

# The Art of Giving Feedback

Feedback starts with your response to the learner's writing. There are two simple questions to ask yourself, as the reader. What moves you in the writing? What did the writer do to provoke your reaction?

Then there are a few small steps to giving feedback that will make the writer want to write more.

1. Find something that works in the piece of writing. It may be a touch of humour or a detail that gives you some important information. It may be the organization of the piece, something with a clear chain of events, or incidents arranged to give you a surprise at the end. It may be something that reaches out and touches your heart or something that reminds you of your own experience.
2. Read it out loud so the writer can hear what you heard.
3. Tell the writer your response (e.g., *"I laughed"*; *"It made me sad"*; *"It cleared up my confusion"*; *"I could see a picture of what you were talking about"*).
4. Then, if you can, tell the learners how the writer made you respond as you did, so they can do something similar another time. **What did the writer do to have that effect on you?**

Still looking at that particular small example of good writing, here are some other questions that help focus the main question:

- How does it help the reader in the task of reading (i.e., good organization, headings, title)?
- How does it involve the reader in the piece? Is it calling up the reader's own experiences? Is it asking the reader to do some thinking?
- Does it appeal to the heart or to the head? How does it do this?
- How does it appeal to the ears (i.e., rhythm of the sentence, repetition of similar sounds, a break in a pattern)?

Make your comment as specific as possible. You can start by saying, *"This is a really good ending,"* but don't stop there. Go on to say what the writer has done to make it a good ending, for example:

*"You show your strong feelings at the end. That really connects me and my feelings to the information you gave earlier."*

*"I like the way you sum up the past and point to the future."*



*“When you said at the end that the dog was really a wolf, I was surprised, but suddenly everything made sense.”*

*“Your ending doesn’t give me any easy answers, but it leaves me with something to think about. I like that.”*

The more specific I am, the clearer I am about how endings can help a writer achieve their purpose in writing the piece.

The chart below gives you some specific responses to learners’ writing, responses that show learners exactly what the writer has done, as well as how and why that brought value to the piece. The responses are listed roughly in the order you might expect to find them as a learner’s skills gradually improve. However, don’t be surprised to find some very sophisticated bits of writing from very beginning writers, especially from those who are good at telling stories or jokes.

**The first column** suggests some things to look for in learners’ writing.

**The second column** outlines what you could say about it. It sometimes gives a detailed look at what the writer did; sometimes it tells how that affected the reader’s response. It explains the value of using the technique.

**In the third column** are examples from learners’ writings.

| What to look for | What effect does it have?   | Examples from learners  |
|------------------|---|---|
| Vivid details    | <p>Details make the ideas or the action clearer.</p> <p>They “paint a picture.” Can you feel, see, hear, or smell what the writer experienced?</p> <p>Details can also give more information about something the learner has already mentioned.</p> <p>(A good detail is usually the easiest thing to find in a learner’s piece.)</p> | <p>“My body feels like a grumpy bear.”</p> <p>“We seen five elk beside the road. There were two cows, two calves and one bull with big horns on him.”</p> |



| What to look for   | What effect does it have?  | Examples from learners  |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Clear organization | <p>Point out how the writer has organized the piece and say why it works in this case.</p> <p>Information given in chronological order is the easiest to understand.</p> <p>Weakest points first, followed by gradually more important points build up the case and make the last point seem more important.</p> <p>Withholding some information until the end may surprise the reader.</p> <p>Various film techniques can be used in writing as well, to the same effect as they have on screen (i.e., starting at the end of the story and circling back to the beginning; moving from a wide, distant view to a close-up, or vice versa).</p> | <p>“On my birthday Doug brought me breakfast in bed. Then I had a lazy day I talked on the phone with my friend in Wainwright. At night we went to my mom’s for a birthday supper. We had cake.”</p>                                      |
| Strong beginning   | <p>A strong beginning reaches out and grabs the reader’s attention. It prepares the reader for what is to come.</p>  | <p>“It was the scariest night of my life.”</p> <p>“It was really touching to hear Linda York speak.”</p> <p>(This was a good beginning because it led into a piece that was all about what Linda said and how it touched the writer.)</p> |



| What to look for | What effect does it have?   | Examples from learners   |
|------------------|---|--|
| Strong ending    | <p>A strong ending lets the reader know the piece is over. The writer didn't just stop because their phone buzzed.</p> <p>It leaves the reader with something to think about, or with feelings about the writing.</p> <p>An ending that echoes the beginning sets up a "spiral effect" that brings everything in the piece back into the reader's mind.</p> <p>Sometimes an ending wraps a piece up and tells the reader what to think.</p> <p>Sometimes an ending leaves everything open for the reader to decide what to think.</p> | <p>"Well, we got our message to the people."</p> <p>"So I am happy I made the step and went back to school." (First sentence: I took a big step to go back to school.)</p> |
| Suitable title   | <p>The title introduces the piece. It may prepare us for what is to come.</p> <p>It fits just right, not too broad or too narrow.</p> <p>It hooks the readers' interest.</p>  | <p>"My Camping Trip"</p> <p>"Silence and Noise"</p>  |



| What to look for    | What effect does it have?  | Examples from learners   |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Correct punctuation | <p>Correct punctuation makes the meaning clear.</p> <p>It makes the piece easy to read.</p> <p>It lets the reader concentrate on the meaning instead of on trying to figure out what is being said.</p>  | <p>"I am tired. I get tired of thinking. I am used to working. Can I borrow your thinking cap?"</p>  |
| Humour              | <p>Humour makes the reader laugh.</p>  | <p>"My brain is at home in bed I'll go home at lunch. And ask it to come back to school with me."</p>  |
| Repetition          | <p>Repetition of a word or a sentence makes the point stronger.</p> <p>A variation in the repetition prevents boredom.</p> <p>If the reader was not paying attention the first time, the repetition gives them a second chance to get the information.</p> <p>Shakespeare often repeated the important things three times, first in ordinary language, then in more poetic language, then in a rhymed couplet.</p> | <p>"Sometimes I wish it would take one day at school and then I would be out there with the working people making money! money! money!"</p> <p>"I was embarrassed. My face went red. I felt hot. I ran out of the room. I wanted to get my hot red face out of there."</p> |



| What to look for           | What effect does it have?   | Examples from learners   |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Variety of sentence length | <p>A variation of sentence length appeals to the ear. It has a pleasing rhythm.</p> <p>When there is a variation, we pay attention to the point made in the sentence that is different. For example, in a series of sentences that are long, long, long, then short, the attention is focused where the rhythm changes, and that should be where the important point appears.</p> | <p>“Well to make the long story short, me and her grew apart. I’m real lucky that we separated so gracefully and that I can still go and see her little boy. I still can take him to the movies, but her new boyfriend gets a little jealous about that. I understand that.”</p> |
| Use of conversation        | <p>Using someone’s exact words brings the reader into the scene. We feel like we are really there.</p> <p>A conversation may also slow down the action so the reader has time to be aware of what’s happening.</p> <p>It provides a break for the eye, and appeals to the ear.</p> <p>It provides a change of voice from the writer’s voice.</p>                                  | <p>“And then I heard the kids scream out loud, ‘What is that, Dad?’”</p>   |
| Appeals to the heart       | <p>Appeals to the emotions make the reader want to be on the writer’s side.</p> <p>That kind of writing uses emotionally charged imagery and ideas.</p>   | <p>“This time of year is really hard for some people because they can’t be with their loved ones for one reason or another. These people can feel lost and all alone at this time of year, which is sad.”</p>  |



| What to look for             | What effect does it have?   | Examples from learners   |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Questions                    | <p>Questions provide a change of rhythm.</p> <p>They lead the reader to think.</p>  | <p>“For my medicine wheel this is the way I look at it. Am I living in balance?”</p>   |
| Smooth transitions           | <p>Transition phrases or sentences can guide the reader through the piece, through time or space.</p> <p>They prepare the reader for changes in thought or emotion.</p> <p>Transitions can emphasize the writer’s points.</p> | <p>“Next”</p> <p>“Later”</p> <p>“When we got home ”</p> <p>“Meanwhile, in the living room”</p> <p>“On the other hand”</p>  |
| Quotations from an authority | <p>Quotations from an expert can back up the writer’s point.</p> <p>They bring a different voice into the piece.</p>  | <p>“I wasn’t sure what to do, but the doctor said, ‘Take her to the emergency ward.’”</p>  |
| Appeals to the head          | <p>Appeals to the head make the reader think.</p> <p>They try to get the reader to agree with the writer.</p> <p>Facts and figures help make the writer’s point.</p>  | <p>“I feel that animals have to leave the big city so they could be free from the pollution. I feel all animals should not live in the big city with all the bad pollution. They’re all safer in the woods.”</p> |



| What to look for                                      | What effect does it have?   | Examples from learners  |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Profanity or other possibly offensive language</p> | <p>Profanity gives the reader information about the speaker.</p> <p>It may make a person seem more true-to-life.</p> <p>It may offend some readers, but it can also emphasize the writer's point.</p> <p>Think of your audience. Do you want to offend some people? Sometimes you do.</p> <p>Do you care if they stop reading? Sometimes you care, and sometimes it is more important to show someone as they really are.</p> | <p>"He had things handed to him on a silver platter and so that made Richard a real stuck-up snob and self-absorbed asshole."</p> |

