

SUMMARY OF WAYS OF RESPONDING

from Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, *Sharing and Responding*, Random House

Two Paradoxes of Responding

First paradox: The reader is always right; the writer is always right.

The reader gets to decide what's true about her reaction: about what she has seen or what happened to her, about what she thinks or how she feels. It makes no sense to quarrel with the reader about what's happening to her (though you can ask the reader to explain more fully what she is saying).

But you, as the writer, get to decide what to do about the feedback you get: what changes to make, if any. You don't have to follow her advice. Just listen openly – swallow it all. You can do that better if you realize that you get to take your time and make up your own mind – perhaps making no changes in your writing at all.

Second paradox: The writer must be in charge; the writer must sit back quietly too.

As the writer, you must be in control. It's your writing. Don't be passive or helpless. Don't just put your writing out and let them give you any feedback. You need to decide what kind of feedback (if any) you need for this particular piece of writing. Is your main goal to improve this piece of writing? Or perhaps you don't really care about working any more on this piece – your main goal is to work on your writing in general. Or perhaps you don't want to work at anything – but instead just enjoy sharing this piece and hearing what others have to say. You need to make your own decisions about what kind of feedback will help you. Don't let readers make those decisions.

Therefore ask readers for what you want or need – and insist that you get it. Don't be afraid to stop them if they start giving you what you don't want. (Remember, for instance, that even after you are very experienced with all kinds of feedback, you may need to ask readers to hold back all criticism for a piece that you feel tender about. This can be a very appropriate decision; stick up for it.)

Nevertheless, you mostly have to sit back and just listen. If you are talking a lot, you are probably preventing them from giving you the good feedback they could give. (For example, don't argue if they misunderstand what you wrote. Their misunderstanding is valuable. You need to understand their misunderstanding better in order to figure out whether you need to make any changes.)

Let the readers tell you if they think you are asking for inappropriate feedback – or for feedback they can't give or don't want to give. For example, they may sense that your piece is still unformed and think that it doesn't make sense to give judgment. They may think sayback or descriptive feedback would be more helpful. Or they may simply hate giving judgment. Listen to them. See whether perhaps you should go along: they may be right.

If you aren't getting honest, serious or caring feedback, don't just blame your readers. It's probably because you haven't convinced them that you really want it. Instead of blaming the readers, simply insist that they give you what you need.

What follows is a summary of the kinds of feedback [you can ask for from readers].

SUMMARY OF KINDS OF RESPONSES

from Peter Elbow & Patricia Belanoff, *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*
McGraw Hill

Here is an overview of eleven different and valuable ways of responding to writing-and a few thoughts about when each kind is valuable. 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 just 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 a nonpressure 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 rather for sections or passages that seem to resonate or linger in mind or be sources of energy. 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 in order 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.

4. WHAT IS ALMOST SAID? WHAT DO YOU WANT TO HEAR MORE ABOUT?

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 fingers 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 yet. Indeed, you can ask for this kind of response even before you've written a draft; perhaps you jotted down some notes. You can just 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? "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 comes 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 hereabout. . .").

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 is a way to get readers to give you new ideas and arguments and in fact 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.)