Summary of Kinds of Responses

Here is an overview of 11 different and valuable ways of responding to writing and a few thoughts about when each kind is valuable. We will explain them more fully later and illustrate their use on sample essays. After you have tried them out, you can glance back over this list when you want to decide which kind of feedback to request.

1. Sharing: No Response

Read your piece aloud to listeners and ask: “Would you please just listen and enjoy?” You can also give them your text to read silently, though you don’t usually learn as much this way. Simple sharing is also a way to listen better to your own responses to your own piece, without having to think about how others respond. You learn an enormous amount from hearing yourself read your own words or from reading them over when you know that someone else is also reading them.

No response is valuable in many situations—when you don’t have much time, at very early stages when you want to try something out or feel very tentative, or when you are completely finished and don’t plan to make any changes at all—as a form of simple communication or celebration. Sharing gives you an unpressured setting for getting comfortable reading your words out loud and listening to the writing of others.

2. Pointing and Center of Gravity

Pointing: “Which words or phrases or passages somehow strike you? stick in mind? get through?” Center of gravity: “Which sections somehow seem important or resonant or generative?” You are not asking necessarily for the main points but for sections or passages that seem to resonate or linger in mind. Sometimes a seemingly minor detail or example—even an aside or a digression—can be a center of gravity.

These quick, easy, interesting forms of response are good for timid or inexperienced responders, or for early drafts. They help you establish a sense of contact with readers. Center of gravity response is particularly interesting for showing you rich and interesting parts of your piece that you might have neglected, but which might be worth exploring and developing. Center of gravity can help you see your piece in a different light and suggest ways to make major revisions.
3. Summary and Sayback

Summary: “Please summarize what you have heard. Tell me what you hear as the main thing and the almost-main things.” (Variations: “Give me a phrase as title and a one-word title—first using my words and then using your words.”) Sayback: “Please say back to me in your own words what you hear me getting at in my piece, but say it in a somewhat questioning or tentative way—as an invitation for me to reply with my own restatement of what you’ve said.”

These are both useful at any stage in the writing process to see whether readers “got” the points you are trying to “give.” But sayback is particularly useful at early stages when you are still groping and haven’t yet been able to find what you really want to say. You can read a collection of exploratory passages for sayback response. When readers say back to you what they hear—and invite you to reply—it often leads you to find exactly the words or thoughts or emphasis you were looking for.


Just ask readers those very questions.

This kind of response is particularly useful when you need to develop or enrich your piece—when you sense there is more here but you haven’t been able to get your finger on it yet. This kind of question gives you concrete substantive help because it leads your readers to give you some of their ideas to add to yours. Remember this too: What you imply but don’t say in your writing is often very loud to readers but unheard by you and has an enormous effect on how they respond.

Extreme variation: “Make a guess about what was on my mind that I didn’t write about.”

5. Reply

Simply ask, “What are your thoughts about my topic? Now that you’ve heard what I’ve had to say, what do you have to say?”

This kind of response is useful at any point, but it is particularly useful at early stages when you haven’t worked out your thinking. Indeed, you can ask for this kind of response even before you’ve written a draft; perhaps you jotted down some notes. You can say, “I’m thinking about saying X, Y, and Z. How would you reply? What are your thoughts about this topic?” This is actually the most natural and common response to any human discourse. You are inviting a small discussion of the topic.
6. Voice

(a) "How much voice do you hear in my writing? Is my language alive and human? Or is it dead, bureaucratic, unsayable?" (b) "What kind of voice(s) do you hear in my writing? Timid? Confident? Sarcastic? Pleading?" Or "What kind of person does my writing sound like? What side(s) of me come through in my writing?" Most of all, "Do you trust the voice or person you hear in my writing?"

This kind of feedback can be useful at any stage. When people describe the voice they hear in writing, they often get right to the heart of subtle but important matters of language and approach. They don't have to be able to talk in technical terms ("You seem to use lots of passive verbs and nominalized phrases"); they can say, "You sound kind of bureaucratic and pompous and I wonder if you actually believe what you are saying."

7. Movies of the Reader's Mind

Ask readers to tell you honestly and in detail what is going on in their minds as they read your words. There are three powerful ways to help readers give you this kind of response: (a) Interrupt their reading a few times and find out what's happening at that moment. (b) Get them to tell you their reactions in the form of a story that takes place in time. (c) If they make "it-statements" ("It was confusing"), make them translate these into "I-statements" ("I felt confused starting here about . . .").

Movies of the reader's mind make the most sense when you have a fairly developed draft and you want to know how it works on readers, rather than when you're still trying to develop your ideas. Movies are the richest and most valuable form of response, but they require that you feel some confidence in yourself and support from your reader, because when readers tell you honestly what is happening while they are reading your piece, they may tell you they don't like it or even get mad at it.

8. Metaphorical Descriptions

Ask readers to describe your writing in terms of clothing (e.g., jeans, tuxedo, lycra running suit), weather (e.g., foggy, stormy, sunny, humid), animals, colors, shapes.

This kind of response is helpful at any point. It gives you a new view, a new lens; it's particularly helpful when you feel stale on a piece, perhaps because you have worked so long on it. Sometimes young or inexperienced readers are good at giving you this kind of response when they are unskilled at other kinds.
9. Believing and Doubting

Believing: “Try to believe everything I have written, even if you disagree or find it crazy. At least pretend to believe it. Be my friend and ally and give me more evidence, arguments, and ideas to help me make my case better.”

Doubting: “Try to doubt everything I have written, even if you love it. Take on the role of enemy and find all the arguments that can be made against me. Pretend to be someone who hates my writing. What would he or she notice?”

These forms of feedback obviously lend themselves to persuasive essays or arguments, though the believing game can help you flesh out and enrich the world of a story or poem. Believing is good when you are struggling and want help. It’s a way to get readers to give you new ideas and arguments and to improve your piece in all sorts of ways. Doubting is good after you’ve gotten a piece as strong as you can get it and you want to send it out or hand it in—but first find out how hostile readers will fight you.

10. Skeleton Feedback and Descriptive Outline

Skeleton feedback: “Please lay out the reasoning you see in my paper: my main point, my subpoints, my supporting evidence, and my assumptions about my topic and about my audience.” Descriptive outline: “Please write says and does sentences for my whole paper and then for each paragraph or section.” A says sentence summarizes the meaning or message, and a does sentence describes the function.

These are the most useful for essays. They are feasible only if the reader has the text in hand and can take a good deal of time and care—and perhaps write out responses. Because they give you the most distance and perspective on what you have written, they are uniquely useful for giving feedback to yourself. Both kinds of feedback help you on late drafts when you want to test out your reasoning and organization. But skeleton feedback is also useful on early drafts when you are still trying to figure out what to say or emphasize and how to organize your thoughts.

11. Criterion-Based Feedback

Ask readers to give you their thoughts about specific criteria that you are wondering about or struggling with: “Does this sound too technical?” “Is this section too long?” “Do my jokes work for you?” “Do you feel I’ve addressed the objections of people who disagree?” And of course, “Please find mistakes in spelling and grammar and typing.” You can also ask readers to address what they think are the important criteria for your piece. You can ask too about traditional criteria for essays: focus on the assignment or task, content (ideas, reasoning, support, originality), organization, clarity of language, and voice.

You ask for criterion-based feedback when you have questions about specific aspects of your piece. You can also ask for it when you need a quick
overview of strengths and weaknesses. This kind of feedback depends on skilled and experienced readers. (But even with them you should still take it with a grain of salt, for if someone says your piece is boring, other readers might well disagree. Movies of the reader’s mind are more trustworthy because they give you a better picture of the personal reactions behind these judgments.)
Procedures for Giving and Receiving Responses

We've briefly summarized your choices among kinds of response. Now we want to emphasize that you also have important choices among procedures for getting responses. It's important to test these out, too—to see which ones are the most helpful for you in different situations.

Early or Late Drafts?

Responses are helpful on both early and late drafts; indeed, it's a big help to discuss your thinking even before you have written at all. (For very early drafts, these response modes are particularly helpful: pointing, center of gravity, summary, sayback, almost said, and reply.) At the other extreme, it can be helpful and interesting to get feedback even on final drafts that you don't plan to revise any more: You will learn about your writing and about how readers read. When poets and fiction writers give readings, the goal is pleasure and celebration, not feedback. (Keep your eye out for notices of readings by poets and writers in local schools, libraries, and bookstores. They can be fun to attend.)

Pairs or Groups?

On the one hand, the more readers the better. Readers are different, and reading is a subjective act so you don't know much if you only know how one reader reacts. On the other hand, more readers take more time and you can learn a lot from one reader if she is a good one—if she can really tell you in detail about what she sees and what goes on in her head as she reads your words. Also, it's easier to build an honest relationship of trust and support between just two people. (If you know you are working on something important and will want to get feedback at various stages, you can use your trusted readers one or two at a time.)

You can have it both ways too—getting the multiple perspectives of groups and the trust and support of pairs—by first getting brief feedback from a group and then dividing into pairs for fuller responses (or vice versa).

New Faces or the Same Old Faces?

If you change readers, you get variety and new perspectives. But good sharing and responding depend on a climate of safety and trust. Certain things can't
occur until reader and writer have built up trust, and that takes longer than you might think. Most writers find one or two trusted readers or editors, and rely on them over and over.

**Share Out Loud or Give Readers Copies on Paper?**

The process of reading out loud brings important learning: You can feel strengths and weaknesses physically—in your mouth as you pronounce your words and in your ear as you hear them. And you can tell about the effects of your words by watching your listeners. Reading out loud is more alive. But if your piece is very long or time is short, you will need to give paper copies. Paper texts give readers more time to read closely and reflect on your writing, especially if the material is technical. Remember, however, that if listeners can’t follow your piece as you read it out loud, it is probably not clear enough.

Perhaps the most efficient way to get the most feedback in the shortest time is to circulate paper copies around a group; at every moment, everyone is reading someone’s paper and writing feedback. (You have the choice of whether to let readers see how previous readers responded.) But efficiency is not everything; this method is not very sociable. You can also combine the two modalities by reading your paper out loud but giving listeners a copy to follow. (Computers and photocopy machines make it easier to create multiple copies.)

Writers have always used the mail to share writing with readers and get responses, but electronic mail and fax machines have encouraged many more people to “meet” across hundreds and thousands of miles. Some people use these media not just for transmitting pieces of writing and responses but even for “real time” conversation about the writing.

**About Reading Out Loud**

You need to read your piece twice. Otherwise listeners can’t hear it well enough to give helpful responses. But if you don’t want to read it twice in a row (which can feel embarrassing), there is a good solution. Have each person read once for no response; then have each person read again for response. Listeners need a bit of silence after each reading to collect their thoughts and jot down a few notes; this way no one will be too influenced later by hearing the responses of others.

Also, it can be interesting and useful to have the second reading given by someone other than the writer. This way listeners get to hear two different “versions” of the words. When someone reads a piece of writing out loud, that in itself constitutes feedback: it reveals a great deal about what the reader sees as the meaning, emphasis, implications, and voice or tone of the piece. Some critics and writers say that a set of words is not “realized” or “complete” until read out loud—that words on the page are like a play script or musical notes on a page, mere ingredients for the creation of the real thing, which is a performance.
Some writers get others to give both readings, but we think that's sad because you learn so much from reading your own words. If you feel very shy or even afraid to read your writing, that means it's even more important to do so.

**Responding Out Loud or on Paper?**

Both modes are valuable. Spoken responses are easier to give, more casual and social. And it's interesting for responders to hear the responses of the others. Written responses can be more careful and considered, and the writer gets to take them home and ponder them while revising.

There's an easy way to combine written and spoken responding. First, all group members give copies of their paper to everyone else. Then members go home and read all the papers and take a few notes about their responses to each one. But each member has responsibility for giving a careful written response to only one paper. When the group meets for sharing responses, the person who wrote out feedback starts by reading what he wrote (and hands his written feedback to the writer), but then the others chime in and add responses on the basis of their reading and notes. This method is particularly useful if there isn't much time for group work or if the pieces of writing are somewhat long.

**How Much Response to Get?**

At one extreme, you'll benefit from no response at all—that is, from private writing where you get to ignore readers for a while, and from mere sharing where you get to connect with readers and feel their presence but not have to listen to their responses.

At the other extreme, it's crucial sometimes to take the time for extended and careful response—perhaps in writing—from at least one or two readers. We urge you to create some occasions where you ask a reader or two to take your paper home and write out at least two or three pages that provide (a) a description of what they see (skeleton or descriptive outline, description of voice, and so forth); (b) a description of how they reacted (movies of their minds—what the words do to them); (c) what they see as strengths and weaknesses of your paper and suggestions for improving it. If your teacher asks for this extensive approach to feedback, she will probably ask you to write out your reactions to those responses, in particular whether you think their evaluation and advice make sense or not and why.

A middle course is to get two to four minutes of response from each reader. This won't give you the complete story of the readers' perceptions or reactions, but it will give you the most powerful thing of all: the leverage you need to imagine what your piece of writing looks like through someone else's eyes. Sometimes just one tiny remark is all you need to help you suddenly stop seeing your words only from your own point of view and start experiencing how differently they sound to someone else.
Ways to Help Response Pairs or Groups Work Better

When it comes to people working together on difficult activities (and nothing is more “difficult” than showing your own writing), there are no magic right methods. But there are some helpful rules of thumb.

First, remember that even though you may feel naked or vulnerable in sharing your writing, especially if it is an early draft, readers will be just as naked and vulnerable if they give you good feedback. To give accurate movies of the mind is a generous gift: honest readers are willing to be guinea pigs and let you see inside their heads. And this kind of honesty goes against many habits and customs of student life. Classmates won’t give you this gift unless you treat them with great respect and are very assertive about insisting that you really want good feedback. (As teachers, we used to shake our fingers at students who weren’t giving much feedback and try to cajole them into being “more responsible responders.” But that never seemed to help. We discovered we could get better results by turning back to the writer and saying: “Are you willing to put up with not getting feedback? We can’t make them do it. Only you can.”)

Try to avoid arguments between responders or between writer and responder. Arguments waste time, and they make responders less willing to be honest. But most of all, you usually benefit from having different and unreconciled points of view about your text. Don’t look for a “right answer” but for how your writing looks through different sets of eyes. And when readers disagree, that brings home the central principle here: You get to make up your own mind about how to interpret the feedback, how seriously to take it, and what changes to make, if any.

When working in groups, always make sure someone agrees to watch the time so that people at the end don’t get cheated.

Spend some time talking about how the feedback process is working. Try taking a few moments now and then to write out informal answers to these questions.

- What works best in your group?
- What is not working well?
- Do you wish members were more critical of your work? less critical?
- Which has been the most helpful to you, oral or written responses?
- Does your group work best with detailed instructions? with little guidance?
- Is there someone who always seems to take charge? or who doesn’t participate much? How do you feel about this?

You can share these responses yourselves and identify problems and discuss ways to make things work better. You can make these comments anonymous if you wish by giving them to another group to read to you. Your teacher may ask for these responses and use them as a basis for full-class discussion.
Final Note

Does this seem too complicated? All these kinds of responses and ways of giving them? There is, in fact, a lot to learn if you want to get useful responses and give them. But after you and your friends have tried out all these techniques and built up a relationship of trust, you can make the whole feedback process become simple. You don't have to decide on any particular kind of feedback to ask for; you can just say, "Tell me about your responses" or "Just write me a letter." You can trust them to give you what is most valuable. But if you leave it wide open this way before readers have practiced all these responding techniques, you often get nothing—or even get something hurtful or harmful. It won't take you too long to try out the 11 kinds of feedback, especially since you can sometimes use more than one in one session.