WHAT IS FEEDBACK?

It seemed like a good idea to start this book with an official definition of the term feedback. So I consulted some online dictionaries, and here is what I found.

I found the definition of feedback as it relates to cybernetics and control theory. I found how the term is used in electronic and mechanical engineering, economics and finance, gaming, organizations, biology, and nature. I found diagrams of feedback loops with lots of arrows pointing here and there. I found exotic-looking translations of the word (terugkoppeling . . . Rückkopplung . . . ανάδραση . . . ). But what I didn’t find was a definition for feedback as it specifically relates to writing.

How can this be? I knew writers had co-opted the term from some other realm (electrical engineering, as it turns out, circa 1920, according to the Oxford English Dictionary), but you would think that by now our application of feedback would have merited its own place in the dictionary, especially since we use the term all the time. “I joined a writing group because I want feedback.” “I’m waiting for feedback from my editor.” “Winston wants me to give him feedback on his story, but I don’t have a clue what to say to him.”

So with no dictionary definition to help us out, what exactly are we all talking about when we talk about feedback?

I think a lot of writers view feedback as someone telling them what’s wrong with their writing in order to help them fix it. That may be one way to think of feedback, but it sure doesn’t make me want to race out and get some. As a writer, just the thought of readers focusing on my imperfections takes me back to the junior prom, with everyone staring at the zit on my nose, but no one even noticing my pretty pink dress. And, as a feedback provider, the responsibility of helping writers “fix” their stories only makes me feel desperate to find fault with them, even where there is none.
It seems to me that as writers and feedback providers we need to change the way most of us perceive feedback. We need to come up with our own definition of the term, one that distinguishes it entirely from feedback as it applies to electrical engineering, for example, with its dry references to input and output, and its awful association with that shrieking sound coming from the PA system. We need to put a positive spin on feedback as it relates to writing, and we need to do it quickly before it’s too late for damage control. Otherwise, the term feedback is in real danger of going the way of criticism, a word once connoting praise as well as censure but that is now just a big, fat negative in most people’s minds.

We can’t let that happen to feedback. We just can’t. Because the essence of feedback is nothing but positive (even when it is negative), and we are only hurting ourselves if we overlook its real meaning and value.

For a writer, feedback means you never have to write in a vacuum. It means that whenever you need or crave a connection to a real live reader, there it is, yours for the asking. And the beauty of feedback is—you can take it or leave it! Part of the reason we shy away from feedback is because we assign it the power of a mandate or a judgment. Feedback is neither of those things. It is simply a resource to help you create the poems or stories or essays you want to create; to help you be the writer you want to be.

Consider all the ways that feedback can serve you in achieving your goals. Feedback can help you polish your skills, hone your writerly instincts, and massage your words into shapely prose or poetry much faster than going it alone. Equally important, feedback can serve as a source of inspiration and motivation. It can energize you to go at it again, make it better, dig deeper, and discover for yourself what happens next and why. Creating an inspired and polished work can be a long and murky process. No wonder so many writers are plagued by two debilitating questions: What the hell am I trying to say here? And who the hell cares anyway? Feedback is one of the best defenses against this kind of self-doubt and its parasitic sidekick, writer’s block.

Writers need to come up with a definition of feedback that embraces all of these positive attributes. And while we are at it, we need to make sure that our definition takes into account the fact that feedback can manifest in a multitude of forms. Yes, feedback can be a critical response to a manuscript, someone telling the writer what is wrong with his writing. That may be exactly the form of feedback that serves the writer best, depending on where the story is at and where the writer’s head is at on any given day.

But feedback can also take the form of listening to a writer talk about his work. “Wow, tell me more about this sculptor in twelfth-century France.” “Tell me why it matters to this old woman to live out her life in her own home.”
“Tell me how this chess fanatic uses the game to avoid the reality of his bad marriage.” Letting the writer hear herself talk—and showing that you are interested in her subject matter—not only helps her crystallize her thoughts but also helps to solidify her faith in the project.

Feedback can take the form of brainstorming. “What if you gave your narrator a secret crush?” “What if you set the story in an Alaskan village rather than downtown Seattle?” “What if you moved these seven paragraphs around?” This form of feedback stimulates the writer’s creativity, reminding him that the story’s elements are hers to manipulate and recreate as she sees fit.

Feedback can be an affirmation. “You’re doing great!” “I know you can do this!” “I can’t wait to read more!”

Feedback can be a kick in the pants. “I want to see a second draft by next Thursday at 4:00.”

Or feedback can simply be a walk around the block with a friend, because sometimes what you need more than anything is to get away from writing for a spell. Your conversation doesn’t even have to be about the story, because while you and your friend are debating whether you would want your dogs cloned or complaining about those neighbors who let their kids run wild, your right brain will be doing its thing, quietly making connections, registering patterns, and solving your plot snarl for you.

So what is the definition of feedback as it relates to writing? Given all the positive things that feedback can help achieve, and all the useful forms that feedback can take, I would define feedback as any response to writers or their work that helps them write more and write better. Better yet, I would define feedback as any response that helps writers write more, write better, and be happier (because writers are always happier when they are writing successfully).

Now that is the kind of definition that would put a positive spin on feedback. That is the kind of definition that would encourage even the most skittish writers to avail themselves of this terrific resource throughout the creative process. In fact, that is the perfect definition of feedback as it relates to writing, or at least the perfect definition according to me. And because you won’t find a better one anywhere in the dictionary, let’s all consider mine as the definitive meaning of the word.

feedback \ féd-bak (noun, often attributive): any response to writers or their work that helps them write more, write better, and be happier.

Doesn’t a definition like that make you want to race out and get some?
People are not supposed to know their IQs. Schools, for example, go to great lengths to hide IQ scores from students and their parents, locking the records in remote file cabinets where only the guidance counselor and the janitor can access them when necessary. I can tell you from personal experience that this policy of secrecy should never be lifted.

I know my IQ, and this knowledge has caused me nothing but grief. My former husband, unfortunately for him, is to blame. Steve is a clinical psychologist, and when we got married he was still in graduate school. Part of his training meant learning how to give IQ tests, so one day I agreed he could practice on me. Big mistake. In retrospect, it’s obvious that no couple should engage in this kind of behavior, because there is some information—how you eat when no one is looking, the number of your former sex partners, and exactly how smart you really are (versus how smart you think you are)—that should remain outside the bounds of marital knowledge. Still, I was a starry-eyed newlywed at the time and wanted to help out my beloved. I also was sure I could nail that IQ test to the wall.

As part of the test, Steve read off a long span of digits and made me recite them backward from memory. He showed me pictures that I had to arrange in a logical sequence. He asked me if I knew the name of the president during the Civil War. Up to this point in the testing I was doing great, imagining my IQ right up there alongside those of Albert Einstein, and Hedy Lamarr, and whoever the genius was who figured out you could eat a pineapple.

Then came object assembly, a test of spatial reasoning. My hubby handed me some puzzle pieces, told me to fit them together into a recognizable object,
and started his stopwatch. I turned the pieces this way and that, assembling them in all sorts of permutations. Were they supposed to form an elephant? A tree? An elephant stuck in a tree? As the minutes ticked away, so did the points of my IQ. My husband finally had to pry the still-disjointed pieces out of my hands. From there, things went downhill fast.

After the testing, Steve combined all the subtest scores, scaled everything in accordance with my age, and calculated my full-scale IQ. He was reluctant to tell me the number until I threatened to adopt one of those Vietnamese pigs for a pet, which happened to be all the rage at the time. I wish he had opted for the pig.

For years I suffered within the confines of my limited IQ. Like most people, I was conditioned to believe that intellectual intelligence is the best measure of human potential. As a result, I went through my young adulthood convinced I was doomed to only a slightly above-average future. Then, in the early 1990s, came a burst of good news. Two psychologists named John Mayer and Peter Salovey introduced the concept of EQ in the Journal of Personality Assessment. In case you missed that issue, EQ stands for Emotional Intelligence Quotient, and it is an alternative way to assess intelligence. Like your IQ, your EQ is also a predictor of future success, only instead of assessing your intellectual abilities, your EQ measures your emotional intelligence—how good you are at acting appropriately, based on your understanding of your own emotions and the emotions of others. A high EQ indicates you are likely to perform well at school, at home, and on the job. A low EQ means you might want to stick to something like making pottery or computer programming.

Well, as soon as I heard the news about EQ, I knew I had to know mine. For this testing, though, I was determined to get a more professional assessment, so I filled out an EQ questionnaire in a woman’s magazine. That is how I discovered that my EQ ran circles around my IQ. Suddenly I realized that I had just as much potential as all those brainiacs with higher IQs. In fact, I actually had more potential because, when it comes to success, EQ matters even more than IQ, at least according to some experts. Armed with this new insight, my approach to life changed forever and my future never looked brighter.

There is nothing like a fresh perspective.

The time has come for a fresh perspective on the feedback process, as well—one that takes into account not only the intellectual factors that support good writing and critiquing but the emotional factors that also play a crucial role in the feedback process. “Emotions?” You ask. “What do they have to do with addressing weak characterizations, thin plots, and passive verb choices?” “Everything,” I say, because if both the writer and the feedback provider are
unaware of their own and the other person’s needs, feelings, and motives, then the feedback process is likely to do more harm than good.

Consider a typical feedback scenario. On one side of the feedback process is the writer; and, let’s face it, every writer is a basket case. Yet, like Tolstoy’s unhappy families, every writer is a basket case in her own way, which is why one writer may find a particular comment helpful, while another writer may be crushed by the exact same comment and do something drastic, like chuck writing altogether and subscribe to all two hundred streaming services. On the other side of the exchange is the feedback provider. This person’s first concern, naturally, is to sound smart, which is why so many workshop peers and writing instructors often end up trouncing around the submitter’s psyche like Thing One and Thing Two in *The Cat in the Hat*, not intending to harm but generating a lot of toxic feedback nonetheless.

I remember being in a workshop years ago with a twenty-something woman who felt compelled to tell an older writer in the group that her memoir about growing up on a small farm wasn’t “meaningful.” Trying to be helpful, the twenty-something advised the woman to write about the child-welfare system or overcrowded prisons, something that actually had significance. Not surprisingly, this feedback provider went on to become a social worker. She is a good person. But her feedback was toxic, causing the writer to doubt the value of her own existence.

In my roles as workshop leader and editor, I, too, have made plenty of toxic bloopers. Maybe I said too much or too little. Maybe I worried more about what I had to say than what the writer needed to hear. Maybe I was just having a bad hair day and was distracted by the fact that my head had suddenly sprouted a hay bale. Regardless of the specifics, in each of these situations I must have left my EQ in my other purse, because the result of my feedback was that the writer ended up feeling overwhelmed or despondent or wanted me to spontaneously combust. It doesn’t get much more toxic than that.

For both writers and feedback providers, applying emotional intelligence is the key to detoxifying the feedback process. Writers, if you want to use feedback to be a better, more productive writer, you need to pay attention to your feelings. What kind of feedback motivates you? What causes you to melt down? At what stage in the writing process do you often feel stuck? How can you manage the feedback process in a way that feels supportive and productive? How are you getting in your own way when processing feedback?

Feedback providers, you need to be equally attuned to the emotional components of the process. What is your personal agenda? What impact are
your words having on the writer? Are you paying attention to what the writer really needs to hear, right at that moment, to move their work forward? When writers entrust us with their works in progress, it is our responsibility to remember that there is an actual living, breathing, sentient person on the other end of our responses.

Let me add here, in case you think I have gone off the touchy-feely deep end, that communication experts far more clinically minded than I’ll ever be have weighed the relevance of emotion in the feedback process. As a result, we now have formulas such as the “feedback sandwich,” which advises that when you are critiquing something—whether it is an employee’s job performance or a writer’s manuscript—you will meet with more receptivity if you start with a positive comment and end with a positive comment, sandwiching the downer comment in the middle. Other communication experts go even farther, advocating for a four-to-one ratio of positive to negative (or “kiss to kick”) comments.

Goodness knows, all those feeding frenzies that pass as writing workshops would be well served if only there were some kind of formula to stop the madness. But formulas for doling out positives and negatives don’t always help, especially since those terms can often be confusing. Here is what I mean. Most people think positive feedback is when a reader says something nice about a writer’s story, and negative feedback is when the reader says something critical. An example of positive feedback might be, “Gee, you write just like Stephen King.” An example of negative feedback might be, “Gee, you write just like Stephen King.” Do you see the difference? Neither do I.

To address the problem of toxic feedback, we need to remember that feedback isn’t simply an equation that can be solved with formulas and ratios; rather, it is an interaction between humans, one in which personality and temperament (not to mention alcohol, Adderall, and chocolate) all have a significant effect on the outcome. Overlook the human factor during the feedback interaction, and you are ignoring the heart that gives writing its life.

As writers and feedback providers, one of the smartest things we can do is to be conscious of the emotional factors that inspire or undermine the creative process. Whether we are on the giving or receiving end of feedback, success comes from understanding our own feelings and the feelings of others and acting accordingly. Maybe potters and computer programmers can function in their work just fine without emotional intelligence, but when the work involves humans, it’s a different story. After all, it doesn’t take an Einstein to figure out that humans are nothing if not emotional.