

10.2 Evaluate Your Feedback and Plan Your Revisions

As the author of a draft, you always have insider knowledge about what you want to accomplish, what your resources are, and what your overall priorities are. In many cases, you also know more about your specific topic or issue than your reader (or some angles of it), even when your reader is an instructor, professor, or manager. You are the authority.

However, in most of the situations in which you are seeking or receiving feedback, your document's success is measured in large part or completely by the judgment of the audience. Just as your Aunt Margaret holds you responsible if your troublesome cousin runs away at the shopping mall and gets lost for an hour, readers in US academic and professional cultures hold a writer responsible for making all the ideas clear to them.

As you revise based on feedback, then, you have to balance your knowledge and abilities with the perceptions, requests, and even demands you receive from readers. Feedback from readers may occur along a continuum from not at all relevant to precisely what you needed: comments may be:

- Unclear, vague, or irrelevant
- Clear but not obviously accurate: you might not agree that there is a problem, that the problem is what the reader thinks, or that their solution will work with your purpose or audience
- Clear and accurate, but too difficult to implement given your abilities or resources
- Clear, accurate, and possible to implement in a modified way
- Clear, accurate, and possible to implement just as suggested
- Clear, accurate, and possible to implement even more broadly throughout the document than was suggested

You have to decide which comments fit which category, and thus how you will respond to each comment. Even a half-hearted reviewer can still give a few useful comments; even a really great reviewer will sometimes provide some unhelpful feedback. As the author, you are and remain the authority on your project, and you are in charge of choosing which feedback will influence your revision process.

Finally, as you revise based on feedback, you need to reflect on the bigger picture: if you make a single change in response to one reader's comments, you need to check on how that change affects other parts of the project. Your reviewers won't always keep all those variables in mind, but you know your project well enough to choose your revisions both for how they improve the small facets and how they will help you build a stronger document overall, in light of your goals and your readers' needs.

Incorporate feedback from expert coaches

In the past when you have had an instructor provide feedback on your writing, you may have had a correction-based relationship: the instructor identified errors, and you assumed that your role was to take every single comment as direct information about how to change a specific word or sentence.

As you move into more advanced writing tasks, that relationship will most likely change (though it's always good to ask your instructor, supervisor, or reviewer what your responsibilities are). For instance, you may encounter experts who do not correct all of your errors, but who instead identify some general areas of writing problems, and who then expect you to assess that information, adapt it in light of your own understanding of the goals and needs of the project, and use it to continue revising multiple areas in your overall document.

When you respond to expert coaching on your writing, you should certainly try to follow any direct suggestions provided: “make this argument more specific” or “add more evidence from the text here.” However, you are moving from being someone who *corrects small errors* to becoming someone who *improves as a writer overall*, so you will need to adopt broader strategies:

- **Identify a range of possible responses** to any suggestion, so that you can choose the one that best fits your context and goals: not only are there many ways to “make a thesis more specific,” but perhaps the problem is not really in the thesis sentence but in the overall topic or question that needs narrowing down. Don't use someone else's suggestion, even an instructor's, unless you're sure it's the best fit for your essay.
- **Extrapolate from individual suggestions** to your overall project: if your reader has asked in one place for more specific evidence, you now have an indication of a reader for whom that criterion is vitally important. Where else in the draft might you increase your level of evidence support?
- **Extrapolate from individual praise** to your overall project: if your reader has praised an example, phrasing, or kind of analysis, try to describe to yourself what made that selection stand out, and look for places to repeat that success elsewhere in your draft.
- **Be ready to discuss alternatives:** in some cases—an instructor with very direct expectations, a report that must follow a very specific format—there is no option for variation. In many other situations, however, you may inquire and discover that a reader is open to alternative approaches to organizing your document, or that they are intrigued by your plan to include a fuller discussion of unexpected data.

In a school setting and in many workplace settings, expert reviewers are willing to answer your questions about their feedback; they're often willing to hear the

reasons you think you might try an approach different from the one they recommend, as long as you can support your explanation by describing how it solves your writing problems more directly and completely. The more you are willing to open a dialogue about writing and revising, the more quickly you can learn advanced strategies for succeeding in your classroom or workplace.

Explore 10.2

In a sentence or two, describe the best advice or feedback you ever received about your writing: what was your writing task, and what was the feedback? Give an example of how you used that feedback to improve your writing at the time. Then consider the bigger picture: how can that advice, or an adaptation of that advice, help in your writing today—for school, for work, and/or for connecting with your friends or community?



Incorporate feedback from actual users

When your reader is actually a member of your target audience, then the feedback they give you might tell you precisely what some members of your audience will need from your document. Perhaps you have written a brochure for a child services organization and given a draft to the manager for that organization, or you have created a web page directed to incoming college students and asked three of your sister's high school friends to review it.

When the feedback is within the readers' area of expertise, the readers are fully representative of your audience, and the comments are clearly stated, you should strive to revise accordingly. If the high school friends tell you that your opening story about music concerts is "old style" and nobody listens to those bands any more, you should take their advice seriously and ask for suggestions. However, if they tell you that your statistics about college-level study skills are wrong, you might be more skeptical, because they have less expertise in that area. If the child services manager tells you their clients will like the information in the brochure you designed but that the pictures convey a "negative vibe," you should trust that feedback; if the manager can't exactly say what pictures they prefer, you might follow up by sharing some possible examples to help them articulate their goals.

As a corollary to this advice, you should learn to value any reader's input for what that reader is best equipped to tell you about your document—and to directly seek out or ask readers for what they can most help you revise. Your class peers will be more reliable at identifying writing challenges and concepts you have just been studying, and so you should value their comments on such matters, and your colleagues at work will be able to tell you whether people in a busy workplace can follow a set of instructions. Likewise, if you want to find out whether a non-specialist can understand your description of cell mitosis or wind shear, you need to find a non-specialist, such as your grandmother or your tennis partner.

Incorporate feedback from general readers

You have probably experienced some of the benefits and challenges of having a friend, class member, or officemate “just take a look” at your writing. While they can provide useful insights, you may also decide that their comments are too general or not relevant enough to be immediately helpful. Instead of concluding that these reviews are useless, though, you need to develop strategies for identifying how to take advantage of these readers’ support.

It may help to think of how people respond to smoke alarms. A smoke alarm sounds to let you know that there is a serious problem somewhere in your building: in the most serious cases, a fire has started somewhere and smoke has drifted to the alarm, while in other cases, steam or other air qualities have triggered the alarm to sound. A fully functioning smoke alarm identifies but does not pinpoint a problem, since the alarm may sound in the hallway when the fire (or burned pan of rice) is in the kitchen.

A reader’s feedback may function as a smoke alarm, particularly if the reader is a peer, friend, colleague, or layperson. Readers who are honest and thoughtful are often able to tell you that your document is not working to its full potential; *something* about your writing affects them negatively. However, they may be unable to pinpoint where the problem is, they may pinpoint one problem when the true source of the problem is elsewhere, or their problem sensors may be tuned too strictly or too gently given your context. These readers may provide “smoke alarm” comments in the following categories, and advanced writers will need to sort the comments out before beginning revisions.

Vague comments

Inexperienced or nonspecialist readers may provide comments such as “this doesn’t flow” or “you should be more personal” or “too many quotations” that are imprecise. However, as a reflective writer you can work to interpret these comments to better define, explore, and act on any problems. The three comments above might refer to a lack of clarity in your goal statements or paragraph structure; to the low amount of supporting detail or a flatness to your tone and style; or to a problem with your analysis of the secondary source information that you included. You can try to imagine what was frustrating your reader, and locate at least one place in your draft where you can explore ways to strengthen your writing to satisfy their concerns while meeting your goals and the other rhetorical demands of your project.

Mistuned comments

Peer readers unfamiliar with the expectations of your genre, your target audience’s background knowledge, or your goals may ask for you to make revisions

that seem inappropriate: “add more stories to your intro,” or “explain what *deconstruction* means,” or “don’t spend so much time explaining multiple views.” If readers are mistaken (memos and lab reports are not supposed to begin with stories), then you can ignore their feedback. However, to make sure the alarm won’t go off again with another reader, you might wonder if you can make any small changes that would accommodate readers’ needs: perhaps you could include a slightly more engaging “Subject” line in your memo or more vivid verbs in your abstract.

A common subset of these comments is the correction of sentence-level errors when you were hoping for more macro-level feedback from peers. If you are not yet ready to work on sentence-level editing, or if readers “correct” sentences and in doing so produce more errors, you should just read around this type of feedback. (And remember: Don’t get tricked into editing when you’re still in revising mode!)

Generalized praise

If you see specific praise—“This quotation persuades me to donate money because the statistic is so dramatic”—you know what the reader believes you have done right. If you see vague praise—“I get it!”—or if an instructor only makes a checkmark or smiley face in the margin, you may not know. Vague praise isn’t always an alarm that signals a disaster, but it can also require interpretation and scrutiny. Sometimes readers praise you for making them happy, not for challenging them to think hard or for meeting the goals of the writing project, just as sometimes a smoke detector goes off when there’s water boiling or the oven door opens.

When you see praise, your first job is to decide whether you are being praised for achieving your main goal. If you think you are, because the commentary is specific or because you trust the source (your instructor would not praise something unworthy!), then your next task is to decide for yourself what you were doing right, so that you can do more of that. Make your best guess and write yourself a note: “Keep using specific quotations” or “Keep adding more counterarguments” or “Keep incorporating more outlying data points.”

If you think your reader is liking something more generally, then your task is to decide whether you can translate that praise to a useful category so that you can search for other places to repeat your strong writing (“I relate to this” may indicate the presence of highly specific detail or of accessible language), or whether your reader is admiring something as a novice reader that your target audience would not admire (“I relate to this” may indicate that you are telling stories that engage novices when your target audience of mechanical engineers expects you to be providing data-supported analysis).

Explore 10.3



As I was writing this textbook, I received comments from *dozens* of reviewers. I admit that my first reaction to a reviewer's critique was often, "What? But that part is *perfect!* Why do they not recognize my genius?!" Then I took a deep breath and settled in to see how I could make my writing better.

Consider a recent a writing project of yours, and identify some feedback you received that you didn't quite agree with, at least at first. What writing task were you working on, and what did the feedback say? (If you don't have a copy to check, try to recall as specifically as possible what your goals were and what the comments were.) Then try a thought experiment: in a couple of sentences, explain how that reader's reaction, if not their exact comment, could help you revise your writing to more effectively reach your audience.

Incorporate feedback from reflection

If you must be your only reviewer or you are a major source of feedback for your own draft, you face some significant challenges. Writers tend to be either hypercritical or highly complimentary of our own writing, neither of which promotes good revision. You should thus begin by learning reflective strategies for reviewing your own drafts so that you can see beyond your first (and second) impressions.

Once you have assessed your draft and provided yourself with both praises and suggestions, you will still need to take your own advice carefully. On the one hand, you are the authority on your topic or issue and on the work you have done so far, and you need to reassure yourself that you have the power and capability to complete these revisions. On the other hand, you are only human, and so if you are not vigilant, you may slip back into old habits that produce less powerful writing (another reason not to revise at two in the morning!). As you look at your self-praises and suggestions, then, take some steps to rearrange your brain and add a few more notes:

- **Recall what you have typically done** as a writer that helped you succeed, and typically done as a writer that was not helpful. If one of your past writing selves (maybe from six weeks ago, or last year) were to look at your draft and your revision suggestions, what would they say: are you about to make any of the same mistakes you've made before? is there something you always try that helps that you should try again?
- **Step into someone else's perspective** for a few minutes: what would a current or former teacher, boss, or friend say about your draft or your suggestions? What sorts of comments does that person often make that you can imagine them making here? What specifically has been asked for by a boss or instructor in this situation that relates to your plans for revision?

- **Become a critic of your critique:** which of your praises or suggestions sounds like you are just trying to let yourself off the hook too easily, either by telling yourself that you don't need to change or by telling yourself that the change would be too difficult? Are there any places where you overlooked or understated a change that needs to be more drastic or needs to happen more often?
- **Become a cheerleader for your revisions:** which of your praises could you strengthen, now that you remember how hard you worked on the early draft and how much you want to keep working on that strategy? Which revision suggestion sounds like something you really want to explore, expand, or even take some risks with to see if you can break new ground and capture your readers' attention?

Even if you think you'll remember what you want to do, when you take the time to actually write these notes-to-self, then you benefit even more because you start the revision process before you start revising, and you retrain your brain to visualize the new draft rather than staying caught in the current one.