



Making Feedback Meaningful

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Objective

- ◆ At the end of this presentation, you will
 - Be able to explain why good feedback is helpful
 - Be able to provide meaningful feedback on documents submitted to you for review

Why review the work of others?

- ◆ By reviewing other writers' work, you will:
 - See what others are doing in the field of technical communication
 - Gain ideas for inclusion in your own work
 - Gain the gratitude, if only anonymously, of the writers who receive your thoughtful comments on their work
 - Avoid the challenges that others have experienced in preparing their documents
 - Be a part of an exciting team, making new contacts

So what is the problem?

◆ How helpful is this feedback?

- “This guy is a jerk. He should not be a presenter.”
- “Totally wrong...USE the product, willya?”
- “Really?? I didn’t know you can do that!”

◆ These are all *actual review comments* that I’ve personally received from SMEs or editors

- Not really what I was looking for....

Responsibilities of a reviewer

- ◆ Strive to understand the audience of the document and their needs
- ◆ Attempt to understand the subject matter
- ◆ Provide substantive, thoughtful feedback on the documents by the stated deadline

Reviewing documents

- ◆ The next few slides explain the philosophy of one experienced reviewer, gained over many years of participation in peer reviews and technical communications competitions
- ◆ These ideas are applicable to ALL documents
 - Specific ideas for Online, Art and Print items appear later

How do I review documents?

- ◆ Look over the materials and get oriented when you receive them. Write down your first impressions
- ◆ If a document is extremely large, determine which parts to review in detail
- ◆ Become the audience, as best you can
- ◆ Formulate a standard for each document
- ◆ Test the documents – use them, if possible
- ◆ Judge the quality of the communication. Don't be unduly influenced by the budget

Start early and get organized

- ◆ Begin when you receive the document - don't procrastinate
- ◆ Get oriented to the material and any notes provided by the writer. Review the audience and purpose statements, if provided
- ◆ Using your experience and the audience statement, form an idea of what this document should be
 - If you feel you are completely out of depth, contact the writer and explain this
- ◆ Manage your time. If the document is too big, choose sections to review
 - At a minimum, review the table of contents, index, introduction, and two chapters.

Read and use the document

- ◆ Read the selected portions
- ◆ Use the table of contents and index to get a sense of their completeness and utility
- ◆ Check the utility of graphics and tables
 - Are they clear, concise, and easy to use?
 - Do they support the communication process?
- ◆ Notice errors, but consider whether they interfere with the *communication process* – explain why something is a problem in that context
- ◆ Watch for over-designed items – sometimes graphics can get in the way

Help the writers

- ◆ You are doing this to help the writers
- ◆ Be kind, yet instructive
- ◆ Explain why something is a problem, and provide a solution
- ◆ Remember to look for things that help the communication process, not just those things that hurt it
- ◆ Review the quality of the item, not the production budget
 - What did the writer do with the available resources?

Writing comments

- ◆ Your comments are the most valuable result that writers receive from the review process
- ◆ The next few slides present thoughts on writing comments from another experienced reviewer
- ◆ These ideas are applicable to ALL documents
 - Specific ideas for Online, Art and Print items appear later

Tips for writing comments

- ◆ Be professional - Imagine yourself presenting these comments in a face-to-face meeting
- ◆ Don't point out isolated errors
- ◆ Write comments about the document, not the subject matter
- ◆ Use present tense, declarative statements
- ◆ Make suggestions in the imperative mode
- ◆ Support your comments with specific references
- ◆ Praise the good points as you spotlight challenges

Be professional

◆ Here's one example:

- “This reference card looks like a ransom note”

◆ Better would be:

- “You’ve organized the information clearly and logically, but all the different fonts and sizes hide that structure. Fewer fonts, using one color, and distinguishing levels by font size could help users find what they need to know much faster”

◆ The second example is harder to write, but it helps the writer and reflects well on the reviewer

Focus on the big picture

- ◆ Don't nitpick every isolated grammar, spelling, or usage error. Maybe the editor had a bad day
- ◆ Only point out these problems if they are endemic to the document or substantially impede the communication process
- ◆ Try to determine if the information is getting across to the audience
 - Is the information clear?
 - Are the organizational tools helpful?
 - Do the supporting diagrams clarify important concepts?

Focus on the document

- ◆ Write comments about the *document*, not about you
- ◆ Mention your experience using the document only if it is relevant to a specific suggestion

- ◆ Here's an example:
 - The first time I read the chapter on stored procedures I was totally confused until after Section 4.
- ◆ A better way to suggest an improvement:
 - The material in Section 4 is crucial to understanding the chapter on stored procedures. Consider moving it to the introduction.

Think NOW!

◆ Write in the present tense, unless you are talking about something that is no longer true:

- “Chapter 6 was confusing” (Now it’s clear??)
- “I liked the use of space” (Now I hate it??)

◆ Better, but not perfect:

- “I think the figure on Pg 17 is really neat. The various stages were totally clear because of all the colors.”

◆ How would you improve that comment?

Just the facts, please...

- ◆ You may have to face the writer at work
- ◆ Leave out the opinion statements
 - “I think that...” “In my opinion,...”
 - “I thought the figure on Pg 17 was really neat. The various stages were totally clear because of all the colors.”
- ◆ State the facts:
 - “The figure on Pg. 17 gives a great overview of the process. The color coding clearly separates the various stages.”
 - “The use of space makes the document easy to read”

Be clear and factual

- ◆ If something needs work, say so clearly and concisely
 - “There seem to be some inconsistencies in how graphics are located in the document in that keeping graphics close to the applicable documentation is not followed in order to make all the pages look full.”
- ◆ Beware of giving orders instead of advice
 - “Keep the graphics with the stuff they show!”
- ◆ A firm but gentle hand is the best guide
 - “Consider placing the graphics close to the text that describes them”

Be specific

- ◆ Support your comments with specific references to page numbers, section/chapter/part headings, or graphic/table reference numbers
- ◆ If the writer can't figure out what you are talking about, how are they supposed to improve it?

Be specific - part 2

◆ This is not especially helpful:

- “Great navigation aids!”

◆ This makes your point clear:

- “The active site map is a very useful navigation tool. The fact that you can zoom out to an aerial view of the campus, then zoom in to the right building, room, and electrical diagram, gives maintenance staff a natural way to find the data they need. I was able to find the inspection records for the elevators in Scopus Hall in less than 30 seconds”

Another example

◆ Would this comment help you?

- “The design is cluttered.”

◆ Wouldn't this be more helpful?

- “Consider breaking the information in Figure 17 (pg 41) into four diagrams, each representing a major subsystem. Each diagram could then be on its own page, along with the legend for that system. Each diagram would be simpler and larger, and less cluttered than the composite, so users could find what they are seeking more easily. Also consider the same simplification for the tables on pages 46 and 48, and the XML schema diagrams on pages 67 – 84”

Accentuate the positive

- ◆ Writers know they could have done some things better
- ◆ Everyone likes to know that something went right, so look for the good stuff too
- ◆ Be specific with your compliments, this is more meaningful than a general “Good Job!” – it shows that you took the time to examine the document
- ◆ Put yourself in the writer’s place – what would YOU like to be told about YOUR work?

Online document considerations

- ◆ Does the document require special or unusual hardware or software? If so, make sure that you have access to it before you begin the review
 - If you can't get access, notify the writer so they can assist you
- ◆ If the document is a website, do not be surprised if the actual site differs from a printout you might have received.
 - This is not unusual. Use the live site for your review, but note the times and dates that you accessed it. This will help the writer understand what you were looking at. Even better, copy the URL or print out the site and attach it to your comments

Online documents - Navigation

- ◆ Pay special attention to navigation controls and links
 - Are they easy to use? Are they consistent?
 - Are there search capabilities? Are keyword searches logical for the subject matter? Is there an index, site map, or directory map?
- ◆ Do the links take you to logical places? Do rollovers or pop-ups disappear when focus is removed?
- ◆ Are web sites easy to read and navigate? Are links to outside locations up to date?

Online documents - Usability

- ◆ For online brochures and manuals, are contents easily visible at standard screen resolutions?
- ◆ Are you required to scroll down in every screen to read all the information?
- ◆ Are animations and graphics clear?

Online documents - Access

- ◆ For tutorials and training materials, look at entry points – are you forced to start at the very beginning every time you enter the training?
- ◆ For online help, check context-sensitive data. Does it make sense? Is it accurate and/or detailed enough to answer your question?

Art and design documents

- ◆ Is the document clear? Does the intended communication take place?
 - This is the most important factor in reviewing artwork
- ◆ If intended for international audiences, is the document universal in its use of icons and symbols?
- ◆ Are colors used in a manner that helps, not hinders, communication?
- ◆ Does layout and use of space enhance the communication process?

Print document considerations

- ◆ Consider the binding and construction in light of the stated purpose and audience.
 - A three-ring binder is good for reference material, but may be too large for a users guide which is to be used at a workstation
 - Spiral binding is good for training and user guide materials, but cannot be easily updated
- ◆ Is there enough space in the layout for the user to add notes wherever they want to?

Marcom considerations

- ◆ Unlike documentation, marketing documents are intended to persuade as well as inform.
- ◆ Consider the desired effect on the audience.
 - Try to put yourself in their place - how would you react to this attempt at persuasion?
 - Are there specific words or phrases that get in the way of the message? The example on the next slide shows how not to talk about competitive advantages.
 - Is the message consistent? Using the same word can be either a powerful tool or a deadly error.
 - Is the document dynamic? If the audience doesn't stay interested, they are not likely to be persuaded.

Marcom considerations

◆ What's wrong with this example?

Control is what John Henry brings to the table. As the company whose founder created today's de facto railroad routing software over 20 years ago, John Henry offers a coherent architecture that can address every requirement for control.

The Bottom Line - SCOFF

- ◆ Be Specific
- ◆ Be Complete
- ◆ Be Objective
- ◆ Be Fair
- ◆ Be Fast

**QUALITY
FEEDBACK**
is your goal

The Last Words

You will get back what you give
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