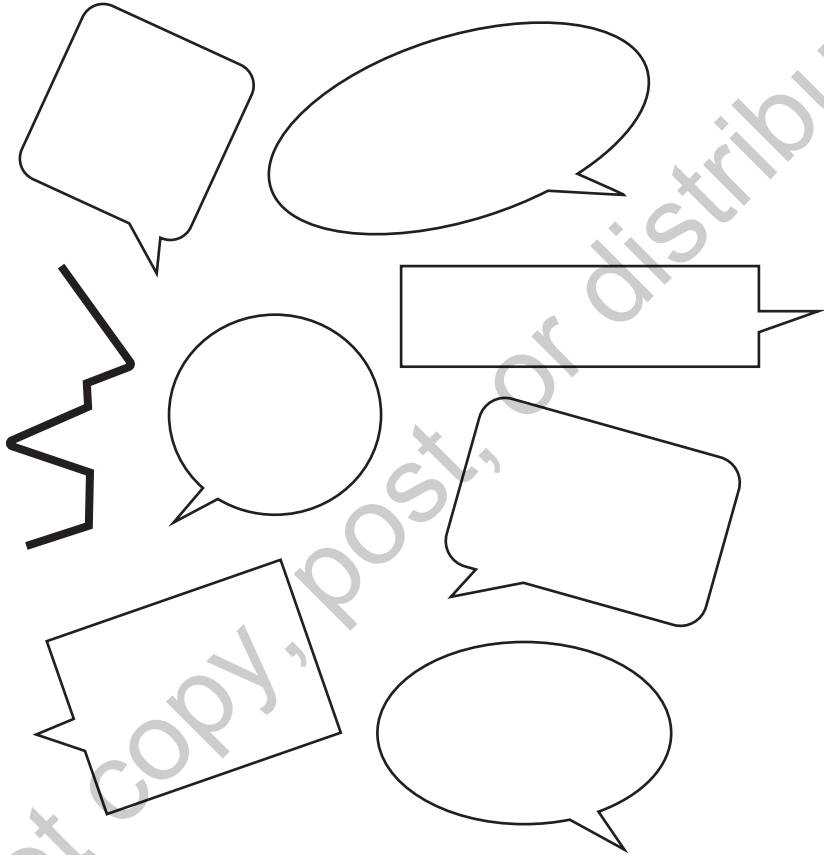
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