Receiving feedback. (Graphic by Beth Warrington, *Military Review*; original photo by Sgt. Antony Lee, U.S. Army)

A Writer's Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback

Capt. Rebecca Segal, U.S. Army

"Is this worth ruining a friendship over?"

If you are sharing or receiving feedback on a paper from a friend and find yourself asking this question, you have probably gone too far. But don't worry, I have been there, on both sides of that situation, and have learned some of the art of giving and receiving feedback in a way that leads to a better paper outcome while maintaining the relationship.

A few years ago, a friend requested that I edit her paper. It was one of the first times I had been sought out informally to edit something, and so I dove into the

draft without a specific plan. As I read her article, I got stuck on the scope and structure, so I set up a call with her. I started by asking questions about the paper, but it soon became clear in her increasingly terse responses that my friend didn't want the deep structure changes I was hinting toward. I switched strategies and instead gave some smaller feedback. She seemed satisfied with this lesser feedback, and we concluded the call.

As the strategy changed mid-call, I realized that when she had requested for me to "edit" her paper, she was expecting surface-level feedback on a near-finished draft, as opposed to deep feedback on structure, flow, and clarity. While not friendship ending, if I hadn't changed strategies, there would undoubtedly have been tension in our relationship. Furthermore, she probably wouldn't have sought out my feedback again.

These days, I request and give feedback on professional topics weekly, both for formal roles as an editor for The Harding Project and From the Green Notebook, and informally for friends and coworkers before they submit their work for publication. The informal feedback process is critical to achieving quality writing. The feedback can come at any step along the writing process, from brainstorming to writing to editing. There is an art to giving and receiving feedback, and below is a guide of lessons I have learned from both the author and editor perspectives.

Brainstorming

Author. When you start brainstorming for a paper, find people from whom to bounce ideas. At this point, you should worry less about finding people who are capable of editing your writing. Instead, focus on finding people who are subject-matter experts in your topic area or simply people who are argumentative enough to provide you with constructive criticism. An expert might be your battalion's maintenance warrant officer, a weapons squad leader, or a civilian instructor at the schoolhouse—someone likely to hold a professional opinion. Find the right person based on their knowledge, not their rank.

To have these engagements, simply bring up the idea and ask them their thoughts. You would be surprised how productive having a conversation on your proposed topic can be in helping to solidify your initial argument. Ask follow-up questions and pose hypotheticals to draw out your ideas. It is critical to seek people

with varied experiences; if everyone you talk with is the same rank and military occupational specialty as you, you're unlikely to receive well-rounded feedback. Similarly, if you aren't receiving pushback on your ideas, you probably need to keep talking to people. It is often in these back-and-forth conversations that force you to explain and support your ideas that you can flesh out and clarify your thinking.

A few years ago, I wanted to write a paper about a new doctrinal concept, but I struggled to create a cohesive outline. Though I spoke with a diverse set of experienced people in my unit on the idea, I couldn't get past brainstorming. I gave up on the paper. Still, I was passionate about the topic and engaged a friend of mine from another unit who had no experience in the area. Fortunately, he completely disagreed with me on the idea, and I was forced to defend my reasoning. In the argument that ensued, the paper structure became clear, and I wrote it the next day.

This experience taught me that it is better to have someone poke holes in an idea before I invest time and energy into the writing process. Had I waited for a complete draft to show my friend, I would have been more emotionally invested in the product and less open to substantial criticism.

Getting involved in intellectual communities where ideas are shared frequently is a great place to start to both observe and participate in these exchanges. This could be joining an online community like those discussed by Erik Davis and Nick Frazier, a unit writing program like Jay Ireland and Ryan Van Wie, or just creating an informal one among coworkers.[1]

Finally, if you sense there is a rank dynamic prohibiting good feedback, be explicit that you are seeking feedback because of their expertise, and that they shouldn't avoid constructive feedback because of rank. It can often be helpful to demonstrate appropriate intellectual back-and-forth by bringing up holes in your ideas or playing devil's advocate, and then encouraging your intellectual partner to do the same.

That "peer" for whom I edited? She outranked me. But in the context of writing, she was seeking out my advice as an

Capt. Rebecca Segal, U.S. Army, grew up in Massachusetts, graduated from Amherst College, and is a field artillery officer. She edits for The Harding Project and From the Green Notebook.

editor. At no point did she pull rank into the conversation, nor did it influence my approach (beyond saying "ma'am" every few sentences). I needed to be sensitive to her requests regardless of her rank; she was seeking me out for my expertise and feedback, despite my rank.

While it is not your job as the peer to shepherd a writer through the process, the simple question as to the writer's next steps can help catch issues before the new writer loses faith or goes astray. Another tool is to show them Theo Lipsky's guide to writing an article.[2]

> For writers who have completed brainstorming but are getting stuck in translating abstract thought into writing, there are people out there to help.

Any good author-editor relationship requires trust and humility from both parties. Adding in the military hierarchy dynamic requires a reverence for this balance.

There will be people who are difficult to brainstorm with, but I have found that they are typically just difficult, independent of their rank. In these situations, assess the project goal and decide whether it is feasible with that individual. You may need to reframe expectations, change the dynamic, or work with someone else to achieve a successful outcome.

Editor. If you are the brainstorming partner, remember to first work to understand what the writer is requesting of you. Are they seeking your experience, guidance on finding resources for further study, or just looking for you to poke holes? Ask the author what they are hoping to get out of the brainstorming session and then help where you can. If you are new to the writing scene and unsure of why you were sought out, remember that the writer approached you because they value your feedback, so trust that. If the writer is new, they are sometimes nervous about sharing half-baked ideas and asking for feedback before a thought is coherent, so remember to balance any passion for a subject with the author's vulnerability in asking for help.

Once brainstorming concludes, ask the writer if they know how to proceed from where you leave off. Recently, I worked with an individual on brainstorming for an article. He had lots of fantastic ideas and largely just needed to say them aloud with somebody. Weeks after the brainstorming session, I followed up to see what happened with the article. It turned out he hadn't been sure how to research the topics and had trouble structuring the ideas, and so he had just dropped the paper.

Writing

Author. For writers who have completed brainstorming but are getting stuck in translating abstract thought into writing, there are people out there to help.

Again, unit writing programs create a local writing support system, so whether you are a part of the unit executing or just aware of that ecosystem, it can provide a great support network. Certain publications also have programs to help writers along the process. From the Green Notebook, for example, has an initiative where writers can work with an editor, regardless of where the writer is in the writing process. The editor can assist with everything from structuring an outline to helping get a draft ready for submission.

While not a replacement for a writing buddy, reading the paper aloud can be a good stopgap until one is found. This method is especially helpful for newer writers who viscerally know what sounds right but often have trouble translating that into their writing.

Once the outline is complete, it's time to start writing. If there is a good outline, then you should be able to get most of a draft completed, and then you can seek out assistance from others for specific parts or for editing the entire draft. Drafting alone helps ensure cohesion and consistency for the narrative voice.

If you can't get past the outline phase, seek out a friend or coworker and ask for help. The issue you are running into will determine whether you need a subject-matter expert to help with the ideas or an experienced writer to help with the writing process.

Editor. While clear writing represents clear thinking, unclear writing isn't necessarily a reflection of

unclear thinking.[3] Your job, again, is to determine which part the author needs support with.

If there is unclear writing but clear thinking, then it is likely the writing process itself that is the issue. Help the author break down the writing process into small-

> No editing should be a slaughterfest. Be empathetic; editing is an agreement of trust and vulnerability, and your job is to help the author.

er chunks and offer to iterate more frequently so they don't hit a wall and stall.

Unclear thinking, on the other hand, indicates a need to revisit brainstorming. In this case, I recommend getting more involved not simply in the brainstorm, but also in connecting those amorphous ideas to a concrete outline.

This process may feel like a step back to the author. But realistically, they weren't ready to progress past brainstorming before. However, if you can help them construct a robust outline, the next iteration of writing should feel less frustrating and produce a better outcome.

Editing

Author. Receiving feedback on a full draft is the height of vulnerability an author experiences in the writing process. At this point, you have invested time and emotion into your paper. You are sharing something personal and asking for feedback. The first thing to remember is that you are asking for feedback, not for somebody telling you it is perfect. While congratulations and praise might feel nice, it won't make the paper any stronger.

If you have specific things that you want the editor to focus on, provide those instructions when you reach out to request edits. For example, are you concerned with the transitions? Do you want to ensure your article is readable to a nonmilitary audience? Is there a specific area that you are stuck on? This is also a great opportunity to provide a scope for your requested edits: Are you looking for deeper edits or simple copy editing?

As you gain experience writing and working with others, you will also learn who to be specific about

which type of editing you want. I have people I reach out to for help with specific topics to ensure ideological rigor, and I ask others for help with writing clarity.

Finally, remember that it's your name on the byline. Know when to listen to feedback and when to ignore it. When you receive feedback that you disagree with, take a walk, or sit on the recommended revisions for twenty-four hours. Then, ask yourself if they are objectively right. If not, why not? Be honest with yourself and try to separate your ego from the feedback that your writing received. But don't feel required to make changes; they were offering you suggestions, even if they might outrank you. Finally, determine if your editor has a personal bias. This is especially relevant for opinion pieces and articles that explore newer, disputed topics. Ensure you provided a complete argument that stands up to their feedback but don't rewrite or scrap a draft simply because somebody disagrees with you.

Editor. No editing should be a slaughterfest. Be empathetic; editing is an agreement of trust and vulnerability, and your job is to help the author. If your author leaves disillusioned with the process, you have lost them and you have failed as an editor.

Before I dive into the paper, I confirm the level of edits the author is requesting and then resist doing any edits outside of what they have requested. A friend asked that I edit a paper of his that turned out to have content with which I wholeheartedly disagreed. It was a piece based on his experience, and I thought the analysis of that experience came to incorrect conclusions. I made a long list of notes for feedback as I read through the piece. Fortunately, I took my own advice and asked what level of feedback the author was looking for. It was clear he just wanted final, small-level feedback and not for his argument to be deconstructed, as I had been gearing up to do. Initially, it felt disingenuous for me to not provide my laundry list, but I realized that he wasn't going to listen to it anyway, so in some ways,

that list didn't matter. Instead, I focused on providing a few key points of feedback from that list. Therefore, the feedback didn't feel canned or disingenuous to me, but it also respected what he was looking for and was well received by him.

This is an art. Sometimes, you have to accept imperfection. However, in doing so, you can respect the author's wishes and help maintain their voice. Not to mention, this keeps the feedback from impacting the relationship and is an approach that will more likely motivate them to work with you again. When they show vulnerability in asking for help, you should choose to build trust instead of breaking it down. Furthermore, giving a little bit of good feedback that the author listens to is far more effective than giving a lot of feedback that the author ignores.

Conducting the edits can sometimes be a lofty endeavor, but I have developed a process I use with authors to limit unnecessary or duplicative work. I evaluate the overall message or argument, structure, individual sections, and end with transitions and fine tuning. I have found that strict adherence to this process helps limit author fatigue. Lots of sections end up being cut or moved, and so I prefer to wait until each step is set to help minimize unnecessary edits. Staying within the step also helps manage expectations for the author, ensuring they know what type of feedback they are going to receive and when. In my experience, this expectation management makes receiving hard feedback easier for the author and also helps limit the volume of feedback given at any time.

I always read the entire article first without making edits. Resisting the temptation to dive in as you see necessary can be difficult but is worth the value added to the overall paper's message.

I'll also ask how involved an author wants to be. Do they want feedback that they action themselves, or do they want me to go in and make edits? Their answer may change at different stages, so if I'm unfamiliar with the author, I'll often check back in.

When starting the edits, I confirm that I understand what the author thinks they are communicating and to whom. Sometimes this requires a phone call for us to talk through their message or intended audience; doing this early in editing the draft has been one of the biggest tools I have acquired. If nothing else, when editing for somebody I don't know, it humanizes both author and editor and gives me a better sense of their literary voice. But often, I find that the article underemphasizes or misses a key part of the author's argument or story, and catching this before working on any structural changes is key.

Sometimes, in editing, there is a paper that needs to take a step back. That conversation can be hard for both the editor and author, but receiving concrete and actionable feedback that is delivered humanely can be the best thing you can do as an editor. If needed, you can direct them to Trent Lythgoe's "From Rough Draft to Polished Manuscript: The Power of Rewriting," included in this compilation, as a guide to diving back into the project.[4] Still, remember to only provide that kind of feedback if you have confirmed that is what the author is asking for. Don't overstep and deter them from completing the project.

If the paper doesn't need to take a step back but you think it needs significant structural changes, limit yourself to three major pieces of feedback and focus on thematic issues. Then, iterate more to allow for successive approximations and fixing of any smaller issues. If you provide a laundry list like I had been gearing up for in my example, you will either lose the author's voice in the paper or their willingness to write completely. Again, focus on where you are trying to get with this paper and accept that you won't fix everything. It can be helpful to identify how many "points" on a one-hundred-point scale you are hoping to improve the paper. If you are just editing and not rewriting from the brainstorming phase, you are probably only able to do about a thirty-point improvement without risking losing the author's voice or the author themself.

Just like before sending it off, read the paper aloud; it can help you catch everything from jarring transitions to grammatical errors. This is even more important if you did not write it, as your brain will make the connections to soften mistakes.

A word of caution when making changes to someone else's work: you must understand your writing style and ensure you are differentiating between edits for grammar and clarity versus edits to conform the text to your preferred style or personal opinions. I know that I have a more "hard science" writing style, for instance, and it can sometimes be a struggle to avoid editing out the more artistic aspects of other people's writing. It is important that both writers and editors understand their own

writing style, so they can recognize implicit biases that impact the editing process. If you find yourself editing so much that the author's voice is gone, it's probably time to take a step back and remind yourself of the intended outcome. After all, it is their paper, not yours.

Finally, the editing process can be tiring for the editor and the author alike. Many iterations on drafts, continued conversations to clarify points, and disagreements between author and editor can leave both parties exhausted and unenthused. In these cases, taking a break or tagging in another editor can help. Even simply checking in with the author about how they're feeling in the process can help get the article to where both parties are satisfied.

Conclusion

Each piece you edit will be at a different stage in the writing process, and each author will want different types of feedback at varying stages of the writing process. This guide serves to share best practices for informal feedback so that you don't accidentally ruin a friendship in the process of making a paper as strong as it can be.

Regardless of whether you are the author or editor, there is an immense pride in getting a paper to publication. A friend who had been resistant to writing for years but has long since been an intellectual partner for my own writing reached out a few months back after having decided to seek publication on a piece of his own. His piece had great ideas and just needed some structural work. We have an easy writing partnership after working together for enough time, so editing for him was comparatively easy. I knew his voice and where he wanted the paper to go, and he was receptive to feedback, so it went smoothly. He submitted it and was immediately accepted. Within a week, he had been recognized by many Army senior leaders for his thoughtful contribution. I was as proud of him and his piece as if it had been my own. I beamed each time he reached out to tell me about another accolade. As emotionally invested in the paper as the author becomes, so too can the editor.

Integrating informal feedback is a critical part of crafting a strong article and sharing your ideas. The hard work will ensure the author's best voice is put forth for publication consideration. However, once the piece is ready, there is one final step: sending it off for publication. Like the informal process, this next step will partner the author with a venue's editor. If you are at this next stage, check out John Amble's article, "Your Draft Is Done, Now What? Working with an Editor," included in this compilation.[5] ∎

Notes

1. Erik Davis and Nicholas Frazier, "Building and Running an Online Forum," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 65–69; Jay Ireland and Ryan Van Wie, "Unit Writing Programs," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 76–81.

2. Theo Lipsky, "How to Write an Article," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 27–34.

3. Marvin Swift, "Clear Writing Means Clear Thinking Means …," *Harvard Business Review*, January 1973, accessed 31 May 2024, https://hbr.org/1973/01/clear-writing-means-clear-thinking-means.

4. Trent Lythgoe, "From Rough Draft to Polished Manuscript: The Power of Rewriting," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 51–59.

5. John Amble, "Your Draft Is Done, Now What? Working with an Editor," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 100–5.