

Responding to Peers' Writing



I've been asked to provide feedback or do a peer review on a piece of writing. What's the most effective way to respond to writing?

Responding to another person's writing can be an important part of the writing process, for both writer and reader. Often others can see things in your writing from a different perspective and offer helpful suggestions. If someone has asked for your feedback on their writing, it is helpful to remember that they are trusting you to be both honest and constructive and to provide thoughtful responses to the work being shared with you. Supplying feedback for someone else can be helpful for your own writing as well. Getting to know how others respond to different writing situations can help you think about new approaches to your own writing tasks.

When you are responding to somebody else's writing, staying open to learning something new, being honest about your impressions, and keeping your comments constructive will help you provide the best feedback possible – and maybe even help you when it comes time to look for someone to respond to your own work!

What is the most effective feedback I can give?

You might notice any number of different ways you could respond to someone's work – one of the things that is so great about writing is that there are usually many approaches to a task. So, how do you decide what to say (or write) when you're commenting on a draft?

More is not always better

Often when we receive criticism, it can feel overwhelming. Giving more targeted feedback is not only less imposing and frustrating for the writer, it also helps to maintain focus on what the most significant issues are. Try and identify a couple of significant issues to be addressed, and keep your comments focused there, leaving small grammatical or lexical changes for later. The beauty of revision is that it doesn't all have to get done at once. Also, always remember to point out the strong points of a draft, as specifically as possible, and why you think those are strong points. It can be just as helpful to know what is working in a draft as to know where the problems are.

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Respond at three levels

1. Project-level concerns

Questions about overall focus are project-level concerns, as are concerns about the organization of a piece, or questions about its purpose. If there are significant gaps in a literature review, for example, or additional evidence is required to support a given argument, these are project-level concerns. These kinds of concerns can be addressed by asking questions about how an argument is formed, or who will likely be the audience for the piece and what will they may need to know.

2. Paragraph-level concerns

Concerns at the paragraph level include things like what an individual paragraph is contributing to the overall argument, and whether its placement is ideal for making that contribution. These kinds of concerns might be addressed by asking what, exactly the information in a paragraph is adding to an argument, or what would happen if it was moved to a different place. Concerns at this level also include thinking about development, or whether there is enough information in a given paragraph to support its main point, and the arrangement of sentences within the paragraph. Sometimes comprehension can be made easier by adding new or different transitions between sentences, for instance, or changing a topic sentence to more precisely reflect what a reader will find in the paragraph it leads.

3. Sentence-level concerns

These concerns include proofreading tasks, such as catching odd typos or repeated words. Citation concerns might also be included here. Addressing these concerns involves changing words or letters and punctuation. Most reviewers are most comfortable expressing sentence-level concerns, and while this feedback can be valuable, it is best to leave it to last unless you've been specifically asked to provide it. Addressing larger, more significant project- and paragraph- level issues can help the writer produce a stronger project overall.

If you're still unsure of how to respond to a piece of writing, just try to be a thoughtful audience for the writer. Let the writer know where you have questions about the meaning, and let the writer know which specific parts of the draft are effective and engaging. If you have questions or concerns about how to give or respond to feedback on writing, you can always ask a Writing Center consultant!