

On the same page

How to give and receive feedback on journal article drafts and research proposals



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A PROTOCOL FOR GIVING FEEDBACK

What to look for

Giving and receiving valuable feedback

Peer review is a cornerstone of academic life. The feedback that you get from this process, though, can sometimes be less than helpful. Whether they're from an anonymous reviewer, an advisor, or a coauthor, I've seen comments such as

- » "You lost me here,"
- » "Not clear," or
- » "Vague."

Comments like these are problematic and unhelpful for a couple of reasons. Before pinpointing just why, consider what's good about them: they clearly indicate that whatever the writer was trying to convey was not communicated to the reader.

Now to what's problematic about them. First, a writer receiving comments like these can't *do* anything with them because they don't indicate what was wrong to begin with, and second, they don't give the writer any direction about how to fix them.



ONE

Look for the intention

ON THE SAME PAGE

To move from unhelpful comments to giving ones that are valuable for writers, you need to search for what the author meant or intended to write. We all have a tendency to be lazy readers, and often the search for the writer's intention is the missing link between a comment like "not clear" and one the writer can actually use to improve the text.



All writers have an intention, and good feedback demands that you look for the writer's "why": "What do you think the author meant by *messiness*?", "Why did she include such a long discussion of past models and frameworks?"

If the intention of feedback is to have a dialogue – and it should be – then a good approach is to first see whether you can identify what the author was trying to do and then figure out why it wasn't working.

Here are some examples of "looking for the intention" comments:

COMMENTS YOU MIGHT RECEIVE

WHAT THESE COMMENTS DON'T TELL YOU

"You lost me here."



"Where, how, did I lose you?"

"Not clear."



"What, specifically, was not clear to you?"

"Vague."



"What is vague and how can I make it less so?"

"If I had to guess, I would say you mention commercial shipping because..."

LOOK FOR THE INTENTION



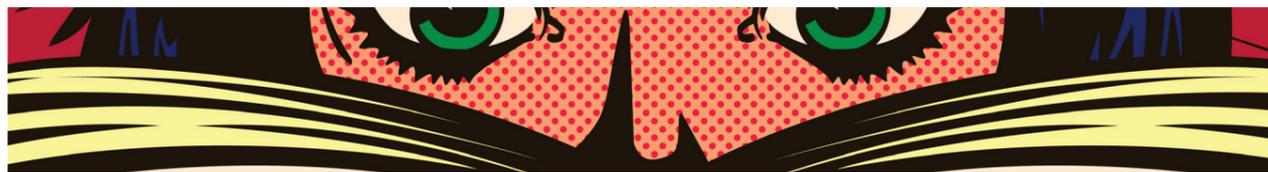
"The purpose of this paragraph seems to be to..."



"It seems like the point of this sentence is to let readers know..."



"Your argument appears to be that..."



The aim of writing

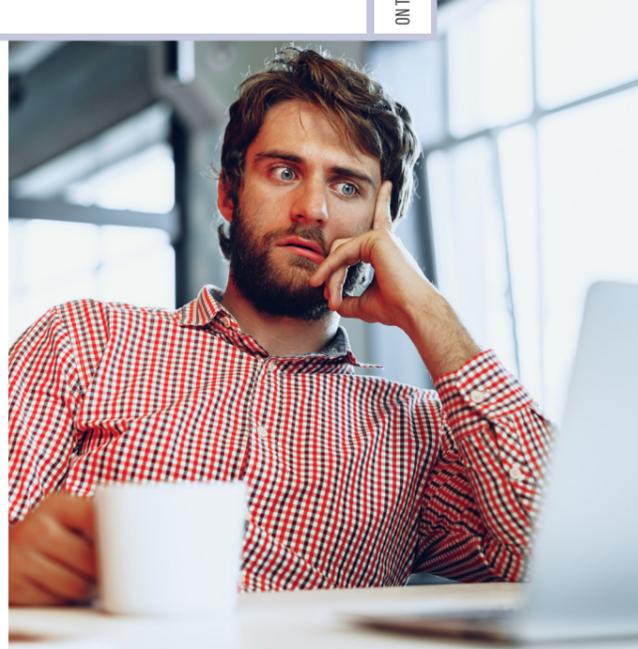
A writer and reader in sync

The assumption behind being on the same page is an idealistic aim: that the reader's understanding is the same one the writer intended. From abstract to conclusion, your readers should follow every sentence, with no questions and no misunderstandings. Only then are you truly on the same page.



Stop when you're lost

The moment you get lost and start to re-read, stop and figure out why.



FOLLOW YOUR INSTINCTS WHEN GIVING FEEDBACK

This advice comes from my years of editing. I've learned to stop whenever I read something I don't understand and flag it. You may not have time to figure out why it's confusing (it may even be explained a few lines later), but at least mark it and make a note of why it's confusing to you – you can always dismiss or reject your notes later. What you can't do later is re-create your experience of the first read-through. And for giving feedback, the first read-through is the most important one because that's the moment when you are in the same situation other readers will be in when they read the text. Just like you, they may struggle to understand, and your job in giving feedback is to alert the author. If you don't flag it, you may forget where you initially got confused and why.

Fight the sometimes-instinctive response of "Oh, she'll clarify that later," or, "Well, I don't fully understand, but I'm not the expert here." Don't rationalize or explain away. Listen to your instincts, be more skeptical, and discover why something isn't working. Don't assume that clarity will come later, because it may not. Stop and figure out why.



Find the good

In addition to looking for the intention and stopping whenever you get lost, you also want to look for what's good in the text. This is a step often overlooked in academia. Frequently, the "reward" for good writing is silence: if there's nothing to fix, there's nothing to say.

This conception of feedback reinforces the idea that feedback is *only* negative. In the critical – sometimes hypercritical – environment of academia, it's important to pause

and appreciate what's good about someone's work, because it's a small way of acknowledging how difficult writing is – for all of us.

Find one specific thing that you genuinely think is good. Here are some examples of finding the good in another's writing:



"One thing you do really well in this sentence is explain why adaptive capabilities are important for young technology firms."

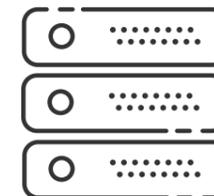


FINDING THE GOOD

"This paragraph nicely summarizes your argument."



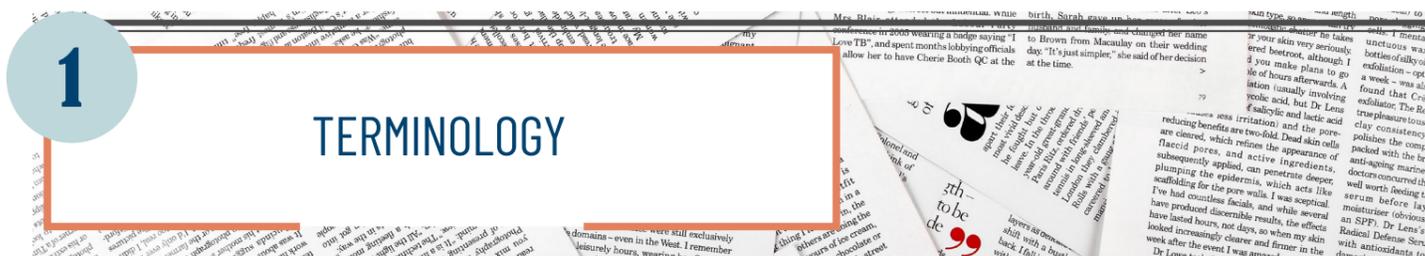
"What comes across clearly in this section is why choosing a longitudinal design was appropriate for answering your research questions."



"What I like about your abstract is that you scale your findings up with a concise statement of significance: It's clear to me how protist diversity can help create resilient agroecosystems."



Next, look for the (sometimes easier-to-find) elements that are not so good. In my experience, the following top five tend to be confusing, missing, or problematic. Check whether the text you're reviewing has problems with any of these.



All disciplines have their own terminologies, and your target readers might immediately grasp them. If that's the case, you (often) don't need to define them.

If you're aiming at a broader readership, though, or if you're introducing a new term, make sure you define. In all cases, be consistent. Don't use more than one term for the same concept or idea unless you alert readers (and even then, be conservative).

Consistent terminology is incredibly important for your readers because it lets them follow your argument. Don't use more than one term for your key concepts. I often see writers who do this to introduce variety, but it ends up confusing readers, who second guess whether both terms refer to the same thing.

?	THE MOMENT YOU GET LOST AND START TO RE-READ, STOP AND FIGURE OUT WHY.	
	<i>How to give valuable feedback</i>	What to look for

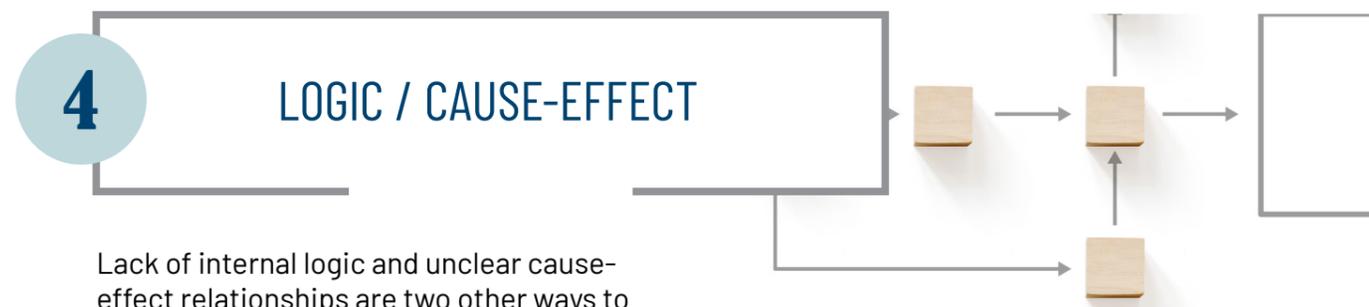


Arguments are at the heart of academic writing, yet they're often one of the hardest aspects of academic writing to develop. I recommend some helpful books for developing your arguments at www.marcabernathy.com/resources

When it comes to feedback and peer review, I frequently see texts in which an argument is never explicitly stated or made clear. I imagine it's because writers don't have an argument (or a fully formed one), or maybe they think they don't need to state it explicitly (thinking the reader will just "get it"). It may even be a symptom of under-confidence when writing (an identity issue). Unless you state it explicitly, however, readers won't just get it, so as a reviewer, you need to look for it, and as a writer, you need to state it.

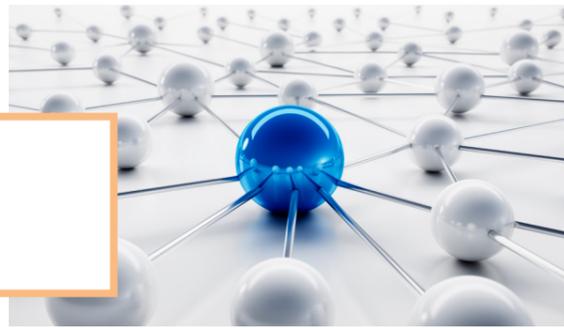


The third element of the not-so-good is lack of transitions or clear connections between paragraphs or within sentences. Ideally, these connections should be indicated with direct transition language (*however, although, while*) or with less explicit but still clearly transitional language (e.g., "These arguments seem less convincing when we consider...").



Lack of internal logic and unclear cause-effect relationships are two other ways to lose your readers. Most often this happens at the sentence level, but it can also occur within paragraphs. In one text I was editing, the author wrote about the trade-off between stifling innovation and protecting users' rights. To me, the logic seemed flawed: isn't the trade-off usually between *encouraging* innovation and protecting users' rights?

COHERENCE



Finally, look for sentences that are unrelated to the surrounding text. I see this a lot in writers' work: a sentence that comes out of nowhere and doesn't fit the context. In one client's paragraph, the first sentence was about using the CCO perspective as a basis for a sociomaterial inquiry, and the next sentence jumped to the concept of leadership actors. There was no connection to the CCO perspective. For readers, this can be really confusing.

	DELIVERING THE MESSAGE	
	<i>How to frame it</i>	Giving and receiving valuable feedback

"I as a reader" responses

Focus on *your* responses to the text.

The "I as a reader" responses are linked to point two above (p. 4): stop when you get lost. The "I as a reader" frame has several benefits. First, it focuses on you – as an intelligent reader – and your reaction to the text: **You** didn't understand or follow it (even though other people might – i.e., "This is just one person's opinion"). Compare the effect and impact of feedback framed this way: "It's not clear" versus "It's not clear **to me**." The "I" focus also moves you away from positioning yourself as the expert or the final arbiter.

Second, the focus on readers reminds writers of why they're writing in the first place. Writers *need* readers – as editors, reviewers, and citers of their work – so it's important to let them know that you are one of those readers and that your opinion is important.

On the next page are some examples of "I as a reader" responses...



YOUR RESPONSE TO A TEXT

"I AS A READER"

➔

"I AS A READER" RESPONSES

"(As a reader) I got lost when I read about commercial shipping because I couldn't see how it related to the main topic of rescue missions..."

"It wasn't clear to me what you meant by the term *mode* because you seem to be using the term *logic* for the same idea."

"I was a little confused by this sentence because above you define common ground as... and here it looks like the definition changes."

"I had trouble seeing the connection between these two paragraphs because one is about organizational growth and the other is about the dynamic-states perspective."

TRY TO USE THE WORD "BECAUSE" IN YOUR RESPONSES



"It was difficult to understand the main idea in this sentence because you use so much hedging language."

Other readers' responses

You may be reading a text from a field other than your own. If that's the case, you're not the target reader. But you can still help the author by shifting the perspective from "I as a reader" responses to "other readers" responses. Your feedback can highlight issues that target readers might struggle with.

Asking your partner "Will this be clear to readers in your field?" is a way to draw the writer's attention to something you as an outsider struggled with. An easy "confuser" for readers outside the field is terminology.



"Will <i>axotomized</i> be clear to readers?"		
	"How do you think readers in your field will respond to the epigraph from Darwin in a work on organizational strategy?"	"Your target readers might be able to easily see the connection between CCO and the Montreal School, but if you think they won't, I would suggest explicitly stating the relationship."



Putting it all together: The aim of feedback

I believe that feedback should be a conversation about your journal article or proposal. It's not simply a matter of language choices or grammar; it's about what you understand a text to be about (and what the author wants it to be about). The conversation takes time, because the process I propose – looking for the intention, finding the good and not-so-good, and noting your reactions to the text – goes beyond saying "It's vague" or "Not clear." To get to a meaningful conversation requires you to dig deeper to uncover where and how the text succeeds or fails at communicating its intended message to you as a reader. Combining these levels provides more complete, more helpful feedback for the person you're giving feedback to.

	DELIVERING THE MESSAGE	
	<i>How to deliver it</i>	Giving and receiving valuable feedback

In terms of what to say, keep in mind that all writers are more sensitive about their own writing than they'd like to admit. Secretly, we all want a glowing, enthusiastic response from readers. Even the most neutral comments and feedback can sometimes feel like a painful cut.

That's why delivery is so important. Before I send an editing project back, I (try to) remove all superlatives. During the early rounds I often write comments based on my initial reactions, which can sometimes be quite strong. I remove them before I send a project back because most writers receiving feedback are operating with a very heightened sensitivity. Taking away the superlatives delivers the same message, but doesn't feel like a punch.

Do's & don'ts



So far, I've given you advice on what to do when giving feedback. Now I want to give you some advice on what *not* to do, which is just as important.

You'll be tempted right away to change and fix an author's text. Resist the temptation. The reason: it skips crucial preliminary steps, such as focusing on how you respond to the text and looking for your partner's intention. Without doing this work, the fixes you propose might be misguided or even belittling – in effect saying to the author, "I know better than you do" or "I'm the expert here, not you."

Another thing to avoid is trying to do too much in one round of feedback. You may have flagged grammar or punctuation as problematic because it causes confusion or leads to ambiguity, but save these smaller-scale comments for later and start with fundamental, big-picture comments. Likewise, avoid comments like "repetitive." Unless you're in the final stages of the writing process, comments like these have limited value; big-picture comments are more valuable.

Finally, you might be tempted to talk about what the writer didn't do or include, such as referencing certain authors, schools, theories, statistical methods, equations, and so on. Your criticism might be spot on, but the next time you give feedback to an author try responding to what you read on the page, not what you don't.

NO SUPERLATIVES

- ~~"entirely"~~
- ~~"absolutely"~~
- ~~"completely"~~

USE SOFTENING LANGUAGE

- "a little bit"
- "somewhat"
- "it seems like"

THE AIM OF YOUR FEEDBACK

WHAT NOT TO SAY

To understand, not fix

~~"Why don't you just write...?"~~

Focus on the big picture

~~"Change worn out to broken."~~

Stick with what's on the page

~~"Repetitive"~~

~~"Change has been to was."~~

~~"Why didn't you cite...?"~~

~~"You don't discuss...at all."~~



HEARING THE MESSAGE

How to receive feedback (well)

Giving and receiving feedback

As you're receiving feedback...

Don't interrupt.

Don't get defensive.

Wait for your partner to finish before you...

...ask clarifying questions



~~"What I meant to write was..."~~

~~"But don't you see, right here it says..."~~

"When you say...do you mean you think I should...?"



"Just to clarify, what you're suggesting is...?"



"So you think if I were to...it would improve the paper?"



TALKING IT OUT

How to receive feedback (well)

Giving and receiving feedback

The last stage of giving and receiving feedback (well) is to talk it out, keeping in mind all the principles you've learned so far. When receiving feedback on your own text, get into suggestion mode and offer alternatives to see if you can find something that works better. As a writer, one difficulty of receiving feedback is that it can be hard to distance yourself from your own work in such a way that you see it as a product, as a document with a clear objective: to communicate clearly to your readers. Thinking about your text in this way not only helps remind you of why you're writing in the first place, but it also helps you achieve the objectivity you need to handle the rough-and-tumble of peer review.

Listen to the questions and comments you receive – they're valuable because they tell you where your text is not doing its job and where intelligent readers are getting lost or confused.

Use the prompts below to help guide the conversation. Your objective should be to offer alternatives and to find solutions – to develop and write a readable text that communicates what you want it to.

"Do you think it would help if I...?"

OFFER ALTERNATIVES
FIND SOLUTIONS



"Would a sentence like... bring together the ideas in this paragraph?"



"What I was trying to do was...Do you have any ideas for how I could (do it better/make it clearer)?"



SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

I'm grateful to many sources for valuable research and advice on giving feedback to academic writers. In addition to my own experience and reflection on working with academic writers, the most valuable source has been my starting point: Wendy Laura Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks* (Second Edition).



ABOUT ME

About Marc Abernathy

For over 12 years, I've been helping PhD students, postdocs, and junior professors get their articles published in their target journals and their research proposals funded. I love working with motivated researchers, learning about their work, and helping them achieve their career goals. I've worked with clients at the University of Göttingen, the University of Mannheim, the University of Antwerp, and the University of Vaasa, among many others, to help them publish their papers in journals such as *Organization Studies*, the *Academy of Management*, and *Nature Communications*. I've taught workshops for the Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft in Vienna, the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, and TH Köln. And I've coached researchers from such universities as the Free University in Berlin, the University of Jyväskylä, and the University of Innsbruck. I'd love to get to know more about you and find out if whether I'm the right person to help you with your next academic writing project – be it a journal article, funding proposal, or an abstract. I offer 45-minute get-to-know-each-other sessions for first-time clients, and you can book one easily by scanning the QR code to the right or going to <https://www.marcabernathy.com/service-page/get-to-know-each-other-session>. I look forward to getting to know more about you and your research.



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