



USE YOUR WORDS: MAKING ROOM FOR AGENCY IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS

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More recently than I want to admit, I ripped apart someone's writing.

What I said wasn't wrong, per se, but that's not the point. Everything about how I did it was. I was in a program that involved weekly peer-critique, and—*[record scratch.]*

Wait. Let's start here before we go any further.

"Critique." "Review." Even the terms we use imply our adherence to models of feedback that set the reader up as an authority, usually over a piece that has nothing to do with them. Somewhere in the formulation of the feedback process in American academic writing, everyone forgot about the writer. And for the most part, I've seen student writers either ignore that fact entirely or shrug their shoulders, content to accept someone else's authority over their writing, to be told whether their writing is "good" or not, or what is "wrong," regardless of what they actually want from or prioritize about their own writing.

Which is fine, I guess, if you're looking at writing as a product to be consumed and think that a writer's work should be dissected as "good" or "worth reading" the way *Consumer Reports* rates the new Toyota Camry. But it doesn't leave room for a living process, or for the writer—or, for that matter, the reader—to advocate for themselves, to define what they want out of the feedback process or their writing in general. It's supposed to make writing better, but doesn't allow writers to define what "better" means to them.

So the feedback that student writers receive often runs the gamut, from inspiring to bafflingly irrelevant, banally positive ("Good job!") to completely hurtful, and only the people who receive it know how much the feedback we ourselves give may miss its mark in turn.

Even in programs where professors attempt to circumvent those models, many students are so used to top-down feedback that it can feel alien to try to bring communication into the process. Put on the spot and told to "critique," students emulate the tools that have been used on them.

We correct grammatical mistakes, or make vague and unclear notes about things being “vague” and “unclear.” We throw darts of opinion wildly into the darkness and hope at least one hits its target. This approach to feedback misses a fundamental point: the writer can be the one to decide what a piece of writing means to them and to request the feedback they need for their purposes.

When I ripped apart that other student’s writing, I wasn’t even thinking about what she might want. It was all about my priorities. I thought I saw significant problems, so I told her, and not too delicately—even though it was so early in her drafting process, even though I had no personal investment in the outcome of the story. It felt good. Then it felt bad. But seriously? I think it wasted both of our time.

Taking agency, in this piece, means recognizing the choices that you have the power to make within the feedback process, both as a giver and receiver of feedback. Centering the feedback process around personal agency facilitates effective feedback through explicit, intentional communication about each person’s expectations and priorities. On a larger scale, it recognizes writers’ authority over their own lives and writing, and respects their capability to decide what role a given piece of writing should play within those processes.

Feedback is a monolith when it should be individualized. In order to engage in an agency-centered feedback process, both the reader and writer must understand what they are asking of each other. Most importantly, that understanding must be created, not assumed, and must be reevaluated every time, in every feedback relationship. It is work, but it is worth it.

I. CHECKING IN WITH YOURSELF

WRITER: WHAT ARE YOUR WANTS AND PRIORITIES FOR THIS FEEDBACK SESSION? WHAT DOES THIS PIECE, AND YOUR WRITING PROCESS IN GENERAL, MEAN TO YOU?

In order to be able to tell your reader what you want, you have to know what you want. If you’ve never been in a position to articulate those ideas, you might not know yet, and that’s fine. Don’t stress out about it. You will gain more understanding each time you go through this process.

Maybe you already know certain things, like you don’t want to deal with grammar until you’re almost done and don’t want your reader to focus on it. Or maybe you know this draft is not your best work and just want to put that out there.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- What’s your history with this piece?
- What do you feel good about?

- What are you having trouble with?
- What are your goals for the feedback session? Try to be specific, e.g. “I have some things written but mostly I want to brainstorm.”

READER: WHAT YOU ARE BRINGING TO THE FEEDBACK PROCESS?

Authorities are faceless, needless, objective. You are a human with a history, needs, emotions, and baggage. Recognize this. Whether you realize it or not, your approach to writing is shaped by the things you prioritize and value. You’re certainly welcome to invite the writer to reflect on them, but you don’t get to decide if other people want the same things as you.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- What’s your relationship with the writer like? How will it affect the way you approach this process?
- What investment do you have in the outcome of this writing?
- Are you working to help the writer, or are you using the feedback process as a platform to negate your own vulnerability, create a soapbox to prove your intelligence, or take moments of power over other people?

II. CHECKING IN WITH EACH OTHER

WRITER: ONCE YOU’VE FIGURED OUT YOUR GOALS, ARTICULATE THEM TO YOUR READER AS BEST YOU CAN.

Part of expecting things from your reader is giving them the right information and tools to support you. One way to do that is with a written or verbal author’s note: a way to qualify your piece so that your reader can know what feedback is valuable and what might be redundant or ineffective. We use author’s notes at the Writing Center to help facilitate our sessions; feel free to come in and pick one up or ask more questions.

An example author’s note could be:

“This is my third draft of this essay. My first two drafts were more focused on [this aspect] of [this topic], but on this draft I started focusing more on [this aspect]. I’m still figuring it out, so I’m looking for feedback on how well my ideas fit together. I know I don’t totally have a clear thesis yet. I’m also curious about whether my organization is working to transition well between these ideas, particularly the transition between [this thing] and [that thing]. Thanks!”

Your author's note can be as long or as short as you want, but the more information you give, the more tools your reader will have at their disposal. Try to be as specific as you can—for example, what exactly do you mean when you ask questions like, “Does this make sense?”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- Are you putting your reader in a position of higher authority or expertise than they feel comfortable or willing to be?
- Have you made sure your reader can show up for you in the ways you need? For example, if you want to argue their points, do they feel like arguing back? If you need them to be sensitive about certain things, can they be?
- If it becomes apparent that you are not a good match for each other, do you still want to go through with this feedback process? What could make this feedback relationship work?

READER: ALLOW THE WRITER TO ARTICULATE WHAT THEY WANT FROM THE FEEDBACK PROCESS. LISTEN AND COMMUNICATE TO MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT THE WRITER WANTS AND PRIORITIZES.

This is your time to clarify and ask questions. If a writer has included an author's note or otherwise requested that you focus or do not focus on certain things, verify that you're on the same page.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- Do you understand what your writer is asking of you?
- Do you feel prepared and capable of giving them the kind of feedback they've asked for?

III. GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

WRITER: LISTEN OPENLY. YOU HAVE CHOICES IN HOW YOU RESPOND TO THE FEEDBACK YOU RECEIVE.

Recognize that the feedback you receive is being shaped by another person's opinions and experiences; it's not an absolute truth. Get multiple opinions. Take what you need and remember that you can accept something as “true” without being obligated to use that feedback right now. If you are told something “doesn't make sense” or “doesn't work,” ask clarifying questions. Trust yourself, and believe in yourself enough to be able to listen to feedback that is negative. Ultimately, if it makes you want to stop writing, ignore it.

READER: GIVE FEEDBACK RESPONSIVELY WHILE KEEPING YOUR WRITER'S REQUESTS IN MIND.

Think of your feedback more as one half of a conversation than a polemic. You are not a source of definitive answers or objective truth. You are filtering your opinion through your own experiences. Be honest about that, with yourself and your writer. Remember the ways that your writer has made themselves vulnerable to you. In a peer-review process, it may soon be your turn to be the vulnerable writer.

A FEW MORE THINGS...

“BUT I LIKE HAVING MY WRITING TORN APART!”

This comes up every time I talk to someone about feedback. If this sort of “tough love” is something you like about the feedback process, that’s your choice, and something that needs to be clarified, whether you are the writer or the reader. (As a request, it’s pretty vague, by the way. Do you want your writing torn apart structurally? Conceptually? Grammatically?) Wanting it tough doesn’t make you smarter or a better writer than someone else—it just means that it’s something that works for you. Recognize that you are a person whose preferences fit comfortably within the traditional feedback model, so you might have to be more conscious of how you work with people whose preferences don’t. Also, consider whether your reliance on other people to tell you what’s wrong with your writing means depending on someone else’s role as an authority, rather than working to enhance your own abilities and authority over your writing.

ON PROFESSOR/STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

This article is primarily directed at the feedback process between two writers who are partners in peer-critique: classmates, a student writer and a student tutor, or two friends. That said, student writers can advocate for themselves by using many of these agency-centered tools in their professor/student relationships. For example, an author’s note can enable students to get the feedback they want while helping professors use their limited time and energy most effectively. However, the professor’s position of authority will ultimately affect the feedback process in a way that two students working together will not.