

Feedback on Your Academic Writing

Receiving feedback on your academic writing is an important part of creating a stronger, more polished final submission. This handout outlines why this feedback is important, who and when you should ask for feedback, how to understand the feedback you've received, and how to turn feedback into revision. It will also address some common questions and concerns you may have about feedback in academic writing.

Why is feedback important to the writing process?

Feedback is an essential part of developing as a writer because it helps you better understand what you are already doing well and where you might need to grow.

One of the most valuable parts of feedback is that it allows writers to recognize their strengths. When someone responds to your writing, they may notice things you might overlook, such as a clear explanation, a strong argument, or effective organization. These moments of recognition could help you become more aware of what you are already doing successfully, so you can replicate that approach and build on those skills in future drafts or assignments.

Feedback is also important because it helps you identify areas that could be strengthened or more fully developed. When you write in isolation, it can be challenging to notice unclear ideas, missing transitions, or places where evidence might be needed. A reader can offer a fresh perspective and point out where your ideas may need more support, clarification, or other improvements.

Who can I ask for feedback?

There are many people whom writers can turn to when seeking feedback on their writing. One of the most common and valuable sources of feedback is your instructor. Instructors are familiar with assignment expectations and can offer guidance on how well your writing meets course expectations.

Classmates and peers can also be helpful readers. Because they are often working through similar assignments, they can provide insight into how clearly your ideas are coming across to an academic audience.

Another excellent resource is the Writing Center at your university. Writing tutors are trained to support writers at all stages of the writing process. They can help you think through ideas, structure, clarity, and revision strategies in a supportive, low-pressure environment.

When should I ask for feedback?

Feedback can be helpful at any stage of the writing process. Seeking input at different writing stages can make writing feel more manageable and help you make stronger decisions as you go.

During the **planning** or **pre-writing** stage, feedback can help you clarify your ideas and narrow your focus. Talking through your topic, thesis, or outline with someone else can reveal whether your direction is clear and understandable or if something needs to be adjusted before you begin drafting.

During the **drafting** stage, feedback is useful for checking whether your ideas are coming through clearly. At this point, readers can help you notice gaps in reasoning, confusing sections, or areas where more detail is needed.

During the **revising** or **polishing** stage, feedback tends to focus more on refinement and details. This approach might include improving sentence clarity, strengthening word choice, and correcting grammar and formatting concerns.

What types of feedback may I receive?

Instructor comments on academic writing often focus on two main types of concerns: higher-order concerns and lower-order concerns. Understanding the difference between these types of concerns can help you prioritize your revisions more carefully and effectively.

Higher-order concerns refer to the bigger-picture elements of your writing, like your thesis, argument, organization, and development ideas. These comments focus on whether your ideas are clear, logical, and easy to follow.

Lower-order concerns focus on sentence-level issues such as grammar, punctuation, clarity, and formatting. These comments help improve readability and polish your writing.

When revising your work, it is generally most effective to prioritize higher-order concerns first. Addressing larger issues like argument and structure first ensures that you are not spending time polishing sentences or details that may later change as you revise the overall content.

How do I turn feedback into revision?

After receiving feedback from a trusted source, it is helpful to approach revision in a structured and intentional way. Taking time to understand feedback before making changes can make the process feel more focused and less overwhelming.

First, read and evaluate all feedback slowly. Before making any changes, go through all comments from start to finish so you can understand the overall direction and meaning of the feedback.

Next, identify patterns in the feedback you've received. Looking for repeated comments can help you see which areas need the most attention.

- Notice if multiple comments mention the same issue (e.g., clarity, structure, or evidence).
- Group similar feedback points together.
- Prioritize patterns, since they often point to the most important revisions.

It is also important to be discerning with feedback. Not every suggestion will necessarily improve your writing or fit your purpose. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does this suggestion fit my assignment's instructions and goals?
- Will implementing this feedback strengthen my clarity or argument?
- Does this suggestion alter my authorial voice?

Finally, follow up if anything is unclear. Feedback is most helpful when you fully understand the comments you have received.

What if I don't understand the feedback?

Sometimes, feedback can be unclear. If comments are brief, use unfamiliar language, or seem to point in multiple directions, it can be difficult to know how to approach revising your writing. This is a normal part of the writing process, and it does not mean that you are expected to figure everything out on your own.

If a comment is confusing, the most effective next step is to ask for clarification. You can reach out to the person who gave you feedback and politely ask them to explain what they meant. You can also ask them to give an example of what they are suggesting. Instructors, tutors, and peers are generally willing to help you better understand how to apply their feedback.

Taking the time to ask questions can help you revise more confidently and ensure that the changes you make truly improve your writing.

How do I navigate my emotions when receiving feedback?

Receiving feedback on your writing can bring up a wide range of emotions, including anxiety, frustration, or discouragement. These feelings are completely normal, as you have already put a lot of effort into your work. Remember that feedback is not meant to judge you as a writer, but rather to support your growth and help you strengthen your ideas over time.

It can be helpful to remember that all writers, regardless of experience level, receive and work with feedback as part of their process. Writing improves through revision, and feedback is one of the tools that helps guide that development.

If you ever receive feedback that feels rude, demoralizing, or given in bad faith, you are *not* expected to simply accept it without support. There are resources available to help you process and respond to difficult feedback, including instructors, the Writing Center, and academic support services.

Activity

Read the sample feedback below. For all comments, decide whether it is a **higher-order** concern or a **lower-order** concern.

1. “Your thesis seems clear, but I don’t understand how your third paragraph connects to it.”
2. “Several of your sentences are missing necessary commas, which negatively impacts readability.”
3. “This sentence contains a subject-verb agreement error.”
4. “Your conclusion section lacks a clear organizational structure, and the order of ideas is confusing.”
5. “Your thesis is very broad and does not clearly make a specific argument.”

Answer Key

1. **Higher-order concern:** This comment focuses on how a paragraph connects to the thesis (organization and coherence of ideas).
2. **Lower-order concern:** This comment focuses on comma usage and sentence-level grammar (mechanics).
3. **Lower-order concern:** This comment addresses a one-off subject-verb agreement error (grammar).
4. **Higher-order concern:** This comment addresses the structure of ideas in the conclusion (organization).
5. **Higher-order concern:** This comment centers on thesis clarity and specificity (argument development).

References

The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “Getting Feedback.” *The*

Writing Center. N.d. Web. University of Wisconsin–Madison Writing Center. “A Quick

Reference Guide for Written Feedback.” *Writing Center*. N.d. Web.