

Reading Drafts: Guidelines for Constructive Criticism

I know many of you have been through this drill before in other contexts (say, English 104), but different instructors have different approaches. It's also probably the case that some of you *haven't* had much experience responding to work by your peers. So follow these simple procedures for fast, fast writing relief.

Since we're all theoretically sophisticated and understand that we're socially and historically constructed subjects rather than bourgeois individuals, we're all completely unruffled by criticism, right...? Uh-huh. Just the same, recognize that you won't be helped much if your peers tell you your draft was peachy-keen and you shouldn't change a word. (The most useless comment of all: "this really flows well.") Oscar Wilde once said that you should read your own writing as if your worst enemy had written it. Roland Barthes declared that the author is dead—meaning (among other things) that once your text leaves your hands, it takes on a life of its own, independent of your intentions. Try not to be *too* proprietorial, then; i.e., try not to identify too thoroughly with the consciousness that produced the ideas in your draft. If people are expressing confusion with what you wrote, take it as an object lesson in the slipperiness of language and the communal nature of meaning.

At the same time: despite the fact that we should all know better, most of us are still pretty heavily invested in our own words. So be tactful. Frame your reactions in terms of what the draft itself did, or didn't do, for you *as a reader* (as in "I'm confused by this sentence; I don't really see how it relates to the rest of the paragraph" or "I don't understand how the point you're making in this paragraph builds on that of the previous one" or "This claim you're making is interesting, but I don't feel as though the textual example you're drawing upon really supports it"), rather than leveling charges or barking commands at the writer (like, "Your writing is confusing," or "Yo, dimwit, you need a new paragraph here").

At the peer conference, you should be prepared to return the drafts you received from your fellow writers with some annotations made directly on each draft, as well as a separate page of written comments for each draft—comments that address at least a well-chosen few of the relevant concerns below. SAVE THE DRAFTS AND COMMENTS THAT ARE RETURNED TO YOU, AND HAND THEM IN WITH YOUR FINAL DRAFT DURING FINALS WEEK.

First reading: the Preliminaries.

1. Read the draft through once to consider **the level of your response**. What do you have to work with here? Did the writer provide you with a bulleted list of ideas scribbled in crayon on a brown paper towel? A professionally typeset essay with endnotes, appendices, and an annotated bibliography? Something in between? Should your comments be strictly of the Big Picture variety, or should you also address style and mechanics: specifics of language, structure, tone, and so on?
2. As you read, keep your eyes open for cries for help, both explicit ("Dear God, somebody save my baby!") and implicit (paragraphs that silently spin out of control, crash, and burn).

Second reading: Start writing.

1. Is there a clearly articulated thesis: that is, does this person explicitly state how he or she thinks this particular text relates to its cultural and historical context(s)?

- If yes: What *is* the thesis? Paraphrase it. Do you think that it's a useful and interesting take on the text? Is it really a *thesis*—that is, a disputable point that needs to be proven—or just a statement of the writer's *topic*?
 - If not: Can you unearth an *implicit* thesis? Can you help the writer figure out what s/he is saying (or is trying to say), and articulate it for her explicitly?
If you can't even determine an implicit thesis, then what's the most interesting/provocative/challenging idea in the draft? Can it be developed into an arguable thesis?
2. Does the writer support the thesis with textual references and logical reasoning? When all is said and done, do you find the essay, the evidence, and the reasoning convincing? Why yes, why no?
 3. If you're unconvinced, explain your objections. Is it a matter of fine-tuning parts of the argument, or do you have misgivings about the entire thesis? Point to *specifics*.
 4. Characterize the writer's "historicism." Are the connections between text and context convincingly demonstrated, or far-fetched and wrong-headed?

Third reading: Looking more closely:

1. Are there paragraphs? Are the paragraphs really paragraphs, or just random acts of indentation? Are the paragraphs *developed*—that is, do ideas progress in each paragraph from sentence to sentence, or do the sentences seem only vaguely concatenated? Can you follow the reasoning that links the sentences together within the paragraph?
2. How do the paragraphs hang together—how does the writer get from the ideas of one paragraph to the ideas in the next one? Is there a logical movement from idea to idea?
3. What would you need as a reader to fill in the gaps, whether between paragraphs or sentences? The addition of *transitional words* to make explicit the relationship between ideas? Additional sentences to fill in the reasoning the writer is pursuing?
4. Tone. Does the writer seem interested in the draft, or is she or he just "going through the motions"? Is there a sense of discovery, of excitement here, or is this strictly a tour of duty?

Fourth reading: Mechanics. *For advanced drafts ONLY. Not appropriate for first drafts.*

1. Check syntax. Is the writer using grammatical sentences with subjects and verbs? Is the language idiomatic—does it conform to the stylistic conventions of common written English? For instance, are the prepositions appropriate for the verbs or adjectives they're linked up with? Do turns of phrase accurately express the writer's intention? Is the sentence structure comprehensible, or are you reading sentences two, three, eight times to figure out what's being said?
2. Check diction (i.e., word choice). Keep a dictionary nearby, and check vocabulary you're not sure of.
3. What editing suggestions might you suggest to streamline verbose sentences, revise awkward constructions, clarify ambiguities?
4. Is the style appropriate (more or less) for an academic paper at an accredited American university? Remember, things are looser now than when you were in high school, getting your knuckles rapped with a ruler for using "I" in a paper, but there are still some conventions observed: avoid anything too "slangy" or colloquial or cute, self-indulgent stylistic affectations, sexist constructions, referring to authors by their first names, etc.

FINALLY, for ALL drafts (and this one is potentially painful): Is it interesting? Was it worth the death of the trees that provided the paper? Has it made you rethink the literary text in question? If not (or not *quite*), then does it have the *potential* to be interesting, worth the death of the trees, etc., etc.? How could the writer get it to that point?