

Feedback: A Comprehensive Guide

Are you the type of person who dreads the moment a paper is returned with more red marks on it than words you actually wrote? If so, I want to help challenge your view on feedback so you can learn to be okay with, or maybe even appreciate, those dreaded red marks. Feedback can be an extremely helpful writing tool if you read, understand and use the information you're given properly.

Your First Draft

It's truly impossible to be perfect on the first try. In class we read, "Shitty First Drafts" by Anne Lamott. She went as far as to say that there aren't just second but even third drafts when you are trying to write successfully. First drafts are designed to receive feedback. You may ask why I'm giving advice on first drafts when the topic of this article is feedback, the answer is that writing a first draft and receiving feedback go hand in hand.

In order to receive feedback constructively you need to write a first draft that you're not that attached to. When I was writing my college application essays, I had to get them revised by my AP Literature class for a grade. I worked so hard on my first draft and thought it was perfect. You can imagine that when I got a lot of peer feedback I was not only devastated, but I was also very reluctant to change anything. I didn't really read the comments and decided not to make any big changes. I ended up not getting the grade I wanted and it turned out that my teacher didn't think I successfully portrayed my main message. Looking back at what my peers had written, they had asked me to clarify on what the main point of the essay was. If I had read through all of the feedback I was given and made the changes I needed to, my essay would have been much more successful. I however got so defensive about the feedback that I didn't really use it. Which leads me into my next point how are you supposed to react to feedback?

Reacting to Feedback

Imagine for a minute, you are in an argument with someone you care about. They are trying to explain why they don't agree with something you did, and how they feel about the situation. I learned in a previous Psychology class, Psychology of the Self, taught by Andres Martinez, that there are four major reactions to these types of arguments that lead to failed relationships. These reactions are called the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse; Criticism, Defensiveness, Stonewalling, and Contempt. What on earth does this have to do with writing an essay? Well, now picture your loved one as someone giving you feedback (professor or fellow student) and the failed relationship as failure to receive and use the feedback. Let me relate these Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse to receiving feedback, by focusing on the two that I believe are the most important; Defensiveness and Stonewalling.

- Stonewalling. What is that? In short, it's being unresponsive and ultimately ignoring what the other person has to say. A common response to receiving feedback is to simply just

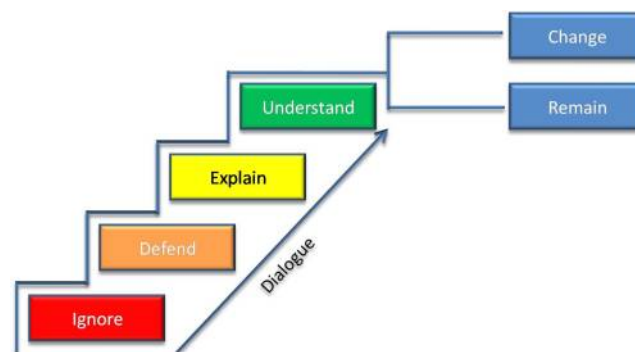
ignore it, like I did. As I found out the hard way, no matter how good you think your writing is, your reader has valuable insight as to whether or not you are successfully sending your message. The only way you would know if your essay is successfully sending a message is if you thoroughly read their feedback.

- Defensiveness. It's natural to want to defend your work. But this is the main thing we want to avoid. Just remember, feedback isn't an attack, it doesn't warrant defense. It's almost the opposite, instead of your reader attacking you, they are quite literally giving you the tools you need to become stronger. If you can look at feedback as an attempt to help you, not hurt you, it will help tremendously in your goal of successfully using feedback.

So, how should you react? You shouldn't, at least not immediately. Thoroughly read the feedback first, don't stonewall your reader's opinion. Also, read it with an open mind, don't get defensive. The goal isn't to react but to understand the feedback before you start to react to it. So, how do you understand feedback?

Understanding Feedback

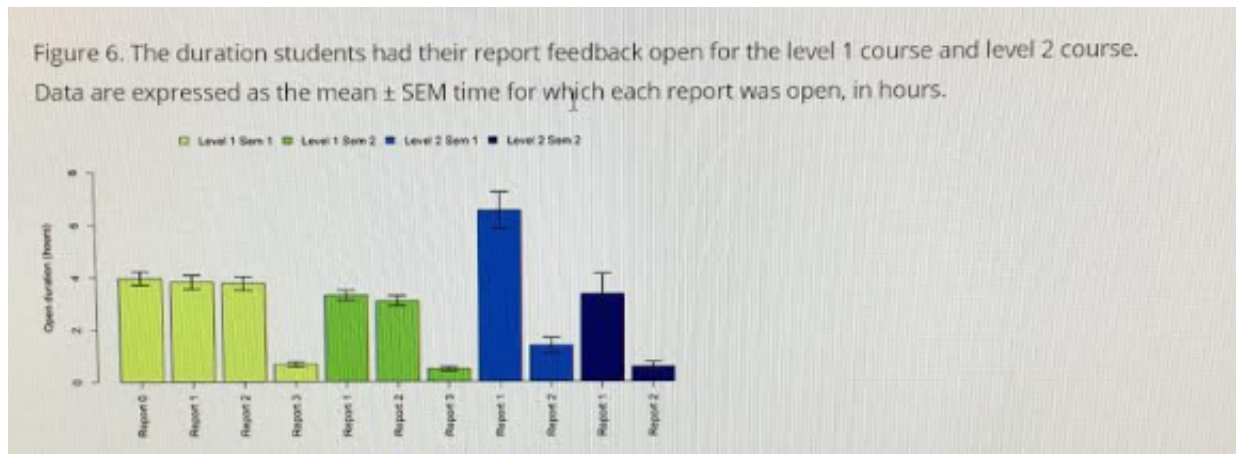
Feedback is an attempt of the reader to try and help you in your goal of successfully sending a message. Look at it as an opportunity for growth through collaboration. A crucial component of feedback is that you are getting information from the reader as to whether or not the meaning of your writing was perceived correctly. Analyze their comments, are they reacting to key features, or ones that you didn't find as important? Does it seem as though they understood what you were trying to say or did they miss the mark? Each comment they make is another tool they are giving you to grow and they are all important in understanding what the feedback means and how you can use it constructively. I believe this image done by Professional Skills Blog Magnusson Training & Consulting is a good illustration of the steps of receiving feedback.



This illustration is showing that ignoring and defending won't get you far, to grow you need to ask for explanation and try to understand. And then make a choice to stay the same or make a change. So, how can you take this feedback and use it?

Using the Feedback Constructively

The final and most important step. Using the feedback. It's not enough to simply just read the feedback. Keep in mind that this could mean making some big changes, for example cutting out certain paragraphs to add more impactful ones, or changing the way you explained all your main points so that you're being more direct. Take any piece of peer or professor feedback and use it to your advantage. One way to take full advantage is to spend a while reviewing it. In an article by Kirsten Zimbardi "Are They Using my Feedback..." they found that the more time students spent looking at their feedback significantly impacted their improvement. Here is one of the graphs from their results.



Although this graph is a bit hard to interpret, the results were very conclusive. They found that the longer students spent with their feedback the greater improvement they had on later assessments. They also found that the amount of time that students spent looking at their feedback directly correlated with the perceived importance of the upcoming assignment. In other words when finals were close students spent more time looking at their feedback, and thus did much better on bigger assignments in comparison to smaller assignments. They also found that students that had more experience with practicing good feedback using techniques, such as second years, did better than the first years on assignments because they learned how to successfully use the feedback.

All of this supports two very clear points that you should keep in mind when receiving feedback. One is that you should spend a lot of time with it, the longer you read it and try to understand what the reader is saying the better you will be able to make the proper changes. The second is that you should prioritize the feedback whether it is a big assignment or not. Feedback will help you no matter the situation or importance of the assignment. Overall, always remember feedback is meant to help you not only succeed in your current project, but to help you write better in the future.

Work Cited

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