

HOW TO GIVE AND RECEIVE USEFUL FEEDBACK

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When I was a nineteen-year-old film student, I gave my boyfriend a script for feedback. He got back to me with only one comment: there was a subplot he liked. He pointed out that there were two characters with cool chemistry between them and that every time he got to the part about them, he got into the script.

With that one piece of feedback, I put the script away and wrote a new one in which that subplot became the main plot, and those two characters were the lead parts. The script sold on spec, was made for two million dollars, paid off my student loans, and garnered twenty awards at international film festivals.

I can't resist spelling out the moral of the story: positive feedback is more useful than any criticism a writer will ever get.

Most writers spend the rewriting process obsessing over the "problems" in the script. That's the reason that most unfinished scripts remain unfinished scripts, and it's the reason that rewriting is a notoriously painful process. If we felt good about our work, rewriting would be a fun and enjoyable challenge.

Beginning the revision process with a list of "problems" is the fast track to discouragement. Without clarity about the strengths of a script, a writer has no perspective on the work. I recommend to writers that as they first go through their outline or first draft, they circle everything they like without paying mind to anything else. What you like in your script is your best clue as to what the revision calls for. It calls for more of *that!*

As a writer and script consultant, there is one truism that I will swear by: *every script has something unique and wonderful about it.* If you're reading someone's script who has asked you for feedback, that kernel is what you are looking for. Even scripts that take days to read, that are utter drab, the ones that you think even a page-1 rewrite couldn't save - even those scripts have at least one thing in them that is priceless. If you can pick out the one golden nugget in the script and genuinely call the writer's attention to it, your feedback will be invaluable.

Giving positive feedback to a writer is like handing them a flashlight as they tread into the dark, wild woods of the revision process. If they can remember what is good about their script, if they can remember the kernel of inspiration that made them write it, they will be able to expand upon it and make more of it. If you read a script and can't find a single piece of goodness in it, than be honest with the writer by telling them that you are not qualified to comment on their work.

Sometimes that little piece of goodness is a single scene that's full of spark. Sometimes it's a character. Sometimes it's the *intention* of the writer, even if the intention wasn't realized. Telling a writer that you appreciate what he's trying to do, before explaining why he didn't pull it off, will keep the writer inspired in their efforts.

When giving feedback, folks often make the unfortunate assumption that writers know what works well in their script, and that they are simply missing information about what sucks in it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most writers spend enormous amounts of time (if not all their time!) thinking about what doesn't work in their script. Even excellent and experienced writers have no perspective on what they do well. That's the reason it takes us so long to write. If we paid attention to what we do well, we would all be prolific.

Because of the addiction to think of what's wrong, positive feedback is the best way to get a writer to think outside the box. If nothing else, positive feedback will keep the writer writing, and we all know that writing is the only way to become a good writer. And don't worry about making a writer's head too big. Writers have big egos only because our self-esteem is the size of a pinhead. These big loud egos are just some weird and silly way that we cover up how insecure we actually feel.

I make it a policy to begin my feedback with as an exhaustive a list of positive feedback as I can. When you're handing a writer that flashlight, you want to hand them the biggest possible flashlight and throw some batteries in. With that flashlight at hand, writers can illuminate those dark and dreary woods, and *see for themselves* what they need to fix. Instead of thinking that their second act sucks, they will think of that one scene that pops out and follow it up with other scenes that exploit that element to the fullest.

Positive feedback does not come at the expense of being rigorous. Your feedback ought to come with the highest expectations of the writer. If anything, it has been my experience that negative feedback generally comes with a set of low expectations, which is why they drive writers towards quitting. When I help someone develop their script, I ask them to think of the best scene in the script, and then I put out the expectation that in the final draft, *every scene* will be *that good*.

If you're not accustomed to lavishing writers with positive feedback, I challenge you to try *only giving positive feedback*. When the writer begs you to criticize them (yes, we unfortunate souls are that misguided) tell them that you're on a diet and have given up criticizing for three months.

We writers are like abused children who are prone to pass on the abuse we've endured to other writers. You know the type of feedback I'm talking about: those long random strings of *this-didn't-work-and-I-didn't-like-this-and-I-didn't-care-about-this-person-and-I-didn't-get* and on and on and on. I'm of the opinion that there is only one thing to do with that kind of feedback: throw it out without reading it. Even if there's some kernel of intelligence in there, it's not worth mining through all that bitterness to find it. No writer has the self-esteem to withstand that kind of injury.

The other type of harmful feedback is what I call the "public opinion poll" feedback. It sounds strange, but when someone asks you for feedback, your personal tastes and opinions are not that relevant or useful to the task at hand. Leave it to the producer to gather a focus group. There are genres that I don't particularly like, but when I look at a script of that genre, I'm there at the service of the writer's intention. The writer is not taking a poll to see if people like this type of story.

So is negative feedback ever useful? Absolutely. But here's the trick to it: *most scripts share more or less the same set of problems*. If you're being original in your negative criticisms, you're probably just venting out some bitterness. While the good stuff about scripts is always original and interesting, the

bad stuff is pretty much always the same: first plot point is on page 70, we don't know what the main character wants, there are no stakes, the premise repeats itself in the second act instead of exploring different angles of itself, there is not enough conflict, there are competing stories or the subplots don't connect to the main plot, the characters are forced to comply with plot points, the main problem is tacked on and does not relate to the character's emotional journey. There may be a couple others, but those are the standard ones. Your negative feedback, if it's truly useful, is probably the same negative feedback you've given a million times.

Instead of listing off all the problems in a script, I find that writers move fastest when they focus on just one or two key issues. If you've studied the craft, you will know what the key problem in the script is and you will be able to point it out. When a writer tackles one key issue, they inevitably discover for themselves what all the other problems are.

Is this also true of scripts that need a page-1 rewrite? It's more true of those scripts. You point to just one problem, and bam! -- you've pushed the first domino piece. Now you can sit back and beam at the writer while they have a series of "Ah-huh's!" as all the other dominos fall on their own. Scripts in more advanced stages generally require a longer, more detailed list of adjustments, but those scripts are far and few between.

Until you have studied for a while and written a few scripts yourself, try doing what my boyfriend did: name the one good thing, and you will have given your cherished and beloved writer the ticket to success.

A FINAL WORD: HOW TO RECEIVE FEEDBACK

As for receiving feedback: that too is a skill in it of itself. I tell my students to ignore most of the feedback that they receive. You are better off getting excellent notes from one experienced writer, than gathering the opinions of ten people. I guarantee you that you are not aware of the damage that feedback can cause. At a painting studio once, someone casually passed by while I was working and said that he loved my painting but didn't like the green. I made nothing of it. Two years later, it dawned on me that I hadn't used green in two years. The injury is deeper and quieter than you'll ever know.

When you do receive good feedback, you still need to stay the boss of your piece. You know better than anyone what you were intending on accomplishing. I love it when I offer writers suggestions and they dismiss it: "Naw... my character wouldn't do that... that's not really the theme of the story... that's not what I'm trying to do here..." There's nothing I love more than writers who trust their own thinking. When they correct me, they are always right. Honestly. That's your mantra my friend: trust your mind. You know what is right for your script. And if you make mistakes, and I guarantee you will, they will be your mistakes. You will learn from your mistakes. You will not learn from making other people's mistakes.

The litmus test to whether you're getting useful feedback is whether you enjoy it. Whether the feedback is positive or critical, receiving accurate feedback is extremely enjoyable. I've given consultations to writers facing a page-1 rewrite and they still walk away with a bounce in their step, excited to start the next draft. When you receive good feedback, you know concretely what you

need to do next and you feel inspired to keep going. If you're not sure whether the feedback you're getting is accurate, that's your litmus test: do you feel like taking a nap, or is there a bounce in your step and a twinkle in your eye.

When you're working professionally, you will receive feedback from development executives and producers. The quality of feedback will vary tremendously, but that shouldn't matter to you. If you're being paid to incorporate someone's opinion, you bite the bullet and do what you can. Sometimes it will improve the script, and if you incorporate it creatively, you don't have to let it diminish your script. But because these folks are temporarily in a position of power over you, that's no reason to internalize their opinions and assume they know better than you, unless what they're saying truly makes sense to you. And certainly don't extend this courtesy to your writing group members or friends who are giving you feedback. If they're not paying you to rewrite your work, don't even try to incorporate their suggestions.

The most important skill to receiving feedback is to learn how to tune most of it out.

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