Five Steps to Giving Feedback on Writing

Providing feedback on writing aims to:

* Provide a constructive critique of the writing, not a personal criticism, that explains the reviewer’s experience of reading the work.
* Help students think critically about the work.
* Provide information to help students develop their writing skills.
* Encourage students to understand that they are writers-in-development, like everyone else, and that improving as a writer involves a process of writing, receiving feedback, learning more, and putting their new understanding into practice into their next writing efforts.

1**. Approach the work respectfully as a reader, not a grader, by encouraging, providing information, and asking questions.**

* Tip: Set Word’s track changes and comment balloons to appear in colours other than red
* Use the first person “I” to show feedback reflects your experience as a reader versus presenting the information as an unassailable truth.
  + “I’m struggling to understand how you’re connecting this quotation to the claim in this paragraph, so I would have found it helpful to have more information here” vs. “unclear connection”. The student likely thought the connection was obvious so “unclear connection” is likely to be ignored or rejected, whereas the first person comment invites the student to think about the reader’s experience.
* Stay focused on the specifics of the writing and give concrete examples versus providing feedback that the student may interpret as a harsh comment on their abilities, intelligence, or intention.
* “I found this sentence difficult to follow as I’m not seeing how the first phrase connects to the second phrase” versus “unclear”.
* Ask questions to encourage thinking and learning versus crossing out text without providing an explanation or rewriting phrases/sentences. For example:
  + “I’m struggling to understand what you’re saying here. What does this mean, exactly? Could you rephrase this sentence to make the meaning clearer for your reader?”.
* Watch for comments that may be confusing or diminishing for students who are new to Canadian academic discourse and who may not have learned typical feedback language (Duff, 2010, p. 181; Séror, 2009, p. 214) e.g., “okay”, “good”, “word choice”, a checkmark, or an “X”.
  + Provide information to students on what the comments mean e.g., “good topic sentence – I understand the claim of this paragraph” versus “good”.

2. **Prepare summative comments**

* Highlight strengths and a few themes in the feedback. By identifying specific areas to work on and why, students have concrete steps for improvement and understand how development in those areas will benefit them.
* When sending students to the Writing Centre for assistance, particularly regarding draft work, it’s helpful to identify specific priorities e.g., “please get help from the Writing Centre on paragraphing and referencing” versus “please talk to the Writing Centre about this paper”. Doing so makes it easier for the student to ask for help and gives a starting point for the conversation.

3. **Take time away from the work before reviewing feedback**

4. **Reread the feedback**

* Consider the feedback from the perspective of someone who is feeling vulnerable and anxious; check for a respectful tone, accuracy, errors, and missing information.

5. **Send the feedback**

* Send the feedback with a preface that explains the approach and an offer of a conversation to answer any questions, which opens a dialogue with the student versus the feedback being a one-way conversation.
* Putting the offer in writing provides a lasting reminder of the option for a discussion, whereas a verbal offer may be lost in the stress of receiving feedback. For example:
  + “You’ll see in your work that I’ve noted the strengths of the work as well as provided feedback and suggestions to help you develop your writing skills as an academic author. I focused on the writing skills particularly in the first two pages, whereas I focused on the content of the discussion in the remaining pages. I approached your work from the perspective of a general reader, and I’ve described my experience of reading the text. I hope you’ll find my comments and suggestions helpful, and if you have any questions, please contact me as I’d be happy to speak with you”.

Do you have questions about this resource? Please contact [Theresa Bell](mailto:theresa.bell@royalroads.ca) in the RRU Writing Centre.

References

Duff, P. (2010). Language socialization into academic discourse communities. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *30*, 169-192. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017*/*S0267190510000048

Séror, J. (2009). Institutional forces and L2 writing feedback in higher education. *The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue Canadienne des Langues Vivantes*, *66*(2), 203-232. doi:10.3138/cmlr.66.2.203