

## **Guidelines for offering feedback**

(adapted from Reynolds and Russell 2008)

- **Use your time effectively:**
  - Consider holding off making any comments until you've read through the whole draft. This allows you to get a sense of the overall writing, to ensure your comments focus on the real issues, and may save you having to amend earlier comments. Taking notes as you read, of course, is often a good idea.
  - Consider letting students' stated concerns/goals guide how you organize your commentary. This gives you a focus while reading, as well as a set of topics on which to center your comments. Of course, if you identify issues that you perceive to be of more concern than those the student raises, you should comment on them.
- **Be mindful of your tone:** There's no need to go overboard with niceties, but consider integrating a couple of positive, supportive comments for what seems to be working well, especially at the beginning of your comments. You might use language such as: "I like how you ..." or "I'm impressed by..." Essentially, think about ways to achieve the balance between being honest and congenial that you'd aim for if you were talking face-to-face.
- **Emphasize the fact that you are one of several readers in students' target audience:** Several faculty members read each thesis, and issues that bother you may not bother other readers, and vice versa. In fact, students often receive diverse, or even contradictory comments from their readers. Keep in mind for yourself, and emphasize to the student, that you are just one reader, and consider prefacing your comments with phrases such as, "As one reader ..." or "From my perspective ...." Students cannot feel free to make their own writing choices if faculty comments are framed as the definitive summary of what does and does not work in their writing.
- **Ask questions:** Your job is not to "fix" the thesis, but rather to help students develop as writers by teaching them how readers interpret their writing. It can be very helpful to ask questions about the writing instead of making suggestions for improvement. Students must reflect on these questions and make writing choices to develop as writers. For example, you might ask, "Your research statement says *what* you did but does not explicitly state *why* you did it. What was your hypothesis?" Or, if you think a certain paragraph doesn't belong in a certain location, you can describe your response as a reader as, "When I got to this paragraph, I wondered what it was doing here – it seemed like you had been talking about A, but all of a sudden, here's this paragraph about B! Can you help your readers understand how this paragraph should fit in?" The student may need better transitions, or may have left out something important that will clarify matters, or he or she may see that the paragraph doesn't really belong. But let the writer make those decisions – if you say, "Take that one out!" you are making the writing decision for her/him.
- **Look for patterns:** Instead of going through a draft and pointing out every error, look for patterns of error. If, for example, you notice wordiness, see how often it occurs; if you see one transition that troubles you, check out the others. Pointing

out patterns and letting students search for specific examples will ultimately be more efficient for faculty and more useful for the students' development as a writer.

- **Beware of taking over:** Avoid the following, as easy and tempting as they may be:
  - Revising students' hypothesis or research goals
  - Rewriting individual sentences
  - Telling students to use a different word (and suggesting what the new word should be)
  - Telling students to remove a paragraph or to move it to a specific place
- **Know the limitations of this type of work:** In the time you spend with a draft, you may find many writing problems. Keep in mind, however, that students may be overwhelmed (and dismayed) if presented with a list of fifteen things to work on. Therefore, it is essential that you prioritize your comments. Use signals such as, "If you only had time to work on one thing, I think you could increase clarity the most by considering ..." or "The three areas that gave me the most trouble as a reader were ...."
- **Make your organization explicit:** Consider simple visual strategies (bullet points, numbering, boldface, etc.) to keep your content clear and to emphasize your main points.
- **Refer the student to other resources:** As a scientist, no one expects you to be the expert on all issues related to writing. If you sense that there is a problem with the writing but are unsure, feel free to refer students to a textbook on scientific writing (such as Cook 1985, Day and Gastel 2006, Pechenik 2006, Williams 2003, Zinnser 2006) or to your institution's Writing Center. It is particularly helpful to point out several places in the thesis where problems occurs, and then let students try to resolve the issues using the resources you suggest.

## References

- Cook, C. K. 1985. *Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Day, R. A., and B. Gastel. 2006. *How to write and publish a scientific paper*. Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut.
- Pechenik, J. A. 2006. *A Short Guide to Writing about Biology*. Longman, New York.
- Reynolds, J. A., and V. Russell. 2008. Can You Hear Us Now? A comparison of peer review quality when students give audio versus written feedback. *Writing Across the Curriculum* 19: 29-44.
- Williams, J. M. 2003. *Style: Ten lessons in clarity and grace*. Longman, New York.
- Zinnser, W. 2006. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. Harper Collins, New York.