

## 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. 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 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'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?

### **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?)

### **What to do with the feedback you get**

- 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.