

occasionally be unclear, inaccurate, incomprehensible or difficult to respond to. Many academic writers can tell you about intemperate, insulting and unhelpful feedback that still sometimes comes from anonymous reviewers of international journals. You should be aware that not all analysers of your work will be motivated to encourage you to improve it, and not all of them will be positive enough to give you feedback that you can do something about. This makes it all the more useful to have positive writing partnerships in your professional life. The following section provides some preliminary advice about setting up supportive writing partnerships. You can also read about more detailed, contextualized approaches to doing this in Part II of this book.

### Setting up writing partnerships and some guidelines for providing effective feedback

Setting up an effective writing partnership involves finding someone who is prepared to spend time getting involved in thoughtful dialogue about your writing. You're most likely to be able to do this if you offer to read someone else's work in return for them reading yours. In setting up a partnership like this, as well as reflecting on how best to respond to feedback you'll receive, it is also worth agreeing ground rules for giving feedback. It might be worth integrating the following feedback guidelines into your writing partnerships:

- Give feedback that you think will facilitate improvement (Ilgen and Davis, 2000).
- As well as identifying aspects of the writing that could be strengthened, point out strengths that already exist. Be honest and specific with both your positive and negative comments.
- Ask the writer to be specific about the kind of feedback they would find most useful and also to specify the stage of development of the writing (Elbow and Belanoff, 2000).
- Differentiate between higher-order and lower-order concerns (Bean, 2001). Higher-order concerns could include whether the writing addresses key questions, is argued in sound and justified ways or is well organized and clear. Lower-order concerns include such issues as stylistic choices, forms of expression, grammar, punctuation, spelling and layout.
- Always write/give feedback in a way that respects the person whose work you are commenting on, and that recognizes how your feedback is likely to make them feel (Goleman, 1995).

\* PTO

## Exercises in retreating from your writing

This chapter has explored how important it is to see your academic writing from perspectives other than your own, but also of not being overwhelmed or paralysed by the feedback you receive. These exercises provide some practical strategies to help you to strike that important balance.

### Exercise 1: Contextualizing your work to enhance the feedback process

When working with a writing mentor or partner, try contextualizing your work. Prompts that might be useful in initiating feedback might sound like this:

- 'Before you give me feedback on this piece, this is what you need to know': e.g. the evolution and stage of my writing (first draft, redraft, revisited after a long time, unstructured, polished).
- 'These are the reasons I wrote this piece.'
- 'I have received feedback about a previous draft that advised me to . . . and these are the ways in which I have tried to integrate that advice.'

### Exercise 2: Deciding on the feedback you want

(Adapted from Elbow and Belanoff, 2000)

You can ask your feedback givers to provide you with different kinds of feedback. Select a piece of writing that you are currently working on, and reflect on which of the following feedback instructions would be most useful for you to give your mentor in the interests of progressing this work:

#### 1 Highlight the essential, central messages in my writing

Ask readers to identify what they think is the most important, central statement in your writing. If your readers do this, it will be satisfying if the centre of gravity that they have identified is the same as you intended, and interesting if they identify something different.

#### 2 Invite me to elaborate on particular aspects of my writing

Ask readers to identify what they want to hear more about. This can trigger your capacity to elaborate and build on the most interesting aspects of your work.

#### 3 Tell me what you know/think/feel about the topic

Even if they are not experts in your discipline, the knowledge bases, ideas and opinions of trusted others might help to uncover new angles or lenses through which to view and develop your writing.

**4 Tell me how much 'voice' you hear in my writing**

If your writing mentors are confused by this question, then perhaps ask them to tell you if they would know that it was you who wrote these words. This can help you to explore the extent to which you are developing an independent, confident style in your writing. As Elbow and Belanoff put it: 'When people describe the voice they hear in writing, they often get to the subtle but important matters of language and approach' (2000: 513).

**5 Be my writing champion**

Ask your critical reader to identify only the things about your writing that they think are good. This is a useful instruction to give someone at times when you're feeling fragile and tentative about your work. Asking someone to tell you what they think is good can boost your confidence at times when you need it. You can help your reader to do this for you by asking them to do things like build on, develop or brainstorm aspects of your work.

**6 Be my devil's advocate**

Ask your critical reader to identify only those things about your work that they think are weak or need more attention. You might do this at times when you're feeling robust and confident by encouraging your reader to doubt, question, 'needle', even tease you about your writing. This could give you some valuable routes to enhancing what is already good or to reconsidering aspects of your writing that require further attention.

**7 Summarize my writing**

Ask your critical reader to take a piece of your writing and sketch out a summary or outline of it. This can be very helpful if you feel your writing is messy or unstructured, and can facilitate your subsequent efforts to tidy, craft and clarify your work.

**8 Give me specific feedback on aspects of my writing (criterion-based feedback)**

Direct your critical readers to specific criteria that are concerning you. It can be particularly useful to get criterion-based feedback when you are producing later drafts of your work. Specific criterion-related questions could include: Is this clear enough? Is my writing simple enough to convey these central ideas? Is this section too short/too long? Do you feel I've justified my assertions in this section? Could you read this piece with a view to picking up misspellings, typos or grammatical mistakes?