

How to give great feedback and look good doing it - Tipsheet

Tips for giving feedback

- **Read your recipient.** Who is this doer? A stranger, coworker or friend? What do you know about them? How do they handle criticism?
- **Focus on the project, not the person.** Make elements of the project the subject of your sentences, not the recipient of your feedback.
 - Not: "You're writing is really confusing and you've left out mentioning XYZ altogether."
 - Instead: "I think ABC needs clarifying. It's a little confusing at the moment. And I don't see any mention of XYZ, which I think would help."
 - Use "I" statements when you're stuck. "I feel like the lines are too thick. I think they're too distracting. How would you feel about trying a two-pixel line instead of four?"
- **Point out strengths along with areas for improvement.** Try the ol' PIP (or sandwich) method: Positive, Improvement, Positive.
 - Don't think of "positive" as "compliment," think of it as a "strength."
 - Strengths, areas of improvement, then either summation of strengths or what could be gained if improvement is made.
 - This method gets a lot of flack, but starting off with positive comments can build rapport and let the doer know you are on their side.
 - Strengths don't have to be long-winded or exaggerated: "Really strong lede and first paragraphs, but I'm confused in paragraph 3 when it discusses XYZ. I think if you clarify that, it'll be a really solid piece."
 - Be specific.
 - If you can't think of a single strength, say something encouraging about the overarching concept, "I'm glad you're working on this," or "I'm excited about this project. I think it has a lot of potential."
 - As your rapport with someone builds and trust is gained, you can drop the formulaic approach and be more direct with Improvements.
- **Talk about actionable items.** Discuss concrete things that can actually be improved upon. It's harder to understand how to make a page feel happier or make a button seem more clicky.
- **Be direct and specific.** Don't expect doers to pick up on hints or see your vision. Tell the doer exactly what you want to see, especially if you are a manager, editor or supervisor.
- **Don't dictate.** Make the criticism a conversation, not a directive. Give doer the opportunity to ask questions as needed and even push back or disagree with things. Explain what you'd like to see changed, and follow up with, "What do you think?" And really listen.
- **Understand the journey.** Ask the doer about his or her approach and listen to why he or she made these particular choices.

- **Scout out a neutral environment.** If applicable/possible, find a quiet space to have the conversation. Consider a private message or email instead of a public note.
- **Be warm and empathetic.** Make eye contact. At the least, deliver criticism in a neutral, matter-of-fact tone. Don't sound apologetic, and don't get too wordy if you feel awkward.
- **Know when to stop.** If there is too much to work on, consider breaking your feedback up into a few iterations. Let the doer revise and come back to you for more feedback.
- **Make sure you're on the same page before you leave.** End by asking the doer if your feedback makes sense, and he or she can envision steps forward.
- **Use tools to stay organized and on-track.** Consider using a Trello board (or similar app) to log actionable items. These boards are neutral and are good for projects that need a lot of specific work. Read your recipient - who is this doer? A stranger, coworker or friend? What do you know about them? How do they handle criticism?

Tips for receiving feedback

- **Have a plan.** Simply putting a PDF on a screen and asking "What do you think?" isn't enough. That opens up the meeting to go in any number of directions and doesn't make the group feel confident providing input.
- **Introduce your project.** Provide necessary context as to why this project exists and what its goals are.
- **Explain which stage of the process you are in.** Remind your audience what problem you're solving and what stage of the process you're in. If you're in the middle, include a brief reminder of what the previous stage was, and what you've done to address the feedback from that stage.
- **Explain your rationale.** When presenting, explain how the decisions you made solve the problem you're solving.
- **Prepare questions to guide the discussion.** This helps them understand what kind of feedback you need, and directs them to the most critical aspects of the project. It also helps them feel more comfortable giving you feedback.
- **Listen.** When critiquers are talking, listen closely. Don't jump to defend your decisions or make promises. Ask for clarification if you don't understand something. You can always say "That's interesting. I hadn't thought of that. Let me think about it."
- **Prepare explanations for the choices you made.** Provide explanations in a matter-a-fact way, instead of getting defensive. If you're defensive, people won't feel comfortable sharing their opinions.

Considerations for critiquers

- **Critique because you want to see the doer succeed.** Good criticism is an act of respect and a gesture of goodwill and support toward the doer.

- **Remember that no project will ever be perfect.** Usually, it's a series of picking the most optimal choices that complement each other, but individually are not quite perfect. Along those lines, not every piece of valid criticism can be or should be acted upon.
- **Nothing is universally liked by everyone.**
- **Don't make assumptions about the doer.** What background could this person have that might change your approach if you knew?
- **Don't make assumptions about the project process.** You don't know what the deadlines were and the obstacles they faced to get the information they did.
- **Check your intentions.** Are you offering criticism to prove you know something?
- **Remember, we all win when our collective work improves.** Our goals shouldn't be putting down; they should be building up.
- **Your opinion may not be the universal opinion.**
- **Embrace experimentation.** It might not always work, but overall, it's good for our industry.
- **Be especially kind and cautious in public spaces.** For the projects that are virally and publicly critiqued: mob mentality is traumatic. It can really affect an individual's life. Don't be a part of it.
- **Take into account the goal of the piece.** It may not be trying to do what you want it to do.

When it all goes wrong

- **Take a breath.** Stay neutral and level-headed.
- **Stay quiet.** Let the person finish speaking.
- **Maintain eye contact the best you can.** Don't look down.
- **Use statements that reflect the environment.** "You sound frustrated/This situation is getting heated. Would you like to have some downtime and revisit this conversation later?"
- **Cut through the tension and be direct.** If the person is your subordinate, encourage them to explain how they feel. "You sound frustrated. Would you like to talk about it?" or a simple "Things feel tense. What's going on?"
- **If things are toxic, get out.** "I don't feel comfortable in this situation. Could we cool down for a couple hours and come back to this later today?"

More resources

- [Good managers give constructive criticism—but truly masterful leaders offer constructive praise](#) (Quartz)
- [How to give Constructive Criticism: 6 Helpful Tips](#) (Nishlan Pillay)
- [How to give and receive criticism](#) (Scott Berkun)
- [13 Ways Designers Screw Up Client Presentations](#) (Mule Design)
- [Presenting design](#) (Sparkbox)
- [Effective design feedback](#) (Jon Yablonski)

- [7 Simple Rules for Giving Great Design Feedback](#) (Amanda Schoedel)