5 Ways to Give Better Feedback on Documents for Technical Teams

Giving feedback on team members' writing is critical, but reviewers often find that they:

- Spend too much time giving feedback (seriously, time yourself and see how much time you spend)
- "Fix" a lot of the writing
- Feel frustrated that they aren't seeing improvements in team's writing

This may be shocking, but often the documents aren't improving because the feedback writers receive is ineffective. Bad feedback (however well-meaning) doesn't result in better documents and can even crush writers.

So, here are five ways by which you can give better feedback to your writers that will result in more effective documents.

1. Be specific.

Pull out specific wording from the document and explain the "what" (what needs to be changed) and the "why" (why it is problematic). Be as specific with your language as possible. If you're unable to explain the "why" perhaps what you're pointing to is more of a pet peeve than an actual problem.

"Unclear" and "awkward" aren't specific or useful. Why? Because what's "unclear" to you may not be "unclear" to the writer. Also, if the writer thought that something was "unclear" or "awkward," they wouldn't have written it in that way in the first place.

2. Ask questions.

Questions encourage writers to use their critical thinking skills to think about, and reflect upon, their writing choices and where they could go in their revisions. Questions also help remedy possible confusion between the reviewer and the writer.

For example, these questions encourage writers to think about the purpose behind their writing moves and how they could change the writing if necessary. They also give the writer a chance to explain their choices to the reviewer.

- What did you mean in this passage

Hurley Write, INC.

- How does this detail contribute to your claim?
- Does your target reader have the knowledge to understand this concept, or do you need to explain it?
- Can you confidently say that this paragraph includes only one idea? If so, what's that idea? If not, then how can you reorganize and/or break up the paragraph so that it does have one main idea?
- What action do you want the reader to take?
- What information does the reader need to take that action?

3. Pull out patterns and explain them to the writer.

What patterns of error do you see in the writing? Is the writer leaving out reasoning that connects evidence to the claim? Is the writer including too much detail for the targeted reader? Is the writer making judgments when the writing is supposed to be objective? Conversely, is the writer being too objective when an analysis or opinion is expected?

Identify the pattern and explain to the writer why it's problematic; doing this will make the writer aware of the pattern so that they can identify it and fix it for themselves. Or, if you can't explain why something is problematic, are you commenting because it's truly problematic or is it because you don't like how it was written or you wouldn't have written it that way?

4. Give a path toward revision.

Offer ideas to guide the writer toward the appropriate revision.

On the surface, writing "Clean this up" or "Make this sentence crisper" may feel faster than suggesting revisions. However, long term, giving writers possible paths toward revision encourages them to critically think through their document and apply your suggestions to future documents, while giving them a feeling that you're collaborating with them rather than commanding them from a position of superiority and control.

5. Tell the writer what they're doing well.

Writers often fall into the trap of "no news is good news." Yet, if writers are doing things well that you'd like to see them continue to do, they won't know unless you tell them.

Focusing on the positive can also foster that sense of collaboration that's so important in the writing/review process.

Hurley Write, INC.

Application Tool

Element	Answer
Do my comments encourage the writer to think critically about the document and revisions?	
Have I explained the reasons for my suggestions?	
Do my comments give the writer an actionable path forward for their revisions?	
Have I told the writer what they're doing well?	
Have I phrased my suggestions as questions in most cases?	
Have I identified patterns and explained them to the writer?	

Want more?

Check out our:

- The Writing Docs Podcast (https://www.hurleywrite.com/podcasts)
- Business Writing Blog (https://www.hurleywrite.com/blog/)
- Whitepapers (https://www.hurleywrite.com/white-papers)
- Live Webinar Series (https://www.hurleywrite.com/webinar-videos)
- LinkedIn (https://www.linkedin.com/company/hurley-write-inc-/)

Or contact us at info@hurleywrite.com or 1-877-249-7483. You can also send us a message here: Contact Hurley Write, Inc. (https://www.hurleywrite.com/contact).

Hurley Write, INC.