

Getting Feedback on Writing From Friends or Fellow Students

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The main thing is for *you* to be in charge of the feedback process—not the readers. If you hand over control to readers, you make yourself helpless. Decide what kind of feedback you need and stay in charge. And readers need guidance for responding.

Here is a small but powerful arsenal of requests you can make of readers. Try them all out: they may surprise you. After practicing with them, you can decide what kind of feedback you need at any given time—depending on what you are working on and how it's going.

1. Don't respond. *"Let me just read this to you without getting any response from you. I'm not interested in feedback right now, I just need to hear how it sounds. I'll make up my own mind."* Perhaps you feel fragile about the piece—or you are done with it and don't want to change anything.

2. Point. *"Point to some specific things you liked—that worked for you—or that stick in your mind."*

3. Tell me what gets through to you. *"Tell me what you hear. I need to know what's working. What do you hear as my main idea? What other ideas do you hear—implied or assumed or almost said or hovering around the edges wanting to get in? What do you hear me trying to do or accomplish—my purpose or goal? How would you describe my voice here—and my relation to the reader?"*

Reply to me. *"Talk to me about what I've said—not how I've said it. Where do you agree and disagree with me? What are your ideas on this topic? What do you want to hear more about? Reply to my content; don't just play teacher and talk about my writing technique."*

5. Give me movies of your mind as you were reading. *"Tell me what was actually going on in your head as you were reading—moment by moment."* Readers may need help at this. Try interrupting your reading now and then in mid course and ask them *"What thoughts and feelings and reactions are you having now?"* By the way, this is the most trustworthy feedback you can get. That is, you can't trust readers' advice or evaluation (e.g., "This paragraph is weak and should be changed as follows"). What you can trust are the facts about what was happening in their minds as they were listening or reading (e.g., "I was bored here." "I needed an example here.")

6. Tell me about specific features or dimensions. Some examples. Clarity: *"Is my language clear?"* Persuasiveness: *"Did I persuade you?—or at least make you question your own position?"* Specificity: *"Were there enough examples for you?"* Voice: *"I'm trying to sound calm and confident, not upset: did I manage?"* Organization: *"Does my organization lead you along so you don't feel lost or off balance?"* Mechanics: *"Can you help me find mistakes in grammar and spelling?"*

Guide readers to give you the feedback you want. If you aren't sure what you want, then ask for movies of their mind. And unless they are way off course, don't interrupt or quarrel with them. *They* get to be in charge of how they react—what's going on in their minds. *You* get to be in charge of what to decide about their reactions and what revisions—if any—you will make. If most readers disagree with you about some point you're making, perhaps you want to have a good argument with them to clarify your thinking. But another option is just to listen politely, not respond, and make up your own mind later.

If you want good, helpful feedback, treat readers well. A reader who can give you an honest and detailed account of how he or she is reacting to a piece of your writing is precious.

More in *Writing with Power* (Oxford) and *Sharing and Responding* (McGraw Hill).