

Getting Feedback

What this handout is about

Sometimes you'd like feedback from someone else about your writing, but you may not be sure how to get it. This handout describes when, where, how and from whom you might receive effective responses as you develop as a writer.

Why get feedback on your writing?

You'll become a better writer, and writing will become a less painful process. When might you need feedback? You might be just beginning a paper and want to talk to someone else about your ideas. You might be midway through a draft and find that you are unsure about the direction you've decided to take. You might wonder why you received a lower grade than you expected on a paper, or you might not understand the comments that a TA or professor has written in the margins. Essentially, asking for feedback at any stage helps you break out of the isolation of writing. When you ask for feedback, you are no longer working in a void, wondering whether or not you understand the assignment and/or are making yourself understood. By seeking feedback from others, you are taking positive, constructive steps to improve your own writing and develop as a writer.

Why people don't ask for feedback

- **You worry that the feedback will be negative.** Many people avoid asking others what they think about a piece of writing because they have a sneaking suspicion that the news will not be good. If you want to improve your writing, however, constructive criticism from others will help. Remember that the criticism you receive is only criticism of the writing and not of the writer.
- **You don't know whom to ask.** The person who can offer the most effective feedback on your writing may vary depending on when you need the feedback and what kind of feedback you need. Keep in mind, though, that if you are really concerned about a piece of writing, almost any thoughtful reader (e.g., your roommate, mother, R.A., brother, etc.) can provide useful feedback that will help you improve your writing. Don't wait for the expert; share your writing often and with a variety of readers.
- **You don't know how to ask.** It can be awkward to ask for feedback, even if you know whom you want to ask. Asking someone, "Could you take a look at my paper?" or "Could you tell me if this is OK?" can sometimes elicit wonderfully rich responses. Usually, though, you need to be specific about where you are in the writing process and the kind of feedback that would help. You might say, "I'm really struggling with the organization of this paper. Could you read these paragraphs and see if the ideas seem to be in the right order?"
- **You don't want to take up your teacher's time.** You may be hesitant to go to your professor or TA to talk about your writing because you don't want to bother him or her. The office hours that these busy people set aside, though, are reserved for your benefit, because the teachers on this campus want to communicate with students about their ideas and their work. Faculty can be especially generous and helpful with their advice when you drop by their office with specific questions and know the kinds of help you need. If you can't meet during the instructor's office hours, try making a special appointment. If you find that you aren't able to schedule a time to talk with your instructor, remember that there are plenty of other people around you who can offer feedback.
- **You've gotten feedback in the past that was unhelpful.** If earlier experiences haven't proved satisfactory, try again. Ask a different person, or ask for feedback in a new way. Experiment with asking for feedback at different stages in the writing process: when you are just beginning an assignment, when you have a draft, or when you think you are finished. Figure out when you benefit from feedback the most, the kinds of people you get the best feedback from, the kinds of feedback you need, and the ways to ask for that feedback effectively.

Possible writing moments for feedback

There is no "best time" to get feedback on a piece of writing. In fact, it is often helpful to ask for feedback at several different stages of a writing project. Listed below are some parts of the writing process and some kinds of feedback you might need in each. Keep in mind, though, that every writer is different—you might think about these issues at other stages of the writing process, and that's fine.

- **The beginning/idea stage:** Do I understand the assignment? Am I gathering the right kinds of information to answer this question? Are my strategies for approaching this assignment effective ones? How can I discover the best way to develop my early ideas into a feasible draft?
- **Outline/thesis:** I have an idea about what I want to argue, but I'm not sure if it is an appropriate or complete response to this assignment. Is the way I'm planning to organize my ideas working? Does it look like I'm covering all the bases? Do I have a clear main point? Do I know what I want to say to the reader?
- **Rough draft:** Does my paper make sense, and is it interesting? Have I proven my thesis statement? Is the evidence I'm using convincing? Is it explained clearly? Have I given the reader enough information? Does the information seem to be in the right order? What can I say in my introduction and conclusion?
- **Early polished draft:** Are the transitions between my ideas smooth and effective? Do my sentences make sense individually? How's my writing style?
- **Late or final polished draft:** Are there any noticeable spelling or grammar errors? Are my margins, footnotes, and formatting okay? Does the paper seem effective? Is there anything I should change at the last minute?
- **After the fact:** How should I interpret the comments on my paper? Why did I receive the grade I did? What else might I have done to strengthen this paper? What can I learn as a writer about this writing experience? What should I do the next time I have to write a paper?

A note on asking for feedback after a paper has been graded

Many people go to see their TA or professor after they receive a paper back with comments and a grade attached. If you seek feedback after your paper is returned to you, it makes sense to wait 24 hours before scheduling a meeting to talk about it. If you are angry or upset about a grade, the day off gives you time to calm down and put things in perspective. More important, taking a day off allows you to read through the instructor's comments and think about why you received the grade that you did. You might underline or circle comments that were confusing to you so that you can ask about them later. You will also have an opportunity to reread your own writing and evaluate it more critically yourself. After all, you probably haven't seen this piece of work since you handed it in a week or more ago, and refreshing your memory about its merits and weaknesses might help you make more sense of the grade and the instructor's comments.

Also, be prepared to separate the discussion of your grade from the discussion of your development as a writer. It is difficult to have a productive meeting that achieves both of these goals. You may have very good reasons for meeting with an instructor to argue for a better grade, and having that kind of discussion is completely legitimate. Be very clear with your instructor about your goals. Are you meeting to contest the grade your paper received and explain why you think the paper deserved a higher one? Are you meeting because you don't understand why your paper received the grade it did and would like clarification? Or are you meeting because you want to use this paper and the instructor's comments to learn more about how to write in this particular discipline and do better on future written work? Being up front about these distinctions can help you and your instructor know what to expect from the conference and avoid any confusion between the issue of grading and the issue of feedback.

Kinds of feedback to ask for

Asking for a specific kind of feedback can be the best way to get advice that you can use. **Think about what kinds of topics you want to discuss and what kinds of questions you want to ask:**

- **Understanding the assignment:** Do I understand the task? How long should it be? What kinds of sources should I be using? Do I have to answer all of the questions on the assignment sheet or are they just prompts to get me thinking? Are some parts of the assignment more important than other parts?
- **Factual content:** Is my understanding of the course material accurate? Where else could I look for more information?
- **Interpretation/analysis:** Do I have a point? Does my argument make sense? Is it logical and consistent? Is it supported by sufficient evidence?
- **Organization:** Are my ideas in a useful order? Does the reader need to know anything else up front? Is there another way to consider ordering this information?
- **Flow:** Do I have good transitions? Does the introduction prepare the reader for what comes later? Do my topic sentences accurately reflect the content of my paragraphs? Can the reader follow me?
- **Style:** Comments on earlier papers can help you identify writing style issues that you might want to look out for. Is my writing style appealing? Do I use the passive voice too often? Are there too many "to be" verbs?
- **Grammar:** Just as with style, comments on earlier papers will help you identify grammatical "trouble spots." Am I using commas correctly? Do I have problems with subject-verb agreement?
- **Small errors:** Is everything spelled right? Are there any typos?

Possible sources of feedback and what they're good for

Yourselves

Believe it or not, you can learn to be your own best reader, particularly if you practice reading your work critically. First, think about writing problems that you know you have had in the past. Look over old papers for clues. Then, give yourself some critical distance from your writing by setting it aside for a few hours, overnight, or even for a couple of days. Come back to it with a fresh eye, and you will be better able to offer yourself feedback. Finally, be conscious of what you are reading for. You may find that you have to read your draft several times—perhaps once for content, once for organization and transitions, and once for style and grammar. If you need feedback on a specific issue, such as passive voice, you may need to read through the draft one time alone focusing on that issue. Whatever you do, don't count yourself out as a source of feedback. Remember that ultimately you care the most and will be held responsible for what appears on the page. It's your paper.

A classmate (a familiar and knowledgeable reader)

When you need feedback from another person, a classmate can be an excellent source. A classmate knows the course material and can help you make sure you understand the course content. A classmate is probably also familiar with the sources that are available for the class and the specific assignment. Moreover, you and your classmates can get together and talk about the kinds of feedback you both received on earlier work for the class, building your knowledge base about what the instructor is looking for in writing assignments.

Your TA (an expert reader)

Your TA is an expert reader—he or she is working on an advanced degree, either a Master's or a Ph.D., in the subject area of your paper. Your TA is also either the primary teacher of the course or a member of the teaching team, so he or she probably had a hand in selecting the source materials, writing the assignment, and setting up the grading scheme. No one knows what the TA is looking for on the paper better than the TA, and most of the TAs on campus would be happy to talk with you about your paper.

Your professor (a very expert reader)

Your professor is the most expert reader you can find. He or she has a Ph.D. in the subject area that you are studying, and probably also wrote the assignment, either alone or with help from TAs. Like your TA, your professor can be the best source for information about what the instructor is looking for on the paper and may be your best guide in developing into a strong academic writer.

Your roommate/friend/family member (an interested but not familiar reader)

It can be very helpful to get feedback from someone who doesn't know anything about your paper topic. These readers, because they are unfamiliar with the subject matter, often ask questions that help you realize what you need to explain further or that push you to think about the topic in new ways. They can also offer helpful general writing advice, letting you know if your paper is clear or your argument seems well organized, for example. Ask them to read your paper and then summarize for you what they think its main points are.

The Writing Center (an interested but not familiar reader with special training)

While the Writing Center staff may not have specialized knowledge about your paper topic, our tutors are trained to assist you with your writing needs. We cannot edit or proofread for you, but we can help you identify problems and address them at any stage of the writing process. Tutors in the Writing Center see thousands of students each year and are familiar with all kinds of writing assignments and writing dilemmas.

Other kinds of resources

If you want feedback on a writing assignment and can't find a real live person to read it for you, there are other places to turn. Check out the Writing Center's handouts. These resources can give you tips for proofreading your own work, making an argument, using commas and transitions, and more. You can also try the spell/grammar checker on your computer. This shouldn't be your primary source of feedback, but it may be helpful.

A word about feedback and plagiarism

Asking for help on your writing does not equal plagiarism, but talking with classmates about your work may feel like cheating. Check with your professor or TA about what kinds of help you can get legally. Most will encourage you to discuss your ideas about the reading and lectures with your classmates. In general, if someone offers a particularly helpful insight, it makes sense to cite him or her in a footnote. The best way to avoid plagiarism is to write by yourself with your books closed. (For more on this topic, see our handout on plagiarism.)

What to do with the feedback you get

- Don't be intimidated if your professor or TA has written a lot on your paper. Sometimes instructors will provide more feedback on papers that they believe have a lot of potential. They may have written a lot because your ideas are interesting to them and they want to see you develop them to their fullest by improving your writing.
- By the same token, don't feel that your paper is garbage if the instructor DIDN'T write much on it. Some graders just write more than others do, and sometimes your instructors are too busy to spend a great deal of time writing comments on each individual paper.
- If you receive feedback before the paper is due, think about what you can and can't do before the deadline. You sometimes have to triage your revisions. By all means, if you think you have major changes to make and you have time to make them, go for it. But if you have two other papers to write and all three are due tomorrow, you may have to decide that your thesis or your organization is the biggest issue and just focus on that. The paper might not be perfect, but you can learn from the experience for the next assignment.
- Read ALL of the feedback that you get. Many people, when receiving a paper back from their TA or professor, will just look at the grade and not read the comments written in the margins or at the end of the paper. Even if you received a satisfactory grade, it makes sense to carefully read all of the feedback you get. Doing so may help you see patterns of error in your writing that you need to address and may help you improve your writing for future papers and for other classes.
- If you don't understand the feedback you receive, by all means ask the person who offered it. Feedback that you don't understand is feedback that you cannot benefit from, so ask for clarification when you need it. Remember that the person who gave you the feedback did so because they genuinely wanted to convey information to you that would help you become a better writer. They wouldn't want you to be confused and will be happy to explain their comments further if you ask.
- Ultimately, the paper you will turn in will be your own. You have the final responsibility for its form and content. Take the responsibility for being the final judge of what should and should not be done with your essay.
- Just because someone says to change something about your paper doesn't mean you should. Sometimes the person offering feedback can misunderstand your assignment or make a suggestion that doesn't seem to make sense. Don't follow those suggestions blindly. Talk about them, think about other options, and decide for yourself whether the advice you received was useful.

Final thoughts

Finally, we would encourage you to think about feedback on your writing as a way to help you develop better writing strategies. This is the philosophy of the Writing Center. Don't look at individual bits of feedback such as "This paper was badly organized" as evidence that you always organize ideas poorly. Think instead about the long haul. What writing process led you to a disorganized paper? What kinds of papers do you have organization problems with? What kinds of organization problems are they? What kinds of feedback have you received about organization in the past? What can you do to resolve these issues, not just for one paper, but for all of your papers? The Writing Center can help you with this process. Strategy-oriented thinking will help you go from being a writer who writes disorganized papers and then struggles to fix each one to being a writer who no longer writes disorganized papers. In the end, that's a much more positive and permanent solution.



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