

Writers

CONNECTION

If You Don't Get What You Want

Tips for getting the feedback you need

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Our best writing is almost always our rewriting. As we search for ways to see the writing anew, we often invite other people to tell us what they see in the work—to give us critique or feedback we can use when revising. We don't always get what we want.

Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way*, highlights the value of feedback. "Pointed criticism," she writes, "if accurate, often gives the artist an inner sense of relief: 'Ah-hah! so that's what's wrong with it.' Useful criticism ultimately leaves us with one more puzzle piece for our work."

The key words are "useful criticism." Finding appropriate feedback can be difficult. For 10 years I've worked with writers and other artists as their creativity coach, so I'm no longer surprised (although my clients sometimes are) at how powerful and long-lasting the effects of criticism can be. The unrecognized damage of inappropriate feedback is a common source of writer's block and abandoned projects.

The writers' quandary is, how can we ask for and receive the feedback we need to make a piece of writing the best it can be without exposing ourselves to potentially damaging criticism?

The first step is to recognize that different levels of feedback are appropriate for different stages in the writing pro-

cess. The second step is to select our respondents carefully and tell them what levels of feedback we want. Finally, we learn to maintain our boundaries so that others respect them as well.

Know What You Need

Different kinds of feedback are appropriate at different stages in the writing process. For example, when a piece of writing is "hot," when it's fresh from the word processor, we don't really want it criticized. Like a loaf of bread just out of the oven, it will lose its shape and flavor if it's poked at too soon. At this stage, we want and need applause; it's too soon for evaluation.

Similarly, when a writer is exploring a new style or voice, useful feedback highlights what is working well. You need to know about missing words or misplaced commas when you're about to submit a piece to an editor or contest judge, but not when you're still developing the plot.

Only you know what level of feedback you can use at any given time. Many of us are so accustomed to taking whatever feedback we can get that we haven't learned to consider what we want or even what we need. You have the right, and the responsibility, to choose from these seven levels of feedback.

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If You Don't Get What You Want

you can at least learn how to ask for, and get, what you need

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■ The First Level

Respondents should always begin by offering congratulations for bringing the piece to the current state of completion. Let's not forget how much work writing is, and let's not be skimpy in our praise. One of the thrills of writing is finding an appreciative audience. Kudos are always in order.

■ Second Level

Next, respondents identify what they most noticed and appreciated. Because respondents use what therapists call "I language" ("I was struck by the sensory details," or "I really liked the description here," for example), there is no judgment implied about the writing.

■ Third Level

To highlight the strongest elements, respondents identify what they thought was particularly effective. Readers are encouraged both to repeat others' responses to give greater emphasis and to disagree to reveal divergent opinions.

■ Fourth Level

Respondents ask questions. Sincere questions about a character's background or motivation may help the writer develop the character. Thinly disguised criticism such as "Do you intend to have your character's dialogue sound stilted?" is obviously out of bounds. "Why did the character do that?" could be a sincere question or disguised criticism, depending on the intention and the tone of voice.

■ Fifth Level

Respondents indicate the areas they think need refinement. "I think you need to improve the dialogue, especially in the third scene," is legitimate at this level of feedback. Again, the use of "I language" makes it clear that these are opinions, not statements of fact. "Your dialogue is stilted," is still out of bounds.

■ Sixth Level

Respondents are invited to make

suggestions for rewriting. These are most helpful when phrased as "What if?" questions. "What if you show the third scene first?"

■ Seventh Level

Respondents are asked to read carefully and make line edits using standard proofreaders' marks.

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notice errors, not what's right,
and to criticize rather than praise.**

It is important to note that the seven levels are cumulative layers, not either-or choices. All feedback should begin with the first level, then continue through the second level and so on to the level requested.

If, for example, you're ready to hear feedback about where your readers think the writing needs refinement (fifth level), respondents first offer congratulations, tell you what they noticed and appreciated, highlight what they thought was effective, and ask questions before detailing where they think the writing needs work. And since you have not asked for the sixth or seventh level of feedback, they should not offer rewrites or provide line edits.

Ask for What You Want

Sometimes we get so caught up in the desire for a response, we forget to screen the sources of feedback. Choose people whose opinions you respect. Be careful around blocked writers; blocks are often the result of severe inner critics, and some of that caustic inner dialogue may leak onto you and your writing. If you notice workshop participants "scoring points" by criticizing other writers, don't open yourself for attack.

Once you've identified potential re-

spondents, give them a copy of the seven levels of feedback and tell them what levels you want. Ask them if they're willing and able to give that kind of response. If you're in a writing workshop, ask the instructor if she or he is willing to use this model or has another method for making sure students receive appropriate feedback.

Keep in mind that it may be difficult to give the feedback you requested. We all have been trained to notice errors, not what's right, and to criticize rather than praise. Others have the right to decline your request, but they don't have the right to give responses you've said you're not ready to hear.

If someone refuses to give feedback the way you've requested or insists on giving feedback you don't want, remind yourself that this speaks volumes about that person and nothing about your writing.

Get What You Need

Gently, but firmly, maintain your boundaries. If necessary, remind respondents that you asked for certain kinds of feedback and they agreed to stay in those limits. You can say, "I appreciate your interest and your willingness to respond to my writing, and the feedback that will be most helpful for me right now is _____. I'm not ready for _____ now. Thanks."

Honoring another writer's boundaries is vital and, at the same time, difficult, particularly if you've been in a group where the guidelines about giving feedback have been loose or nonexistent. The most exciting writing conversations often occur at level six. Our imaginations get sparked, and we start wondering how we'd tackle the challenge.

Telling someone else how to write gives us all the satisfaction of solving the challenge without any of the hard work, so of course we want to do that. But courtesy demands we do this silently unless and until we are asked to share our

ideas in level six or seven feedback.

As a facilitator of writing classes, I gently and continually remind students to remain within the feedback levels requested. I also find I need to gently and continually monitor my own urges to share "significant" insights. The truth is, those insights are much more significant when the writer gains them on his or her own. When a writer is truly stuck for ideas on how to fix something, he or she will ask. Until then, the writer has the right to his or her own "ah-hahs."

Know How to Refuse

There is a common (nonsense) notion that "serious" writers take whatever feedback is dished out, listen to it all the way through, and then sort it out later. To be polite, that notion is organic material good for fertilizing roses. It does not further the creative process of humans.

Don't be shamed into believing that "serious" writers take creative abuse. Serious writers recognize and respect their own creative process. They recognize that levels five, six, and seven are not appropriate at the beginning of the process and that they return to the beginning of the process every time they start a new writing task, regardless of how long they've been writing.

Serious writers know what levels of feedback they're ready for, ask for what they want, and then make sure they get what they need.

If your attempts to maintain your boundaries are repeatedly disregarded, don't just sit there and take it. Leave. I tell my students to call me if this happens to them, even if it's years since they've taken a class with me. If this happens, you need to talk with someone who supports you. Ask that person to give you exactly the feedback you ask for.

Always thank your respondents, even if they violate your boundaries. In fact, when someone is being intrusive or hyper-critical, saying "Thank you" in a neutral tone can be an effective stopper.

Get It in Writing

Ask your respondents to write their comments, and you should take notes so you can evaluate the feedback later. Stephen King's rule of thumb is, Give your writing to 10 people. If you get 10 different responses, you can safely

disregard them all. However, if six or seven people make similar observations, pay attention. Take action. Rewriting is a big part of the writing process.

If we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the feedback we really want is 10 to 20 minutes of detailed praise for all that is working right, followed by, "This is perfect. Don't change a thing."

Like the song advises us, we don't always get what we want. But when we try, when we follow through on the worthwhile feedback, we can get what we need. And what we need is usually a

combination of praise for the writing as it is and motivation and direction for the revision. ■

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DEALING WITH DAMAGING CRITICISM FROM YOUR PAST

Step 1. Acknowledge the harm done. As with any injury, accurate diagnosis is vital. When we're injured around our creativity, we sometimes go into a state of shock. While being numb can get us through the trauma, later it interferes with recognizing exactly how we were wounded so we can begin to heal.

Pursue any memories, clear or vague, that you have about being harmfully critiqued. Follow the clues: Is there a story you were excited about, then suddenly lost interest in? A piece you've wanted to do for a long time but never seem to get around to? Types of writing you think you can't do?

Step 2. Tell the story. Record as much as you can about the harmful incident. How did you feel about your writing before the feedback episode? When and where did it happen? Who was there? What did each person say? How did you feel about what they said?

Go a little deeper. What was each person's probable motive for her or his response? Did anything that happened then trigger embarrassing or painful experiences from your past?

Tell this story to a trusted friend who can help you explore these questions more fully.

Step 3. Take positive action in your own behalf. Start by expressing the old emotions now. Get mad and beat up a pillow. Or grieve and cry. Stomp your feet, pout, complain. Whatever it was you felt and didn't know how to express then, let it out.

Then take symbolic action in your own behalf: Write a letter of protest, contradict what you were told, put all the harmful comments you remember on a piece of paper and burn it, or throw darts at a picture of whoever harmed you.

Read what other writers have to say about critics (there are some juicy bits in *Writers on Writing*, by Jon Winokur). Remind yourself that even the authors you most respect received unfavorable comments. The point is not to let those critical voices silence yours.

Step 4. Stop telling the story. No wound heals if we keep picking at it. You'll know when telling the story stops being about acknowledging your pain and when it starts being about gathering self-pity and making excuses to avoid writing. That's when it's time to move on. Ultimately, the best healing (or revenge, if you wish) is to return to your writing.

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