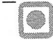

worth the time you are spending on it? Should you keep working on this particular article? If you are feeling good about the article, you can skip the following.

If you are feeling bad about your article, I hope your readers this week can reinvigorate your commitment to it. At this late stage, others can see your work more positively than you do, and you should trust them. If you are starting to wonder if the article is worth working on at all, ask yourself if the main reason you want to stop is because you are scared, tired, or bored. If so, push on! Those feelings will pass. As Bolker says, "Just as it's okay to be scared, it's also okay to be tired and bored, just so long as you keep working anyway" (Bolker 1998, 124). Don't be like Frodo in *Lord of the Rings* who spends his whole life making it to the volcano at Mount Doom only to decide not to throw the ring in (Lee 2005).

If, however, the reason you want to stop is because you have slowly discovered some fatal flaw in your article, and have confirmation from a trusted reader that the article cannot be salvaged, you have some decisions to make. If you are not going to work on this article, which one will you work on? You cannot simply stop writing; as an academic; you must always be working toward publication. You have two choices. You can select another article for revision and start work on it right away. Or, now that you have learned many of the principles for writing a publishable article, you can start from scratch on a brand new article.

If you make the decision to abandon the article and move on to another, don't feel you have wasted your time. Rather, you have learned something important about your own writing through the revising process. In my course, quite a few students do significant revising and then decide that the paper they chose was too flawed to revise into publishable quality. But many write to me later to say that the process of revising their own work taught them more than drafting articles from scratch ever had and that subsequent writing was much easier. Further, nothing confirms that you are a true writer more than having the courage to set writing aside and begin again.

TYPES OF FEEDBACK

This week is not about engaging in a formal peer review process, like that at journals, but about asking for the feedback of your colleagues, classmates, or advisors. Receiving and using such feedback is an essential part of becoming a good writer.

Unfortunately, one of the occupational hazards of being in academia is that our critical faculties wax and our supportive faculties wane. By the time we get out of graduate school we are a lot better at pointing out what people are doing wrong than in enabling people to do better. While there is a place for pure critique, the informal activities of this chapter are about getting feedback that can help you improve your article, not abandon it.

In this section, then, are instructions for giving feedback, not receiving it. One of the best ways to improve your writing is to learn to give good feedback and be supportive of others' struggles. So, how do we learn to use our critical faculties to enable others to write better and, eventually, ourselves? You can learn to avoid the five obsessions of bad readers and to embrace the practices of good readers. You can also have potential readers read the following advice, so that they approach your writing with the same spirit in which you will approach theirs.

What Not To Do When You Are Giving Feedback

The following obsessions prevent us from giving good feedback to our friends and colleagues.

Do not obsess about the author's bibliographic sources. A good reader does not simply name five, ten, or fifty additional books that the author should have consulted and cited. Your job is to focus on what the author does with what they have read. In a thirty-page article, no one can possibly cite everything on a topic. An article is not meant to be exhaustive.

Recommending reading can be a substitute for actually engaging with the content of the article and how the author has gone about putting his or her ideas together. Don't use others' research as a leaping off point to think through your own ideas. Stay engaged with their project and their aims. If you read a thirty-page article with twenty to sixty citations, don't let your only feedback be a long list of titles. Don't develop the nervous tic of academia to rattle off only loosely related titles. People have written amazing articles without citing more than three or four other texts.

"But, but, but," you say, "are you really saying we should never recommend texts? What if the author really has left out an important text? What if I just happen to know a text that would provide them with a perfect proof? I love it when my professor tells me what to read!" You can recommend reading, but don't gild the lily. Ask yourself if, given the size of the article, the author has a fair number of references to literature in the field. If he or she does, really work to resist the impulse to recommend texts. Learn to accept that no article will ever cite everything relevant. If he or she doesn't seem to engage with their field—remember the author must say something new about something old—then you can make some kind of blanket comment about this. "I don't think you have enough about what other social scientists say about motivation" or "There's a fair amount of scholarship on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's theory, you might want to cite some of it."

And, if you read someone's article and you get this excited feeling that you can really help him or her by recommending a particular text, go for it. If you get this sinking feeling the longer you read and you find yourself repeatedly thinking, "How can they possibly write on this topic without mentioning so and so," then mention that text. If you feel that some sources are needed to back a particular argument, say that. You don't have to suggest which ones unless you really know which ones.

Do not obsess about what is not in the article. It is your job to focus on improving what is in the article, not to insist that the author include what isn't in the article. A thirty-page article can only do so much; by definition, it will have huge gaps. No author can cover every possible approach to the topic in such a limited space. It is perfectly acceptable to write an article about racism in middle schools without addressing gender; to write about nineteenth-century British thought without mentioning eighteenth-century British thought; to write about Southern California without mentioning Northern California; to write about African authors without mentioning Nadine Gordimer; to write about German art without mentioning surrealism. To make a general comment saying that the omission of race or classical thought raises serious questions is okay, but again, it shouldn't be the majority of your comments. Don't ask for additional research or experimentation; instead, comment on what the author managed to do with the data collected. If it isn't convincing, then say it isn't convincing. Good readers pay attention to what is there.

Do not obsess about fixing the article. Because most of us have more experience writing than reviewing, we tend to approach other people's articles as writers. That is, as if the article was our own writing. We don't separate ourselves enough from the text in front of us, and we think it is our job to rewrite it.

Two problems result from not setting enough distance from others' work. First, you often start to feel overwhelmed. It's a huge job to go into someone else's writing and solve it. You start to experience mistakes in an author's work as an offense: "How dare they ask me to read something that is so confused? Don't they know I'm busy? How am I supposed to help them when they need so much help?" You feel anxious because you are not sure how to fix the writing. This leads to the second problem. Since you don't feel adequate to the job and, since this feeling of inadequacy is unbearable, you sometimes take it out on the author. The review is then delivered in anger and frustration, which is almost always useless to the author, who can't hear the advice because of the emotional way that it is being delivered, which sparks his or her own anxieties. That's why I recommend that you not focus on fixing others' work, but on giving a response. It is not your job to fix other people's articles; it is your job to give them your reading of it.

Do not obsess about judging the work. You need not consider yourself an expert on anyone else's writing. You are simply a reader. One subjective, slightly tired, slightly distracted reader. So, don't see your own position as all-knowing.

In practice, what this means specifically is, don't be harsh. Be kind when you are reading others' work and your own. You shouldn't, of course, praise everything but you should avoid phrasing your criticisms in ways that are harsh and unhelpful. I mean such words as "sloppy," "incoherent," "nonsense," "ridiculous," "boring"—and I cite here just a few of the words I have seen on the margins of my own papers over the years.

Students have told me that professors have written on their papers "hackneyed," "rubbish," "tedious," "hokey," "fake," and (I don't know why I find this so shocking after all the rest) "shit." Such comments simply aren't helpful. Remember not to judge the article (it isn't a contest), but to give feedback according to your own subjective views.

It can be particularly difficult to avoid being a judge when you do not agree politically with the content of someone else's article. If you find someone else's work disturbing, you can always excuse yourself. "I just don't think I would be a good reader for your article deconstructing the poetry of this openly racist writer." That's all you need to say, and there is no reason for either side to feel bad. You are not obligated to read disturbing things. If you can't give feedback on an article at this initial stage without prejudice or emotion, best to leave it to others. If, however, you really disagree with the author's topic or approach and want to take it on, make a concerted effort to remember that you are not a judge and that it is your job to provide a response. Every argument has flaws; point out where the argument is not working on the author's own terms. Lee Bowie, a logic professor of mine, used to say, "It is difficult to convince individuals that their premises are wrong. It is easier to show them how their premises do not lead to their conclusions."

What To Do When You Are Giving Feedback

So, if those are the rules on how to avoid being a bad reader, how do you go about being a good one?

Start with the positive. A little bit of sugar makes the medicine go down. A student once told the class that she had two advisors. One she liked and did everything she recommended; the other she disliked and resisted everything she recommended. Why? The student commented,

> I realized that the reason I liked the one and disliked the other had nothing to do with the criticism itself. In fact, the one I disliked tended to have fewer critical things to say than the other. But the advisor I liked always started off enthusiastically, she always loved the paper, thought it was a great project, was sure it would be published, and then would give me a long list of what was wrong with it. But because she had "bought in," because I felt like she had signaled she was on my side, I listened to her and I walked away feeling encouraged. The other advisor always started off with the problems. It just felt so discouraging, "well, you've really got to work on your structure and you didn't cite these three people I told you to cite and you really should learn APA style better." At the end, she would say, "But, it's a very solid project and I think you are doing good work." By then, it just seemed like a kiss off, like bribery, like I was a little kid who could be bought off.

But why would she feel this way when the second advisor's criticisms weren't as wholesale as the first advisor? The student said, "What made

the difference was that the first advisor always started off positive. And what's funny is that, even knowing this was the difference didn't help; I just never could quite hear the second advisor as well as I could the first." I have found this to be true for many people. One of the biggest steps you can make toward being a useful reader is to start off with the positive.

Be specific. However, when starting with the positive, make sure it's specific. Vague praise such as "Good paper!" is not enough. Most authors in the position of getting feedback are like patients waiting for the doctor to give them the results of their health test. As soon as the doctor walks into the room, the patient is trying to read her expression and her words for catastrophic news. For some reason, generalities inspire fear: "She just said that I'm looking good, that means I have something fatal!" Starting with a specific positive—I really like your argument about x, I thought your conclusion was really strong—lets the author know that you are being sincere, not just placating them until you get around to delivering the bad news that "you should never pick up a pen again."

If you feel that you do have a solution, that you do know something specific that would improve the article, be clear about it. Nothing is worse than someone who reads your work and tells you something is wrong with it but they aren't sure what it is. "I mean, it's a really good article, but, I don't know, something about it doesn't quite hang together, you know?" Likewise, don't tell someone, "Your writing style needs a lot of work," as this is vague and unhelpful. Say instead, "You might think about working on making your sentences more active and less passive." In delivering criticism, be purposeful and clear. This is the great balancing act of reviewing, humble but firm, respectful but sharp.

Focus on giving a response. The writing research says that the most helpful review you can give another writer is to tell them what you understood their article to say (Elbow 1973; McMurry 2004). You don't have to tell them what's wrong with it or how it should be changed to be correct. You only have to tell them: "I understood this, I didn't understand this, it seemed like your argument was this, you seemed to say that your article is a contribution because of this." If you focus on giving a response rather than on offering solutions, it will help you to be respectful of the author's person and intent. They are not you; they do not put things the way you would. And they do not have to agree with you or accept what you are saying to them.

Continuing on this theme, I believe that what is helpful for an author is not so much telling them what is wrong and how to fix it, but marking what made you stop. In other words, ideally, what a reader offers is a marker of what they have noticed, what stood out. What they say about what they noticed can sometimes be less important than the fact that they have identified a section to be addressed. Where did you have to reread the sentence or paragraph several times? Or, where did you stop because you thought, wow, that's really good! Just letting the author know these moments is helpful. For instance, sometimes it is exactly what someone

praises that needs to go. That is, because you marked it the author realized that it sticks out, it is not like the rest, or it's over the top. Sometimes you mark where you stumbled and the author will realize that actually nothing is wrong there, it is the paragraph before that is the problem. In summary, this is the response approach to feedback, where you are not attempting to solve problems, but merely to identify where you as a reader had problems.

Always suggest. If you feel that you do have a solution, that you do know something specific that would improve the article, something that goes beyond response, frame it as a suggestion. Again, the work is not your own, you are not the expert on it, so all you can do is make suggestions. Admit your limitations and don't invent advice on material that is beyond your knowledge.

Copyeditors are trained to ask the author questions instead of telling them what to do. The difference between "Redundant." and "Redundant?" may not seem like a big difference, but that little question mark can prevent the criticism from making such a large dent in the author's ego. The period places you as the authority; the question mark places the author as the authority. "Sentence fragment. Rewrite?" or "Relevance?" suggests that it is possible that this is not an error but a choice on the part of the author, which it may be. All we can offer is our opinion on what works for us and what doesn't.

Focus on the macro. Most readers get distracted by the small stuff. You will become known as a good reviewer if you can stay focused on the big stuff. Does the article have an argument? Is that threaded throughout? Just focusing on the structure of the article can be extremely helpful to authors. Three solid observations about macro aspects of the article—its argument, evidence, structure, findings, or methods—are often worth dozens of smaller observations about grammar and punctuation. In these early stages, try to think about the whole and the logical flow of the piece. Most people can't absorb a number of comments at one time.

Spend the time. It takes two to five hours to read and comment on another's article thoroughly. If you haven't done much commenting before, it can take as many as eight to twelve hours.

What to Do When You Are Getting Feedback

Now let's leap over to the other side. How does one go about being a good recipient of feedback? How does one survive the process?

Give instructions. When you hand your article to another, let that reader know what kind of feedback you need. If you are about to send the article to a journal, you can say that you are looking just for a last check for typos or egregious errors; you aren't at a place where you can absorb much else. If you are having trouble with your methods section, ask them to focus on that section. Feel free to say that you are not currently looking for line editing, spelling and grammar correction, but attention to more macro issues. Or, vice versa.

Separate the delivery from the message. Many people are bad at giving criticism—they don't start with the positive, they get angry, they get frustrated. Try to ignore the emotion with which comments or suggestions are delivered. If you can stay calm and refuse to take any comments personally, you will be better able to evaluate the criticisms on their own merits. Criticism delivered in a hostile manner can still be correct; criticism delivered in a kind manner can still be wrong. You have to learn to sift the useful from the useless without reference to its delivery method. "Remember that the same person can be absolutely right about certain aspects of a piece and dead wrong about others" (Edelstein 1991, 13).

Listen, don't talk. A good practice when receiving criticism of your writing is to be silent. Just listen and take careful notes. Later you can decide which criticisms are useful or not; for now, just make sure that you understand clearly what the criticism is. It's easy to get swept up in defending your work instead of listening. But even if you orally convince others of your point, your defense still isn't on the page, which is where it needs to be. In fact, some writing groups have a rule that those being critiqued cannot speak until everyone has given their opinion. You don't have to go this far, but you should be listening more than you are talking. If you are working in a group, this allows you to have the wonderful experience of hearing others defending your work for you.

Take advantage. Every criticism is an opportunity for you as to explain your ideas more clearly. So, don't think, "What an idiot! Anyone smart would get that sentence." If your reader stumbles, use that feedback to clarify your writing.

You are the final authority on your own writing. You don't have to do anything anyone tells you to do, no matter how hard he or she pushes. Only make changes that you understand and that make sense to you. Once you really believe that you are the final judge of your writing, you can be more open to others' comments and suggestions.

Interestingly, the more famous you get, the less feedback you get. A student in one of my classes told us a story about her participation in a graduate student journal. They reviewed submissions anonymously and as a group. Everyone read all the articles, they then debated their strengths and weaknesses, and had someone draft a letter with the various recommendations. Only after doing so did they look at the names. On one occasion, they found that a submission was from an extremely famous scholar. The article was quite problematic, however, clearly a first draft. The students debated what to do and then decided, courageously, to proceed as they normally did and send off the recommendations. The scholar wrote back to them almost immediately, saying that it had been years since he had received detailed feedback and he was very grateful to them! He revised the article as suggested and resubmitted it. So, be glad that you are in a place where people still critique your work!

EXCHANGING YOUR ARTICLES

This week we are going to focus on giving and getting feedback. It's important to do both this week because in the process of giving feedback, you learn something about revising your own work. The tools you will learn can be used on your own writing.

Day 1: Reading the Workbook

On the first day of your writing week, you should read the workbook up to this page and answer all the questions posed in the workbook up to this point. Then work on any tasks remaining from previous weeks or on your own list of tasks to accomplish.

Day 2: Sharing Your Article and Getting Feedback

Sharing with professors. If possible, you want to have someone in your field read the article as it stands. If a professor recommended you pursue publication, you should ask him or her to read the article. As noted in the earlier section about picking a paper, a faculty member can save you tremendous amounts of time and put you way ahead of the game with a few good reading recommendations and some suggestions on structure and argument. If you feel anxious about presenting yourself as someone aspiring to publication, tell the professor that you are meeting merely to get advice on revising. You do not have to tell the professor that you have an eye on publication. Then, if the meeting goes well, you can relate your intention.

Sharing with colleagues. Find someone who is willing to do an article exchange with you. Exchange reviews are better than solo reviews because those who are about to be critiqued tend to be kinder in their own critiques. Then, get together in a place where you won't be interrupted and hand each other your article for reading right then. When you give an article to someone to read while alone, it can be difficult for him or her to get around to reading it, so why not make it social and read the article when together?

Once you have exchanged articles, then follow the reading process below. The reason for this particular process is to train readers to keep some distance from the article and not get too wrapped up in it. The reader's job is to identify problems, not try to solve them.

- Tell each other what kind of feedback you each need at this point in the writing process.
- Taking up the other's article, read it through once without a pen in your hand. Do not make any marks on the article, just familiarize yourself with it. Don't get distracted by the small stuff, you are trying to keep the whole in mind. (30–60 minutes)

- Then, go back to the beginning and pick up your pen. Go through the whole article putting a check mark next to whatever is good, clear, vivid, or compelling. You can put a check next to a whole paragraph, a sentence, a word, an example, a heading, whatever you think is good. If you want, you can write down next to the check what you liked about that part. (20 minutes)
- Then, go back to the beginning and circle the unclear, what you do not understand fully, would you would like to know more about, what could be improved. (30 minutes)
- Then, turn over the article and on the back page write a summary of what you understood the article to be about. (5 minutes)
- Then, go over your marks with the author. First, describe what you liked about the article in general. Starting with the positive is essential. Then, go over your checks and circles and explain what you liked or what caused you to stumble. If the author wants to work through possible solutions with you, that's fine, but don't feel you need to have solutions. Be sure to give your summary to the author so they can see what you took away from the article. This allows them to adjust it accordingly.
- If the author starts explaining aspects of the article, try to take notes as the author talks. These notes can help the author later.

Sharing with students. Don't assume that someone has to be an expert to help you. The research shows that even inexperienced writers can catch problems with tense, transitions, spelling, facts, and so on (Willis 1993, 56). Although professional editors are great, take advantage of the (free) resources you have.

On the next page is a form you can use if you want to be sure that your reader comments on all relevant aspects of your article.

Day 3: Making a List of Remaining Tasks

If you must wait for your readers to get back to you with their comments, this is a good time to take stock of where you are in the process of revising the article and what remains to be done. If you haven't sent out your query letter yet (see the advice in Week 4), now is a good time to do so.

Days 4 and 5: Revising Your Article According to Feedback

Follow the advice earlier in the chapter about using feedback and consult the relevant chapters in the workbook as you revise in response to the feedback you have received.

Feedback Form

These questions will help you to comment on the article you are reviewing. Your answers should give the author a guide in revising his or her work. You may not find all the questions relevant to reviewing the article that you are reading; use what is useful. The General series of questions are mine; the rest, which are more evaluative, are direct from a form that the journal *Cultural Anthropology* gives to its reviewers.

General

- What are the strengths of this article?
- Does the author state the article's topic?
- What is the topic of the article in three or four words?
- Does the author state the argument of the article early and clearly?
- What is the argument of the article (so far as you understand it)?
- Who is the audience?

Content

- Does the first sentence draw the reader in? If not, what might make it better?
- Does the author establish the significance or relevance of the article? If not, where might this be done?
- Does the author raise questions that go unanswered? If so, specify one.
- Were any parts of the article redundant or not relevant? If so, specify where.

Flow

- Does the ending circle back to the beginning? If not, specify what might tie it together.
- Are there any unclear or missing transitions? If so, specify one.
- Was there any section where you lost interest? If so, specify what might have held your interest better there.

Other

- Did you feel the structure of the article could be clearer or stronger? If so, specify how.
- Could the author's argument be better supported? If so, specify where.
- Does the article have any blind spots? If it does, specify one.
- Did you notice any errors in sources, dates, quotations, facts, or proper names? If so, note them on the article.
- What did you find most intriguing about this article?