

## Giving Feedback in Writing Groups

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This is an abridged version of: *"You Lost Me in the Third Paragraph: A Guide to Gracious Criticism:* <http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter/handouts/eiphand.html>

### Some Rules to Follow When Giving Feedback to the Writer:

1. Read the paper carefully, and read it through once before commenting.  
If, for example, you encounter a misspelled word in the first sentence, do not say, "Well, here's your problem -- your paper is full of mechanical errors!" Read to the end, then offer advice.
2. Ask your colleague about the intention and audience of this paper. To whom is she writing? For what purpose is she writing?
3. After you have read the paper through once, go back and mark places on which you are unclear. If you don't really understand the point of a paragraph, say, or if a certain example seems totally out of place, make a little mark in the margin and be prepared to explain what seems out of whack to you.
4. Remember that you are offering advice, not laying down the law. If your colleague balks at your suggestion, do not take it personally. One's writing is one's own. At the same time, if your colleague refuses to even listen to your suggestions, chances are she doesn't really want feedback, but approval.

### Some Questions to Consider:

1. What is this paper doing? Is it expressing an opinion, giving information, offering criticism concerning a work of literature? Does it attempt to persuade, enlighten, entertain? What is the objective of this paper and is this objective met?
2. Does the writer seem aware of her audience? Is she writing for herself? For her teacher? For her classmates? For the department of psychology at Princeton? For the readers of U.S. News and World Report?
3. Is the writer's style and tone appropriate to her subject matter and to her audience? If writing to persuade teenagers of the dangers of cholesterol, does the writer adopt a way of speaking that is at once informative and entertaining, or does she come across as stuffy, overbearing, boring? If writing about symbolism in *Huckleberry Finn*, does the writer adopt a tone that is too casual and loaded with slang terms, or does she adopt a style that is clear, concise, and knowledgeable?
4. Does the writer have a clear focus? Does she stay on track, or does she drift off into discussions of her personal life that, while entertaining, have little to do with the topic at hand?

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5. Is the paper well organized? Can you identify a definite structure within the paper itself, one that makes sense and serves the purpose of the paper, or does the information contained in the paper seem tossed in at random? In other words, does the third paragraph appear before the fourth paragraph for a reason? Could you construct an outline of this paper? Could the writer? If you are having trouble answering this question, try to construct an outline and see what happens. If you can't do it, there's probably an organizational problem.
6. Are the transitions between ideas smooth? Does idea #1 (or paragraph #1, say) lead logically into a discussion of idea #2? Or is everything side by side without regard to a sense of connection? Some good ways to bridge the gaps between paragraphs are with words such as: "however," "on the other hand," "unlike the previous example."
7. Is the paper punctuated correctly? Is it grammatically correct? If it is typed, are the margins correct? Look for things like subject-verb agreement, the correct use of plurals and possessives, the correct use of pronouns, etc. These are the last things you should consider. More important concerns include structure, clarity, focus.

Finally, be honest. If you're confused say so. A good writer is a writer who wants to improve. She or he will not be offended by honest criticism. Above all, know that your questions, concerns, and suggestions will assist your colleague in writing a better paper.