Principles for Giving and Receiving Feedback on Writing in This Seminar

Although the act of writing can be a lonely one (sitting alone at your desk in the middle of the night, your roommate fast asleep), scholars are in fact doubly connected to other people—through the sources they draw on (and the writing support they receive. In this course, you will be asked not only to use—and properly cite—sources in your writing but also to get input on your ideas and writing from other people and to provide feedback on the writing of your colleagues.

Strong academic writing is the result of collaboration. In this case, “collaboration” refers to the giving and receiving of feedback on our writing. All professional academics engage in this process, no matter what their discipline or level of expertise. Well beyond academics, the feedback process is something we are involved in all the time, at every level of our lives: we give and receive feedback from friends, parents, significant others, teachers, coaches, bosses, even from strangers on the street. Developing some specific strategies for making sure the feedback we give is appropriate and effective and for making sure the feedback we receive is interpreted correctly and put to good use is an essential communication skill we will be focusing on throughout our Writing Seminar semester.

Below is a discussion of several important principles for giving and getting feedback in this course. Other professors may have different guidelines, so be sure to consult them before giving or getting feedback in their courses. Writing Center Fellows are also available to answer your questions and respond to your writing.

To make an appointment at the Writing Center, visit: https://writing.princeton.edu/undergraduates/writing-center

Principle #1: Feedback is about learning; make sure the writer maintains authority over her/his own work.

Writing is an engaged act of communication between writer and reader. Emphasizing our presence as a reader is an act that helps us aid our colleagues in their professional growth as questioning readers and writers and enables writers to maintain their control over their own work. Maintaining authority over our work involves evaluating whether the writer is an active or passive partner in the collaboration. If the writer is active, the collaboration is most likely within appropriate limits; if the writer is passive and the reader ends up taking over the paper, the collaboration has almost certainly exceeded the bounds of acceptable behavior. For example, a writer may brainstorm ideas with someone else before writing or act upon a reader’s general suggestions for revision. In this case, the writer is active. But the reader may not dictate, write, rewrite, or copy-edit the writer’s paper, or tell the writer “what to do.” In this case, the writer is passive. This level of involvement would constitute an infraction of Princeton’s academic regulations (and the writer wouldn’t end up learning anything, either).
All cases of giving and getting feedback require writers and respondents to exercise judgment, but perhaps the trickiest cases of all are those that involve writing that’s just difficult to read. Under no circumstances should the respondent “correct” the draft, but he or she may use the following strategies:

- **Read several sentences out loud and ask the writer to clarify the sentences’ meaning.**
- **Identify patterns of error and show the writer how to fix them** (for example, if the writer misuses commas throughout a draft, the respondent can point out the pattern, then demonstrate proper comma usage in two or three places. But it’s up to the writer to address the problem in the rest of the draft)
- **Model concrete options for how the writer might revise.** Modeling may involve providing examples from other texts (including the respondent’s own) for the writer to emulate or verbally suggesting a variety of ways to express an idea.

### Principle #2: Respond to the work of your colleagues as a reader.

Responding as a “reader” may seem like an obvious point, but giving feedback in this way, from the specific perspective of a reader or audience, situates your response to the work of others in the context of a dialogue or ongoing conversation. It is important to demonstrate to the writer of a paper that an actual person has read her/his work. Rather than “commenting on” a draft, consider “responding” to it. Emphasizing your reading experience will ensure that your comments gain currency with the author as this approach shows respect for the writer’s ideas and for the writer’s authority over her/his own work. Some examples of what this kind of reader-centered feedback might include comments framed in the following ways:

- **questions** (“I’m confused. How does this paragraph connect to the claim you make in the previous paragraph?”)
- **specific claims** (“The detailed evidence here is persuading me of your argument”)
- **coaching** (“I saw motive really clearly earlier in the paper, on page 3, but I’ve lost it here. Can you bring motive in again here as strongly as you did on page 3?”)
- **attempts at understanding** (instead of “that’s wrong,” consider a comment like, “tell me more about this. I’m not yet convinced” or “I’ve noticed this too, but what do you think about x?”).

### Principle #3: Remember that feedback moves you forward, not backward.

Writing is a very personal exercise, and we can get very attached to our own work. Sometimes it is difficult to see the value in using the feedback we receive from others, especially if we don’t feel like we need it or if the feedback isn’t coming from an authority figure. Feedback might also
seem discouraging because it feels like we need to go right back to the beginning and start again. Revision is a very good thing. No great writer pens an excellent first draft. Indeed, your thinking about a topic isn’t even complete as you write your first draft; the research process continues as you continue to write. No matter how much you might want to start and finish a paper in one night, a good paper needs to go through several (many) stages.

The amount of feedback you receive in the Writing Seminar might feel overwhelming at times, or even uncomfortable. In these cases, take charge of the feedback you receive: figure out what the advice is that you’re getting, and accelerate your writing process. Engage a new perspective; try feedback out. In draft workshops, for example, listen for themes in the comments you receive on your draft. If peers keep telling you that your draft “doesn’t flow well,” what does that actually mean? If you think that your thesis is obvious (and obviously brilliant) but your peers keep looking for your thesis statement, what does that mean? Feedback will move you forward; take charge of it!

**Principle #4: When receiving feedback, don’t be afraid to ask questions.**

Maybe you have received feedback in the past, from friends, parents, teachers or even professors that says something like “interesting,” “awkward,” or “explain.” This feedback isn’t helpful, because it doesn’t give us any information – it doesn’t tell us exactly what the problem is, why it matters, and how we might revise it (what, why, how). Take charge of the feedback you receive. Think about what kind of feedback you want to receive, specifically: instead of saying, for example, “I’d like some feedback on my argument,” consider a sharpened question like, “What’s one thing my paper is doing that’s getting in the way of my argument?” Set priorities for your writing: which issues are most important in terms of moving forward? Why do your readers think this? Here are some other questions you might ask your readers to consider:

- What do you think my motive/thesis is? Where did you find it?
- What is effective about my use of evidence, and how could I use it more effectively?
- Can you describe the structure of my essay? What are the pieces of it, and how do they fit together?
- Is there any place where I should provide more orienting information to make my essay accessible to the “intellectual community” beyond this seminar?

When we give feedback, it’s tempting to fall back on one-word responses like “interesting!” Think about adding a “because” to any one-worder you write on a draft: “This needs to be explained because….” or “this caught my attention because….”

**Principle #5: Input from others must be acknowledged in writing.**

Look at any piece of scholarly writing, and you’re likely to find a section or note of acknowledgment in which the writer expresses his or her indebtedness to anyone (including family members) who provided feedback or other kinds of assistance and support—intellectual, bibliographical, clerical, financial, emotional.
In keeping with common scholarly practice, you should include an Acknowledgments section or note. In a long work, such as a senior thesis, your Acknowledgments could take up an entire section—usually after your Table of Contents and before your first chapter. In shorter works, it could appear in a footnote to your title or as a note before or after your references. Below is an example of one student’s Acknowledgments (with names changed):

Acknowledgments

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