GIVING FEEDBACK

Joni: Listen. So often I think of feedback as talking at the person, while failing to recognize that being an active listener is also a form of feedback, especially at certain interludes of the creative process. Being a receptive listener and sounding board often helps the writer generate ideas and clarify their thinking.

I always want to be on the writer’s side. Rooting for them. I want to make sure I offer insights that nurture, whether that feedback takes the form of appreciation for what they are already doing well, or whether it takes the form of specific constructive feedback. The power of specific positive feedback as an educational tool, as well as a motivational tool, is probably the most overlooked aspect of how to deliver feedback effectively.

Gary: Strive to be your author’s ideal reader. Or, if not ideal, be an attentive reader: give feedback that reflects your understanding/interpretation of what the creative work is doing—if your comments are on point, the author knows they’re on the right track. If your comments reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the work, or if you’re confused by the work, that’s equally helpful to the author, especially if it’s in a group workshop and multiple peers have similar misunderstandings.

When giving feedback, be aware of your own aesthetic biases. Sometimes you may be suggesting what you would do if it were your own work, not necessarily what’s best for the author’s draft.

Tim: Rather than speaking only in terms of what’s “working” and “not working,” I like to consider where the writing feels most “alive” (and by extension, least alive). Often a piece of writing isn’t clicking in early drafts because the writer hasn’t quite realized their ambition, or they haven’t been willing to take the risk of being more ambitious. The category of feeling alive allows us to talk about the potential of a piece. Maybe it is fumbling, but maybe it is fumbling toward something, or in that disorder there are the grounds for something great, distinctive, something only that writer could’ve made. I think of a kitchen mid-cooking, with multiple burners going, something sizzling, a pot about to boil over, the general effluvium of possibility in the air. Sure, a meal could’ve been zapped in the microwave for a fixed time, but it would’ve been predictable. Conversely, thinking of cliche as language or action or characterization that feels less alive is a way of thinking about it that can prompt the question, “How can I breathe life into this?”

Whenever possible, aim for both written feedback and a conversation. I’m always surprised at how these approaches lead to such different results. I like to do line comments and a letter; to me, this honors the work on the line level and also as a whole piece of work. A letter allows me a certain kind of voice, too—personal, unrushed, and taking the panoramic view. It allows me to see, clearly, the proportion of praise and suggestions, and to make sure that they are suitable and will leave the writer
galvanized, not defeated. A letter allows me to shift focus from paragraph to paragraph—perhaps some reading suggestions here, perhaps an analogy with another art form there, perhaps me figuring out in real time why something is or isn't working (or alive) for me in this draft. A conversation, on the other hand, can accomplish so much in just a few minutes. Within conversations, don’t be afraid to ask questions—I can’t tell you how many times I assumed I was interpreting something rightly, and even if I was literally correct, there was so much more going on beneath the surface. The writer will tell you about the six pages that they cut that you haven’t read. They will tell you about what they wanted to do but weren’t sure they could pull off. And via that conversation, you build a trust, as if those invisible pages are present with you alongside the visible ones.

Emily: Put your ego aside. You serve the story.

Juan: When offering feedback, I keep Hilma Wolitzer’s concept of “honesty and charity” in my mind. Even if I am not an expert on the subject matter, this mind-set helps me better consider what feedback will enable my fellow writer to get closer to achieving their goals. I also avoid my personal imposter syndrome if I feel like I am not their ideal audience. Echoing the reminder to listen and consider what you can offer, I like to further that by expressing appreciation for specific parts that resonate. It avoids blanket statements and generalizations and ensures that I can point to specific places where I want to know more, where I get lost, and where I wonder if they may consider trying something else. The honesty helps me consider the writer’s intentions and where the intentions can also evolve post-workshop and during their revision process. I’m looking for the moments where we can see hope in the writer’s eyes, as a representation of what can inspire them to get back to work and reconnected with the jolt of excitement they felt when they started writing.

Juan: I love asking questions that coax the writer to unsilence the workshop. Sometimes, there is hesitation because so many of us are still rewiring our brain to unlearn the workshop where we cannot speak. A good question can cut through an adversarial environment or the nervousness that may have infiltrated the workshop. The good question helps the writer look beyond the specific stanza or paragraph that’s causing trouble and to instead consider how revision in nearby areas of the poem or prose may create another breakthrough. This also allows us to pinpoint specific examples where the author is already succeeding and where they can use that momentum to revise through other challenging locations in the piece.

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Joni: I’ve learned that often the feedback that makes me the most prickly is the feedback I need to attend to with more scrutiny. Why am I reacting so strongly? How can I use this feedback to test (but not subvert) my own editorial instincts? It also helps when hearing feedback that causes me to prickle to remember: I am the boss of my own story. Know thyself. There are times I can choke on a crumb. Those are the times I may still seek feedback to enliven my creative process when I’m stuck, but too much feedback can easily overwhelm me, until I’m much more secure about the work. In short, when it comes to feedback, pace yourself.

Gary: A simple reminder that you’re submitting a draft that you’ve determined needs further work and would benefit from critique. The simple act of workshop is an invitation for critique by other readers—for what one of my mentors once called an autopsy. If you’re not prepared for such a deconstruction of a work-
in-progress, it may be better to give more space and time before submitting the work for workshop. Controversial, perhaps, but do your best to not explain your work at any point during the workshop process—unless, of course, your workshop group asks for an explanation (at which point, you can still choose not to). If you do feel you need to explain some aspect of your work, try to frame your explanation in conditional “if” statements. For example, instead of saying, “I’m writing about X here,” try saying, “What if I incorporated X here?” and gauge whether or not such an explanation or inclusion would actually help the work or is even necessary.

Bonus tip for giving and receiving feedback: Don’t be an ass.

**Tim:** To the extent possible, help your readers to guide you to address the issues you know you need help with. A workshop can be so wide-ranging, and it can certainly be useful to hear general impressions. But if you can pinpoint something you sense might or might not be achieving what you’re hoping for, frame it for your readers in advance. “Are the stakes of this scene coming through?” “Did this flashback pull you out of the larger narrative?” Etc.

Revel in the range of responses you will almost inevitably get. To me, perhaps the most valuable thing about feedback is not necessarily to get practical guidance (though it’s lovely when that happens). It’s seeing your work refracted once, five times, ten times, etc. Someone found your narrator’s tone funny, and someone else found it sad—this inconsistency is not something to edit out, but might very well be the strongest thing about your prose, i.e. that it is able to walk this high wire, supple enough to be read in different ways by people with differing sensibilities and frames of mind and on different days. Seeing your work anew—prismatically rather than through your own gaze, since you might have already grown so used to it that it is invisible to you—is part of the fun and the radical joy and value of feedback.

**Juan:** Hopefully, I have had time to distance myself from the work prior to the workshop and clear my mind. Then, I usually highlight places where I have doubts, questions, and struggles in my work. I carefully listen and take notes while people are speaking to help me absorb what the shared feedback and reactions are to the piece.

**Emily:** Put your ego aside. You serve the story.

**Juan:** Similar to my approach in giving feedback, I prioritize asking questions when I can, but I never want to monopolize the conversation. However, if the workshop gets bogged down talking about a word or phrase in another language or an image, action, or item from a different culture they do not understand, I do my best to diplomatically help the conversation along. Consider it authorial interruption or telling in order to show. And if people do not get it, I will ask how I can clarify what I intended, knowing that some cultural elements may not be received.

In the past, I subscribed to the silent author in the workshop, which also included trying to maintain a poker face and a stoic posture. Now, I let my facial expressions and nonverbal communication become two additional ways to share my comfort or discomfort in the workshop. Hopefully, it can be an additional method to strengthen the workshop’s flow.