



Providing Feedback to Writers

Tips For Responding to Someone Else's Writing

1. **Say something positive.** It is just as important to know what we are doing well in our writing as what things need improvement.
2. **Talk about your responses while reading the work.** "When I read this sentence, I wondered if the paragraph was going to be about this topic." Be sure to ask lots of questions.
3. **Critique the writing, not the writer.** Instead of telling someone they have trouble staying on topic, say something like, "This paragraph doesn't seem to support your thesis."
4. **Be specific.** If you make a statement about lack of organization in the paper, be sure to point to specific places in the writer's draft as examples.
5. **Prioritize your comments.** Start with bigger concerns—the quality of the argument, the thesis, and the structure of the paper—and then move to smaller issues like wordiness, grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.
6. **Summarize comments in a paragraph or two.** But don't try to write the paper for the writer by telling him/her what to say and how to say it. Write out your key comments and suggestions on the back of the paper or on a separate sheet of paper so the writer can refer to them later while revising.
7. **Golden Rule.** Provide your peer with the considerate and thorough feedback you would want to receive.

Why It Is Useful to Focus on Higher Order Concerns Before Lower Order Concerns

Before you respond to your colleague's writing, you may want to try organizing your comments into higher order and lower order concerns. At the Writing Center, we always begin with higher order concerns. These are the large issues in the paper that may interfere with the overall meaning of the work and/or effectiveness of the argument. We recommend spending less time on lower order concerns because, though they may be distracting, these are things that typically can be caught in a later draft. If the writer asks for proofreading comments, however, try to pick out the big mistakes rather than picking on every single thing that might be incorrect. Consider also that we don't all have the same perceptions of what constitutes an error. It could be productive to have a discussion about the errors that tend to be most distracting to the group members and to make a list of these as you go along.

Higher Order Concerns:

1. What is the writer's position (thesis/main point)? Is that position clearly communicated to the reader? Point to places in the text where the position is articulated and argued.
2. What evidence does the writer provide to support his/her position? Is the evidence persuasive? Specific enough? Well-documented if from another source? Does the evidence match the point being made?

3. How is the piece of writing organized? Does the writer follow a logical sequence to guide the reader through his/her reasoning? Are transitions needed? What about other organizational cues, like headings and subheadings (if called for by the discipline)?
4. Think about the overall effectiveness of the piece. Does the writer accomplish his/her goals? If not, point to one or more areas where the writer should focus his/her attention for the next revision.

Lower Order Concerns:

1. Are the “mechanics” correct, e.g. sentence structure, sentence syntax (the phrasing and word choice), grammar, punctuation, citations, and, of course, spelling?
2. Are there stylistic problems you find distracting? (Like, unclear use of “this” and “it” or wordiness.)

*Questions adapted from The Writing Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>*

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