

Using Feedback in Revising

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines how to use feedback during the revision process. It identifies the people who are most likely to provide feedback, and how writers can respond to it effectively. An example of how feedback can be used to improve written work is included.

This tutorial investigates the use of feedback during revision in four parts:

1. Revising Using Outside Feedback
2. Who Gives Feedback? When and How?
3. Responding to Feedback
4. Feedback: Example

1. Revising Using Outside Feedback

Revision — the process of re-visioning and rethinking an essay, including its ideas, structure, and support — doesn't have to be a lonely process. Writers should self-evaluate their work, which provides feedback from a personal perspective. However, one of the best ways to improve a draft is to have someone else read and respond to it critically.

Receiving and responding to external feedback are important skills for all writers to develop, but they are critical for academic writers. Academia prioritizes peer-reviewed work and participation in broad scholarly conversations — some of which can involve an entire discipline. It can be difficult to receive constructive criticism; most writers don't enjoy having their work criticized, perhaps harshly. However, writers must develop a "thick skin" and an open mind regarding feedback. It is the only way to make use of the opinions, insights, and perspectives of others on how to improve written work.

2. Who Gives Feedback? When and How?

In college courses, a number of people can give feedback to a writer, including teachers, graders, and fellow students. Writers can also ask for feedback from people whose perspectives they value (e.g., friends, family members, etc.). Writers in a professional situation may ask for feedback from bosses, colleagues and other interested people, or may receive it unsolicited.



HINT

It's usually better to accept feedback from a few sources, rather than many. Too few can limit the benefit derived from new perspectives, but too many can reduce a writer's ability to make effective use of criticism.

Feedback can be provided, and can be useful, during different stages of the writing process. You may receive written comments (e.g., notes written on a printed copy of your work) or digital comments entered in a file. Feedback may be provided as a summarized statement or letter, or during conversation.

No matter the form, feedback is either constructive, or it isn't. Feedback is usually not constructive when it is so extensive that the writer finds it difficult to make any of the suggested changes. Feedback that is completely *non*-critical — that provides no helpful insights into what the writer should work on — is also not constructive. Constructive feedback straddles a line between these two: It provides useful insights and ideas that can be implemented by the writer.

3. Responding to Feedback

It's important to keep in mind that writers are in control of their work when responding to feedback, and can choose how or whether to make any of the suggested changes. Listen to advice with an open mind, but don't feel obligated to take it (unless it comes from your boss, teacher, etc.). You can reject feedback from a superior, but if/when you do, make sure that your counterarguments support your methods and goals clearly and thoroughly.

Strategies for responding to feedback that does *not* come from a superior are not mutually exclusive. Writers, especially beginning writers, should make use of all of the following strategies.

Start the revision process with an open mind. Whether you are evaluating comments written on a copy of your draft, summarized in a letter or other document, or spoken during conversation, receive feedback gratefully, and with an open mind.

Pay attention to the kind of feedback you receive. Is it a "big picture" comment, or does it focus on specific ideas? Does it refer to your work's structure and organization, or is it feedback on style? Does it address your formatting or grammar, or focus on other technical considerations? Your response to feedback will vary, depending on the focus of that input.



HINT

Pay close attention to feedback regarding the "big picture" of your work.

Take the reviewer's suggestions seriously. They provide a different perspective on your work. Also consider how to address reviewers' concerns, even if you don't agree with them. Consider each source and comment thoughtfully, as well as how it might benefit your work.

Use brainstorming techniques to identify ways to incorporate new ideas. Brainstorming will enable you to evaluate (and possibly incorporate) feedback effectively. Student writers often receive feedback on style as they work to discover their voices. Feedback on technical details (e.g., punctuation, grammar) can usually be addressed quickly. Most of it does not require a lot of intellectual involvement from writers.



HINT

It's a good idea to respond to feedback on technical details last, during the editing or proofreading stage of the writing process.

Don't hesitate to ask for more feedback — from a previous reviewer or anyone else. When you think it will benefit your work, ask for clarification from a reviewer, or seek another opinion on your writing or on a previous reviewer's comments. After you've made changes, go through your work again with reviewers' comments in mind. Ask yourself whether (and how) you've addressed their feedback.

4. Feedback: Example

Read the following excerpt from an early draft of an essay. Try to identify problems; not only mistakes in grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc., but also structural and thematic problems, and "big picture" concerns.

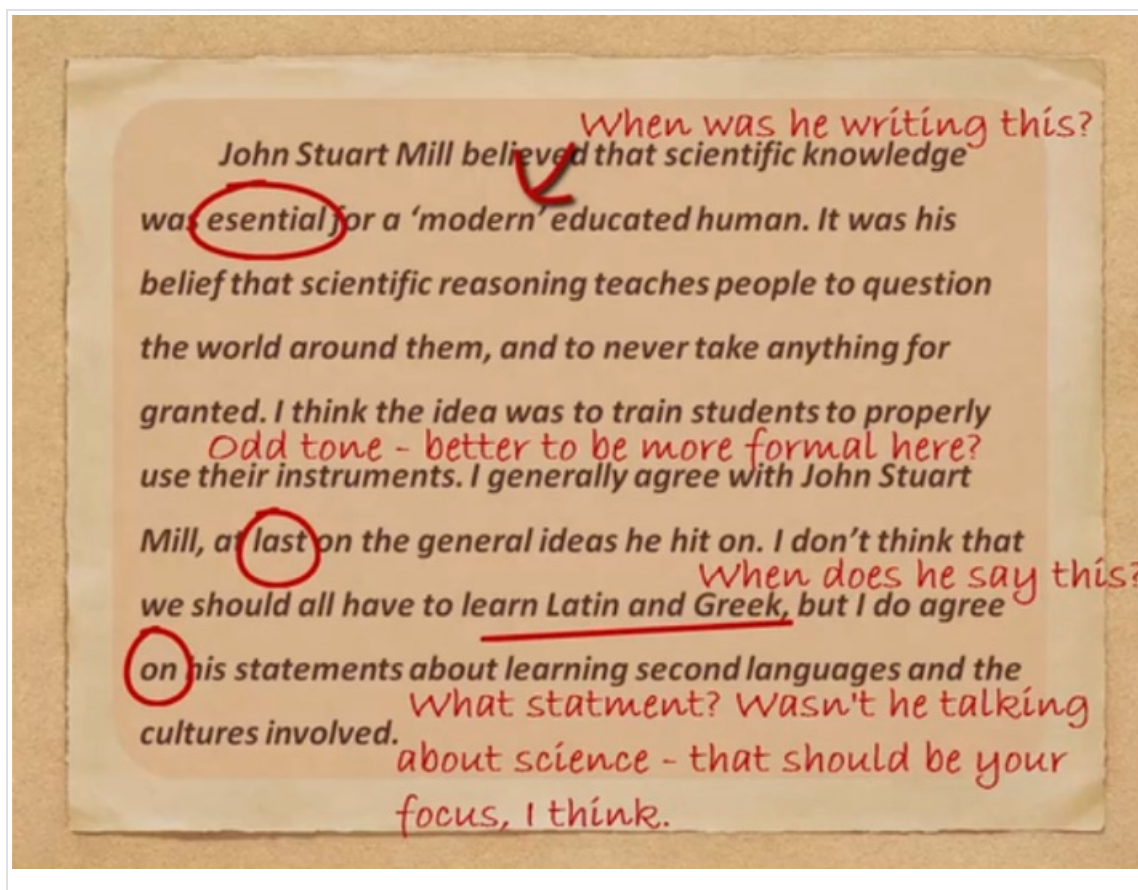


THINK ABOUT IT

Consider your evaluation of the following paragraph. What would you like to ask the writer? What suggestions would you make?

John Stuart Mill believed that scientific knowledge was essential for a "modern" educated human. It was his belief that scientific reasoning teaches people to question the world around them, and to never take anything for granted. I think the idea was to train students to properly use their instruments. I generally agree with John Stuart Mill, at least on the general ideas he hit on. I don't think that we should all have to learn Latin and Greek, but I do agree on his statements about learning second languages and the cultures involved.

This paragraph will benefit from constructive criticism. The following image displays the kind of comments a reviewer might make. It not only identifies possible typos and errors in grammar, but also questions how ideas work together. It even asks the writer how the conclusion of the paragraph connects to its main idea.



Because the entire essay is not available in this example, it's impossible to evaluate how this paragraph relates to the thesis, or to the "big picture." However, there are obvious problems with flow in the paragraph. Read the following revision:

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) believed that scientific knowledge was essential for a "modern" educated person. It was his belief that scientific reasoning teaches people to question the world around them, and to avoid taking anything for granted. He wrote that "Facts are the materials of our knowledge, but the mind itself is the instrument..." (pg. 396). The idea that education should be about developing a person's method of thinking — in this case the scientific method — came from Mill, and other thinkers of his time. This focus is even more important in the current era of computers and space shuttles, microwaves and nuclear missiles, than it was in his day. As Mill said, the benefits of the scientific method are present in everyday life, no matter what you do for a living.

The writer has taken the feedback he or she received into account, not only to correct typos, but to improve the development of ideas in the paragraph. As a result of the feedback, the point about scientific learning is made more effectively. Also, the tone of the revised paragraph is more academic.



BIG IDEA

Feedback helps writers by providing a different perspective on their work and the impact it has on the intended audience. Used effectively, it's a resource that promotes successful writing.



SUMMARY

This tutorial outlined how to revise written work based on outside feedback. It explored the types of feedback, their sources, and how feedback is conveyed. Tips on how to respond to feedback were provided, along with an example that demonstrated how written work can be improved by effective use of feedback.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall