

Chapter 8: Feedback in the Writing Process

Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.

–Winston Churchill

Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain but it takes character and self control to be understanding and forgiving.

–Dale Carnegie

He has a right to criticize, who has a heart to help.

–Abraham Lincoln

Speaking is silver, listening is gold.

–Turkish proverb

Getting Started

Introductory Exercises

1. Find a news Web site that includes a forum for reader comments on the articles. Read an article that interests you and the comments readers have posted about it. Please share your results with classmates.
2. Interview a colleague, coworker, or someone in a business or industry you are involved or interested in. Ask them how they receive feedback about their work. Please share your results with classmates.
3. Review a document (online or offline) and create at least two different examples of how a reader may respond to the content and presentation. Please share your results with classmates.

The feedback loop is your connection to your audience. It's always there, even if you haven't noticed it. In today's business environment, across a variety of careers and industries, people are taking serious note of the power of feedback. How does a viral marketing campaign take off? How does an article get passed along Twitter? How does a movie review, and its long list of discussion thread comments, influence your viewing decisions? How do Wikipedia, the Global Business Network, or customer book reviews on Amazon.com impact us, alter our views, or motivate us to write?

“The feedback loop provides you with an open and direct channel of communication with your community, and that represents a never-available-before opportunity” (Powel, 2009). The feedback on what you write has never been as direct and interactive as today's online environment can provide, and the need to anticipate, lead, listen, and incorporate lessons learned has never been greater. This chapter examines feedback in its many forms and how it can and will have an impact on what you write, and how you write it.

What you write does not exist in a vacuum, unaffected by the world around it. It may be that what you write is read by a relatively small group of readers, or by a large target audience who may have only read a few of your messages. Either way, what you write is part of the communication process, and it makes an impact whether you know it or not.

This chapter recognizes the writing process and its components with an emphasis on feedback. Do you know the difference between indirect and direct feedback? Are you aware of effective strategies to elicit valuable feedback? How do you know if the feedback is valid? To what extent, and in what ways, should you adapt and adjust your writing based on feedback? These are central questions in the writing process, and any skilled business writer recognizes the need for improvement based on solid feedback. You may not always enjoy receiving feedback, but you should always give it due thought and consideration. Failure to change and adapt has many unfortunate consequences (Johnson, 1998). It is up to you to seek good information and to separate the reliable from the unreliable in your goal of improving your business writing.

References

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Powel, J. (2009). *33 million people in the room: How to create, influence, and a run a successful business with social networking*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press/Pearson Education.

8.1 Diverse Forms of Feedback

Learning Objectives

1. Describe feedback as part of the writing process.
2. Compare and contrast indirect and direct feedback.
3. Understand internal and external feedback.
4. Discuss diverse forms of feedback.

Just as you know that religion and politics are two subjects that often provoke emotional responses, you also recognize that once you are aware of someone’s viewpoint you can choose to refrain from discussing certain topics, or may change the way you address them. The awareness of bias and preference, combined with the ability to adapt the message before it is sent, increases the probability of reception and successful communication. Up until now we have focused on knowing the audience’s expectation and the assignment directions, as well as effective strategies for writing and production. Now, to complete the communication process, to close the writing process, we need to gather and evaluate feedback.

You may receive feedback from peers, colleagues, editors, or supervisors, but actual feedback from the intended audience can be rare. Imagine that you work in the marketing department of an engineering company and have written an article describing a new kind of water pump that operates with little maintenance and less energy consumption than previous models. Your company has also developed an advertising campaign introducing this new pump to the market and has added it to their online sales menu. Once your article has been reviewed and posted, it may be accessed online by a reader in another country who is currently researching water pumps that fall within your product range. That reader will see a banner ad displayed across the header of the Web page, with the name of your company prominently displayed in the reader’s native language, even if your article is in English. Ads of this nature are called contextually relevant ads. An example is Google’s Feedback Ad function, which incorporates the content of the site and any related search data to provide information to potential customers. If the reader found your article through the German version of Google, Google.de, the ad will display the Adwords, or text in an advertisement, in German.

As the author, you may never receive direct feedback on your article, but you may receive significant indirect feedback. Google can report the “hits” and links to your Web site, and your company’s information technology department can tell you about the hits on your Web site from Germany, where they originated, and whether the visitor initiated a sales order for the pump. If the sale was left incomplete, they will know when the basket or order was abandoned or became inactive in the purchase process. If the sale was successful, your sales department can provide feedback in the form of overall sales as well as information on specific customers. This in turn allows you an opportunity for postsales communication and additional feedback.

The communication process depends on a series of components that are always present. If you remove one or more, the process disintegrates. You need a source and a receiver, even if those roles alternate and blur. You need a message and a channel, or multiples of each in divergent ratios of signal strength and clarity. You also need context and environment, including both the psychological expectations of the interaction as well as the physical aspects present. Interference is also part of any communication process. Because interference—internal or external—is always present, as a skilled business writer, you have learned how to understand and anticipate it so that you can get your message across to your audience.

The final step in the communication process is feedback. It contributes to the transactional relationship in communication, and serves as part of the cycling and recycling of information, content, negotiations, relationships, and meaning between the source and receiver. Because feedback is so valuable to a business writer, you will welcome it and use strategies to overcome any interfering factors that may compromise reception and limit feedback.

Feedback is defined as a receiver's response to a source, and can come in many forms. From the change in the cursor arrow as you pass over a link as a response to the reader's indication, via the mouse, touch screen, or similar input device, as a nonverbal response, to one spoken out loud during the course of a conversation, feedback is always present, even if we fail to capture or attend to the information as it is displayed. Let's examine several diverse types of feedback.

Indirect Feedback

If you have worked in an office you may have heard of the grapevine, and may already be aware that it often carries whines instead of wine. The **grapevine** is the unofficial, informal communication network within an organization, and is often characterized by rumor, gossip, and innuendo. The grapevine often involves information that is indirect, speculative, and not immediately verifiable. That makes it less than reliable, but understandably attractive and interesting to many.

In the same way, **indirect feedback** is a response that does not directly come from the receiver or source. The receiver may receive the message, and may become the source of the response, but they may not communicate that response directly to you, the author. Your ability to track who accesses your Web page, what they read, and how long their visit lasts can be a source of feedback that serves to guide your writing. You may also receive comments, e-mails, or information from individuals within your organization about what customers have told them; this is another source of indirect feedback. The fact that the information is not communicated directly may limit its use or reliability, but it does have value. All forms of feedback have some measure of value.

Direct Feedback

You post an article about your company's new water pump and when you come back to it an hour later there are 162 comments. As you scroll through the comments you find that ten potential customers are interested in learning more, while the rest debate the specifications and technical abilities of the pump. This direct response to your writing is another form of feedback.

Direct feedback is a response that comes from the receiver. Direct feedback can be both verbal and nonverbal, and it may involve signs, symbols, words, or sounds that are unclear or difficult to understand. You may send an e-mail to a customer who inquired about your water pump, offering to send a printed brochure and have a local sales representative call to evaluate how suitable your pump would be for the customer's particular application. In order to do so, you will need the customer's mailing address, physical location, and phone number. If the customer replies simply with "Thanks!"—no address, no phone number—how do you interpret this direct feedback? Communication is dynamic and complex, and it is no easy task to understand or predict. One aspect of the process, however, is predictable: feedback is always part of the communication process.

Just as nonverbal gestures do not appear independent of the context in which the communication interaction occurs, and often overlap, recycle, and repeat across the interaction, the ability to identify clear and direct feedback can be a significant challenge. In face-to-face communication, yawns and frequent glances at the clock may serve as a clear signal (direct feedback) for lack of interest, but direct feedback for the writer is often less obvious. It is a rare moment when the article you wrote is read in your presence and direct feedback is immediately available. Often feedback comes to the author long after the article is published.

Internal Feedback

We usually think of feedback as something that can only come from others, but in the case of internal feedback, we

can get it from ourselves. **Internal feedback** is generated by the source in response to the message created by that same source. You, as the author, will be key to the internal feedback process. This may involve reviewing your document before you send it or post it, but it also may involve evaluation from within your organization.

On the surface, it may appear that internal feedback cannot come from anyone other than the author, but that would be inaccurate. If we go back to the communication process and revisit the definitions of source and receiver, we can clearly see how each role is not defined by just one person or personality, but instead within the transactional nature of communication by function. The source creates and the receiver receives. Once the communication interaction is initiated, the roles often alternate, as in the case of an e-mail or text message “conversation” where two people take turns writing.

When you write a document for a target audience—for example, a group of farmers who will use the pumps your company produces to move water from source to crop—you will write with them in mind as the target receiver. Until they receive the message, the review process is internal to your organization, and feedback is from individuals and departments other than the intended receiver.

You may have your company’s engineering department confirm the technical specifications of the information you incorporated into the document, or have the sales department confirm a previous customer’s address. In each case, you as the author are receiving internal feedback about content you produced, and in some ways, each department is contributing to the message prior to delivery.

Internal feedback starts with you. Your review of what you write is critical. You are the first and last line of responsibility for your writing. As the author, it is your responsibility to insure your content is

- correct,
- clear,
- concise,
- ethical.

When an author considers whether the writing in a document is correct, it is important to interpret correctness broadly. The writing needs to be appropriate for the context of audience’s expectations and assignment directions. Some writing may be technically correct, even polished, and still be incorrect for the audience or the assignment. Attention to what you know about your reading audience (e.g., their reading levels and educational background) can help address the degree to which what you have written is correct for its designated audience and purpose.

Correctness also involves accuracy: questions concerning true, false, and somewhere in between. A skilled business writer verifies all sources for accuracy and sleeps well knowing that no critic can say his or her writing is inaccurate. If you allow less than factual information into your writing, you open the door to accusations of false information that could be interpreted as a fraudulent act with legal ramifications. Keep notes on where and when you accessed Web sites, where you found the information you cite or include, and be prepared to back up your statements with a review of your sources.

Writing correctly also includes providing current, up-to-date information. Most business documents place an emphasis on the time-sensitivity of the information. It doesn’t make sense to rely on sales figures from two years ago when you can use sales figures from last year. Neither does citing old articles, outdated materials, and sources that may or may not apply to the given discussion. Information that is not current can and does serve useful purposes, but often requires qualification on why it is relevant, with particular attention to a current context.

Business writing also needs to be clear, otherwise it will fail in its purpose to inform or persuade readers. Unclear writing can lead to misunderstandings that consume time and effort to undo. An old saying in military communications is “Whatever *can* be misunderstood, *will* be misunderstood.” To give yourself valuable internal feedback about the clarity of your document, try to pretend you know nothing more about the subject than your least informed reader does. Can you follow the information provided? Are your points supported?

In the business environment, time is money, and bloated writing wastes time. The advice from the best-selling style guide by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White to “omit needless words” is always worth bearing in mind.

Finally, a skilled business writer understands he or she does not stand alone. Ethical consideration of the words

you write, what they represent, and their possible consequences are part of the responsibility of a business writer. The writer offers information to a reading audience and if their credibility is lost, future interactions are far less likely to occur. Customer relationship management requires consideration of the context of the interaction, and all communication occurs with the context of community, whether that relationship is readily apparent or not. Brand management reinforces the associations and a relationship with the product or services that would be negatively compromised should the article, and by association, author and company, be found less than truthful. Advertising may promote features, but false advertising can and does lead to litigation. The writer represents a business or organization, but also represents a family and a community. For a family or community to function, there has to be a sense of trust amid the interdependence.

External Feedback

How do you know what you wrote was read and understood? Essentially, how do you know communication interaction has occurred? Writing, reading, and action based on the exchange of symbolic information is a reflection of the communication process. Assessment of the feedback from the receiver is part of a writer's responsibility. Increasingly Web-based documents allow for interaction and enhancement of feedback, but you will still be producing documents that may exist as hard copies. Your documents may travel to places you don't expect and cannot predict. Feedback comes in many forms and in this part of our discussion we focus on answering that essential question, assessing interaction, and gathering information from it. [External feedback](#) involves a response from the receiver. Receivers, in turn, become a source of information themselves. Attention to the channel they use (how they communicate feedback), as well as nonverbal aspects like time (when they send it), can serve you on this and future documents.

Hard Copy Documents and External Feedback

We'll start this discussion with traditional, stand-alone hard copy documents in mind before we discuss electronic documents, including Web-based publications. Your business or organization may communicate in written forms across time zones and languages via electronic communication, but some documents are still produced on paper. Offline technologies like a copy machine or a printer are still the tools you will be using as a normal course of business.

Letters are a common way of introducing information to clients and customers, and you may be tasked to produce a document that is printed and distributed via "snail mail," or the traditional post mail services. Snail mail is a term that reflects the time delay associated with the physical production, packaging, and delivery of a document. Legal documents are still largely in hard copy print form. So too are documents that address the needs of customers and clients that do not, or prefer not to, access information electronically.

Age is one characteristic of an audience that may be tempting to focus on when considering who may need to receive a letter in hard copy form, but you may be surprised about this. In a 2009 study of U.S. Internet use, the Pew Research Center (Horrigan, 2009) found that between 2008 and 2009, broadband Internet use by senior citizens increased from 20 percent to 30 percent, and broadband use by baby boomers (people born 1945–1963) increased from 50 percent to 61 percent.

Socioeconomic status is a better characteristic to focus on when considering hard copy documents. Lack of access to a computer and the Internet is a reality for most of the world's population. It's often stated that half of the world's population will never make a phone call in their lifetime, and even though the references for the claims are widespread and diverse, the idea that there are people without access to a phone is striking for many Westerners. While cell phones are increasingly allowing poor and rural populations to skip the investment in landline networks and wireless Internet is a leapfrog technology that changes everything, cell phones and computers are still prohibitively expensive for many.

Figure 8.1



In an increasingly interconnected world, feedback is important to business success.

Jurgen Appelo – [FIGURE 11.2](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Let's say you work for a major bank on the West Coast of the United States. You have been assigned to write a letter offering a refinance option to a select, previously screened audience composed of individuals who share several common characteristics: high-wage earners with exceptional credit scores. How will you best get the attention of this audience? If you sent an e-mail it might get deleted as spam, or unwanted e-mail that often lacks credibility and may even be dangerous. The audience is small and you have a budget for hard copy production of documents that includes a line item for mailing costs. If the potential customer receives the letter from your department delivered by an overnight courier like FedEx, they may be more likely to receive your message.

In 2005, Wells Fargo Bank did exactly that. They mailed a letter of introduction outlining an opportunity to refinance at no cost to the consumer, targeting a group identified as high profit and low risk. The channels selected—print-based documents on letterhead with the mode of delivery sure to get attention—were designed to prompt a response. The letter introduced the program, highlighted the features, and discussed why the customers were among a group of individuals to whom this offer was being extended (Diaz, 2005).

In the letter, the bank specifically solicited a customer response, a form of feedback, via e-mail and/or phone to establish dialogue. One could measure feedback in terms of response rate; in terms of verification of data on income, debt outstanding on loans, and current home appraisal values; and in terms of channel and how customers chose to respond. All these forms of feedback have value to the author.

Hard copy documents can be a challenge when it comes to feedback, but that doesn't mean it is impossible to involve them in the feedback process. It's important to remember that even in the late 1990s, most business documents were print-based. From sales reports to product development reports, they were printed, copied, bound, and distributed, all at considerable cost.

If one purpose of your letter is to persuade the client or customer to reply by e-mail or phone, one way to assess feedback is the [response rate](#), or the number of replies in relation to the number of letters sent. If your report on a new product is prepared for internal use and is targeted to a specific division within your company, their questions in relation to the document may serve as feedback. If your memo produces more questions than the one it was intended to address in terms of policy, the negative feedback may highlight the need for revision. In each case, hard copy documents are often assessed through oral and written feedback.

External Feedback in a Virtual Environment

Rather than focus on the dust on top of documents once produced, perhaps read, and sometimes forgotten, let's examine document feedback from the interactive world that gathers no dust. One challenge when the Web was young involved the accurate assessment of audience. Why is that relevant to a business writer? Because you produce content for a specific audience with a specific purpose, and the degree to which it is successful has some relation to its value. Imagine that you produced a pilot television program with all the best characters, excellent dialogue, and big name stars portraying the characters, only to see the pilot flop. If you had all the right elements in a program, how could it fail? It failed to attract an audience. Television often uses **ratings**, or measurements of the estimated number of viewers, to measure success. Nielsen is the leading market research company associated with television ratings and online content. Programs that get past a pilot or past a first season do so because they have good ratings and are ranked above other competing programs. All programs compete with each other within a time slot or across a genre. Those that are highly ranked—those that receive the largest number of viewers—can command higher budgets, and often receive more advertising dollars. Those programs that reach few people are often canceled and replaced with other programs that have great characters, solid writing, and hopeful stars as the cycle continues.

Business writers experience a process of competition, ratings, feedback, and renewal within the world of online publishing. Business writers want their content to be read. Just as companies developed ways to measure the number of viewers of a given television program, which led to rankings that influenced which programs survived and prospered and which were canceled, the Web has a system of keeping track of what gets read and by whom. Perhaps you've heard of hits, as in how many hits a Web site receives, but have you stopped to consider what hits represent within our discussion of feedback?

First, let's examine what a **hit** is. When a browser, like Internet Explorer or Firefox, receives a file from a Web server, it is considered a hit. Your document may be kept on our company's **Web server**, or a computer dedicated to serving the online requests for information via the Internet. The Web server receives a request from the user and sends the files associated with the page; every Web page contains several files including graphics, images, and text. Each file request and receipt between server and browser counts as a hit, regardless of how many files each page contains. So let's say you created an online sales catalog with twenty images per page, twenty boxed text descriptions, and all the files for indicating color, size, and quantity. Your document could have quite a few hits with just one page request and only one viewer.

Does a large number of hits on your document mean that it was successful? Not necessarily. Hits or page views have largely been discredited as a reliable measure of a document's effectiveness, popularity, or audience size. In fact, the word "hits" is sometimes humorously referred to as being the acronym for *how idiots track success*.

Page views are a count of how many times a Web page is viewed, irrespective of the number of files it contains. Each time a user or reader views the page counts as one page view.

Nielsen Online and Source.com are two companies that provide Web traffic rating services, and Google has also developed services to better enable advertisers to target specific audiences¹. They commonly track the number of unique visits a reader makes to a Web site, and use **cookies**, or small, time-encoded files that identify specific users, as a means to generate data.

Another way to see whether a document has been read online is to present part of the article with a "reveal full article" button after a couple of paragraphs. If someone wants to read the entire article, the button needs to be clicked in order to display the remainder of the content. Because this feature can be annoying for readers, many content providers also display a "turn off reveal full article" button to provide an alternative; Yahoo! News is an example of a site that gives readers this option.

Jon Kleinberg's HITS (hyperlink-induced topic search) algorithm has become a popular and more effective way to rate Web pages (Kleinberg, 1998). HITS ranks documents by the links within the document, presuming that a good document is one that incorporates and references, providing links to, other Web documents while also being frequently cited by other documents. **Hubs**, or documents with many links, are related to **authority pages**, or frequently cited documents. This relationship of hubs and authority is mutually reinforcing, and if you can imagine a Web universe of one hundred pages, the one with the most links and which is most frequently referred to wins.

As a business writer you will naturally want to incorporate authoritative sources and relevant content, but you will also want to attract and engage your audience, positioning your document as hub and authority within that universe. Feedback in the form of links and references may be one way to assess your online document.

User-Generated Feedback

Moving beyond the Web tracking aspects of feedback measurement in terms of use, let's examine user-generated responses to your document. Let's say you have reviewed the posts left by unique users to the comments section of the article. This, in some ways, serves the same purpose as letters to the editor in traditional media. In newspapers, magazines, and other offline forms of print media, an edition is produced with a collection of content and then delivered to an audience. The audience includes members of a subscriber-based group with common interests, as well as those who read a magazine casually while waiting in the doctor's office. If an article generated interest, enjoyment, or outrage (or demanded correction), people would write letters in response to the content. Select responses would be published in the next edition. There is a time delay associated with this system that reflects the preparation, production, and distribution cycle of the medium. If the magazine is published once a month, it takes a full month for user feedback to be presented in print—for example, letters commenting on an article in the March issue would appear in the "Letters" section of the May issue.

With the introduction of online media, the speed of this feedback loop has been greatly increased. Public relations announcements, product reviews, and performance data of your organization are often made available internally or externally via electronic communication. If you see a factual error in an article released internally, within minutes you may be able to respond with an e-mail and a file attachment with a document that corrects the data. In the same way, if the document is released externally, you can expect that feedback from outside your organization will be quick. Audience members may debate your description of the water pump, or openly question its effectiveness in relation to its specifications; they may even post positive comments. Customer comments, like letters to the editor, can be a valuable source of feedback.

Customer reviews and similar forms of user-generated content are increasingly common across the Internet. Written communication is often chosen as the preferred format; from tweets to blogs and commentary pages, to threaded, theme-based forums, person-to-person exchange is increasingly common. Still, as a business writer, you will note that even with the explosion of opinion content, the tendency for online writers to cite a Web page with a link can and does promote interaction.

It may sound strange to ask this question, but is all communication interaction good? Let's examine examples of interaction and feedback and see if we can arrive at an answer.

You may have heard that one angry customer can influence several future customers, but negative customer reviews in the online information age can make a disproportionate impact in a relatively short time. While the online environment can be both fast and effective in terms of distribution and immediate feedback, it can also be quite ineffective, depending on the context. "Putting ads in front of Facebook users is like hanging out at a party and interrupting conversations to hawk merchandise," according to Newsweek journalist Daniel Lyons. Relationships between users, sometimes called social graphs, are a reflection of the dynamic process of communication, and they hold value, but translating that value into sales can be a significant challenge.

Overall, as we have seen, your goal as a business writer is to meet the audience and employer's expectations in a clear and concise way. Getting your content to a hub position, and including authoritative references, is a great way to make your content more relevant to your readers. Trying to facilitate endless discussions may be engaging and generate feedback, but may not translate into success. Facebook serves as a reminder that you want to provide solid content and attend to the feedback. People who use Google already have something in mind when they perform a search, and if your content provides what readers are looking for, you may see your page views and effectiveness increase.

Interviews

Interviews provide an author with the opportunity to ask questions of, and receive responses from, audience members. Since interviews take considerable time and cannot easily be scaled up to address large numbers of readers, they are most often conducted with a small, limited audience. An interview involves an interviewer, and interviewee, and a series of questions. It can be an employment interview, or an informational interview in preparation of document production, but in this case we're looking for feedback. As a business writer, you may choose to schedule time with a supervisor to ask a couple of questions about how the document you produced could be improved. You may also schedule time with the client or potential customer and try to learn more. You may interact across a wide range of channels, from face-to-face to an e-mail exchange, and learn more about how your document was received. Take care not to interrupt the interviewee, even if there is a long pause, as some of the best information comes up when people feel the need to fill the silence. Be patient and understanding, and thank them for taking the time to participate in the interview. Relationships are built over time and the relationship you build through a customer interview, for example, may have a positive impact on your next writing project.

Surveys

At some point, you may have answered your phone to find a stranger on the other end asking you to take part in a survey for a polling organization like Gallup, Pew, or Roper. You may have also received a consumer survey in the mail, with a paper form to fill out and return in a postage-paid envelope. Online surveys are also becoming increasingly popular. For example, SurveyMonkey.com is an online survey tool that allows people to respond to a set of questions and provide responses. This type of reader feedback can be valuable, particularly if some of the questions are open-ended. Closed questions require a simple yes or no to respond, making them easier to tabulate as "votes," but open-ended questions give respondents complete freedom to write their thoughts. As such, they promote the expression of new and creative ideas and can lead to valuable insights for you, the writer.

Surveys can take place in person, as we discussed in an interview format, and this format is common when taking a census. For example, the U.S. government employs people for a short time to go door to door for a census count of everyone. Your organization may lack comparable resources and may choose to mail out surveys on paper with postage-paid response envelopes or may reduce the cost and increase speed by asking respondents to complete the survey online.

Focus Groups

Figure 8.2



Focus groups can be an important source of feedback.

Susan Sermoneta – [small group work at FIT](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Focus groups involve a representative sample of individuals, brought together to represent a larger group or audience. If you know your target audience, and the range of characteristics they represent, you would look for participants who can represent more than one of those characteristics. As we've discussed in an interview setting, the interaction involves a question-and-answer format, but may also introduce other ways to facilitate interaction. If your company is looking to launch a new product, you may introduce that product to this select audience to see how they react. As a business writer, what they say and express may help you in writing your promotional materials. In terms of feedback, you may assemble a group of individuals who use your product or service, and then ask them a series of questions in a group setting. The responses may have bearing on your current and future documents.

Normally we'd think of focus groups in a physical setting, but again modern technology has allowed for innovative adaptations. Forums, live Webcasts, and other virtual gatherings allow groups to come together across time and distance to discuss specific topics. A Web camera, a microphone, and an Internet connection are all it takes. There are a number of software programs and online platforms for bringing individuals together. Anticipate that focus groups will increasingly gather via computer-mediated technologies in the future as the costs of bringing people together for a traditional meeting increase.

Key Takeaway

Feedback may be indirect or direct, internal or external, and may be mediated electronically in many different ways.

Exercises

1. Design a market survey that asks your friends at least three questions that have to do with their attitudes, preferences, or choices. Prepare and present your results, noting the number of respondents, and any characteristics that you requested or can offer, like age or level of education, for example.
2. How does the online world affect the process of feedback on written documents? Does it improve feedback, or lead to self-censorship? Discuss your thoughts with classmates.
3. In your opinion, are traditional print publications still viable with daily, weekly, or monthly publication cycles? Why or why not?
4. Research online survey programs and review two competitors. Compare the features and the apparent ease of use. Which would you recommend and why? Report your results and compare with classmates.

¹<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2012/01/search-plus-your-world.html> (06/28/12).

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8.2 Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Learning Objectives

1. Compare and contrast the feedback that can be obtained with qualitative and quantitative research.
2. Discuss validity, reliability, and statistical significance.

Perhaps you have heard the term “market research” or have taken a class on statistics. Whether your understanding of the gathering of credible, reliable information is emerging or developed, a general awareness of research is essential for business writing. Many businesses use research as a preproduct, postproduct, and service development method of obtaining feedback. Understanding the feedback from research can influence your writing as you learn more about your target audience. Ralph Rosnow and Robert Rosenthal offer a solid introductory discussion into basic research terms in their text *Beginning Behavioral Research: A Conceptual Primer* that serves our discussion well (Rosnow, 1999).

We can divide research into two basic categories:

1. *Qualitative research* focuses on *quality* in the sense of “what is it like?” or “how does it feel?”
2. *Quantitative research* focuses on *quantity* in the sense of “how many customers?” or “what percentage?”

Let’s examine the advantages and disadvantages of each of these kinds of research.

Obtaining Feedback with Qualitative Research

Qualitative research involves investigative methods that cross subjects and academic disciplines to gain in-depth information. If quantitative research explores “what,” qualitative research explores “how” and “why.” From interviews to focus groups, many of the face-to-face strategies used to gather information are qualitative in nature.

You have five senses, and you may be able to distinguish between sweet and salty foods, but can you describe what you taste and smell? Let’s say you work for a vineyard, and have been tasked to write a paragraph describing a new wine. Could you? Capturing fine data points and representing them in words and symbols can be a significant challenge for researchers. When testing the wine with a focus group, you might want information on how it is perceived, and the responses may be varied and unusual. What do you do with the information you gather? You may be able to identify trends among the varied responses, and create groups that indicate a woody or earthy flavor, but numbers will fail to capture the nuances of flavor and body of the wines in the information.

Some information—like the way consumers characterize the taste of a wine—is a challenge to obtain, and qualitative research often serves well in this capacity. If quantitative research handles large audiences well, qualitative research allows for in-depth interpersonal interviews that produce rich and meaningful results. The information may not be as reliable, and your ability to produce the same results over time may be limited, but humans are emotional, irrational, and unpredictable. They are also, each in his or her own way, unique. As you increase the level of perspective in terms of abstraction, all humans may eventually come to look similar, even the same. We all possess some similar characteristics, such as the use of language, or the composition of our bodies. But when you look more closely, you see

the diverse range of languages, and learn that not everyone has 206 bones in an adult body. Between these two views we find the range of information that quantitative and qualitative research attempt to address.

Suppose we want to determine who has greater lifetime risk of developing heart disease, a man or a woman? If we are talking about an individual man and an individual woman, our answer might be quite different from what it would be if we were talking about men in general versus women in general. A survey may work well to capture the data about men versus women, but a face-to-face interview with a man and a woman will allow for interaction, follow-up questions, and a much better picture of the question: between this individual woman and this individual man, who is more likely to be at risk? The risk and protective factors we learn from broad research projects involving thousands of subjects have value, but there are times when a broad brushstroke will fail to capture the fine data that is needed or desired.

Imagine that you are involved with a direct observation of buying behavior by reviewing video recordings of security cameras that clearly show your company's product in relation to other products on the shelf. You may find, particularly after a review of the literature, that product placement makes a significant impact on purchase decisions. In addition, you may be involved with some level of participation in the setting. Serving as a participant observer means you are part of the process, involved in action, and not separated from the interaction. You look at the sales experience through the eyes of a participant, and view others through the eyes of an observer. You may find that interviews and focus groups serve to teach you more about your audience, but may also find that others have conducted similar interviews and learn from their findings.

As a business writer, you should be familiar with qualitative research and its relative strengths and weaknesses. You may use some of its techniques to gather information about your audience, may cite research that involves qualitative methods, and may utilize its strategies with an audience post document, product, or service.

Obtaining Feedback with Quantitative Research

Quantitative research involves investigation and analysis of data and relationships between data that can be represented by numbers. It is often used to test a hypothesis, and normally involves large volumes of data. Where a qualitative research project may involve a dozen interviews, a quantitative one would involve hundreds or thousands. Since each interview carries a cost—and a thousand or ten thousand interviews may exceed the research budget of your organization—a more cost-effective alternative must be found. By limiting the number of questions and limiting the ways in which participants can respond, the data can be gathered at a lower cost with often a higher level of statistical validity.

In qualitative research, you may ask an open-ended question like “What does the wine taste like?” In quantitative research, you may limit the response options: “Does the wine taste (a) woody, (b) fruity, or (c) both?” You may find that 90 percent of respondents indicate answer (c); you can represent it with numbers and a graph, but it may not serve your investigation the way you planned.

Research methodologies involve examining and evaluating the methods used in investigation or soliciting feedback. They are used to address and improve poorly worded questions, and to help the investigator match the research goal to the method. Quantitative research serves us well when we ask, does vitamin C, taken at a dosage of 500 mg daily for five years, lower the incidence of the common cold? We could track a thousand participants in the study who provide intake prescreening information, confirm daily compliance, and participate in periodic interviews. We also know that part of our group is taking a placebo (sugar pill) as part of the requirements of a double-blind study. At the end of the term, we have certain numbers that may be able to indicate the degree to which vitamin C affects the incidence rate of illness.

Figure 8.3



Audience research is critical to success.

[Dave](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Advertisers often conduct research to learn more about preference and attitudes, two areas that are not easily captured. Sometimes preference studies use Likert scales, which give respondents a preset scale to rate their answers. An example of a Likert item might be, “Please indicate to what degree you agree or disagree with this statement: I enjoy drinking brand X wine. Do you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree?”

There is a tendency for some attitudinal and preferential research that may be more accurately described as qualitative, to be described in numerical terms. For example, you have probably heard the claim that “four out of five dentists prefer brand X,” when in itself, the number or representation of preference is meaningless. As an astute business writer, you will be able to understand pre (before) and post (after) document, product, or service research investigations and distinguish between the two main approaches.

What Is Validity?

How do you know the results presented in a study or article have value? How do you know they are valid? **Validity** involves the strength of conclusions, inferences or assertions. Thomas Cook and Dan Campbell indicate that validity is often the best available approximation of the truth or falseness of an inference, proposition, or conclusion. Readers want to know that your information has value and that there is confidence in its points, supporting information, and conclusions. They want to know you are right and not making false statements.

One way you can address the value of validity is to cite all your sources clearly. As a writer, you may certainly

include information from authorities in the field when the attribution is relevant and the citation is clear. Giving credit where credit is due is one way to make your information more valuable, and by referencing the sources clearly, you enable the reader to assess the validity of the information you have provided.

Does all feedback have validity? Just as there are many threats to validity in research applications, you cannot always be sure that the feedback you receive is accurate or truthful. Have students ever evaluated professors negatively because of the required work in the course? Of course. In the same way, some readers may have issues with the topic or your organization. Their feedback post may be less than supportive, and even openly hostile. Assess the validity of the feedback, respond with professionalism at all times, and learn how to let go of the negative messages that offer little opportunity to improve understanding.

What Is Reliability?

Reliability is the consistency of your measurements. The degree to which an instrument gives the same measurement each and every time with the same subjects, in the same context, is a measure of its reliability. For example, if you took your temperature three times within fifteen minutes, and your thermometer gave a different reading each time—say, 98.6, 96.6, and 100.2—you would conclude that your thermometer was unreliable.

How does this apply to feedback in business writing? Let's say you have three sales agents who will complete follow-up interactions with three customers after you have sent a report to each customer on their purchases to date with suggestions for additional products and services. All three sales agents have the same information about the products and services, but will they perform the same? Of course not. Each one, even if they are trained to stay on script and follow specific protocols, will not be identical in their approach and delivery. Each customer is also different, so the context is different in each case. As business professionals, we need to learn about our environment and adapt to it. This requires feedback and attention to the information in many forms. We need to assess the degree of strength or weakness of the information, its reliability, or validity, and be prepared to act on that information. Successful businesses, and by extension successful business communicators, recognize that communication is a two-way process in which we need to listen, learn, and respond to feedback. We need to meet and exceed the expectations of our customers.

Inter-rater reliability involves the degree to which each evaluator evaluates the same in similar contexts. One can think of a college essay, for example, to better understand this concept. Let's say you write an essay on customer relationship management and submit it to the instructor of your business communication class. At the same time, you submit the same essay to your English professor, and you submit a copy to your marketing professor. Will all three professors evaluate your essay the same? Of course not. They will each have their own set of expectations and respective disciplines that will influence what they value and how they evaluate. Still, if your essay is thoroughly researched, logically organized, and carefully written, each professor may give it a better than average grade. If this is the case, inter-rater reliability would indicate that you did a good job on the essay.

What Is Statistically Significant?

This is a research term that is often used and commonly misunderstood. Not every research finding is statistically significant, and many of those that are considered significant are only slightly more likely than pure chance. **Statistically significant findings** are those that have a high level of reliability, in that if the same test is applied in the same context to the same subjects, the results will come out the same time and time again (Stone-Romero, 2002). You may see a confidence level of +/- (plus or minus) three percentage points as a common statement of reliability and confidence in a poll. It means that if the poll were repeated, there is confidence that the results would be within three points above or below the percentages in the original results. When statements of statistical significance are made, you will know that it means a difference or a relationship was established with confidence by the study. That confidence gives the results credibility.

Key Takeaway

Research can be qualitative or quantitative, and it is important to assess the validity, reliability, and statistical significance of research findings.

Exercises

1. Visit the Web site of a major polling organization such as Gallup, Pew, Roper, or Zogby. What can you learn about how the organization conducts polls? How valid, reliable, and statistically significant are the results of this organization's polls, and how do you know? Discuss your findings with your classmates.
2. Find an example where information is presented to support a claim, but you perceive it to be less than valid or reliable. Share your observations and review the results of your classmates' similar efforts.

References

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8.3 Feedback as an Opportunity

Learning Objective

1. Describe the five types of feedback identified by Carl Rogers.

Writing is a communicative act. It is a reflection of the communication process and represents each of the process's components in many ways. Yet, because many people tend to think of writing as a one-way communication, feedback can be particularly challenging for a writer to assess. The best praise for your work may be the sound of silence, of the document having fulfilled its purpose without error, misinterpretation, or complaint. Your praise may come in the form of increased referrals, or sales leads, or outright sales, but you may not learn of the feedback unless you seek it out. And that is what this section is about: seeking out feedback because it is an opportunity—an opportunity to engage with your audience, stimulate your thinking, and ultimately improve your writing.

You ask a colleague, “How was your weekend?” and he glances at the floor. Did he hear you? Was his nonverbal response to your question one of resignation that the weekend didn't go well, or is he just checking to make sure his shoes are tied? Feedback, like all parts of the communication model, can be complex and puzzling. Do you ask again? Do you leave him alone? It is hard to know what an action means independent of context, and even harder to determine without more information. Feedback often serves the role of additional information, allowing the source to adapt, adjust, modify, delete, omit, or introduce new messages across diverse channels to facilitate communication. One point of reference within the information or response we define as feedback may, in itself, be almost meaningless, but taken together with related information can indicate a highly complex response, and even be used to predict future responses.

Carl Rogers, the famous humanistic psychologist, divides feedback into five categories:

1. Evaluative
2. Interpretive
3. Supportive
4. Probing
5. Understanding

These five types of feedback vary in their frequency and effectiveness (Rogers, 1961; Rogers, 1970). This framework highlights aspects of feedback that serve as opportunities for the business writer, as he or she recognizes feedback as an essential part of writing and the communication process. Let's examine the five types of feedback, as presented by Rogers, in their order of frequency.

Evaluative Feedback

This type of feedback is the most common. **Evaluative feedback** often involves judgment of the writer and his or her ethos (or credibility). We look for credibility clues when we examine the letterhead; feel the stationery; or read the message and note the professional language, correct grammar, and lack of spelling errors. Conversely, if the writer's credibility is undermined by errors, is perceived to be inappropriately informal, or presents questionable claims, the

reader's view of the writer will be negative. The reader is less likely to read or respond to the message communicated by a source judged to lack credibility.

In an interpersonal context, evaluative feedback may be communicated as a lack of eye contact, a frequent glance at a cell phone, or an overt act to avoid communication, such as walking away from the speaker. In written communication, we don't have the opportunity to watch the reader "walk away." As a business writer, your ethos is an important part of the message.

In aspects of interpersonal interaction, behavioral evaluations are one type of evaluative feedback. A [behavioral evaluation](#) assesses the action and not the actor, but the business writer lacks this context. You don't always know when or where your content will be read and evaluated, so it is in your best interest to be consistently professional. Fact checking, elimination of errors, and a professional image should be habits, not efforts of will. They should be an automatic part of the writing process for any business writer.

Interpretive Feedback

In the course of a conversation, you may not be completely sure you heard correctly, so it is often a good idea to paraphrase or restate what you heard as a way of requesting confirmation or clarification. You may also understand what was said, but restate the main point as a way of communicating attention. Listening is hard to assess in any conversation, and interpretive feedback allows the speaker to hear a clear demonstration of feedback that confirms that the message was understood or needs correction. [Interpretive feedback](#) requests confirmation or clarification of a message, and is often expressed in the form of a question.

In hard copy documents, we normally lack this feedback loop, but online documents increasingly allow for this form of exchange. You may find a "Comments" button at the end of an online article. When you click on the button, a text box will appear, providing a space and a medium for feedback from readers to the author, allowing an opportunity to respond with opinions, interpretations, and questions sparked by the article. Blogs incorporated this feature early in the development of Web content, but you can see variations of this feedback style all over the Web. This form of feedback is increasingly common in Facebook's wall, in MySpace's comment box, and even in an article published in the online version of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Supportive Feedback

You come in second in a marathon to which you have dedicated the better part of a year in training. It was a challenging race and you are full of mixed emotions. The hug from your partner communicates support and meets your need in ways that transcend language and the exchange of symbolic meaning. In an interpersonal context it is easy to identify, describe, and even predict many representations of supportive feedback, but in other communication contexts it can prove a significant challenge.

You may give yourself encouragement as you mentally prepare for the race, and may receive backslaps and hugs after the race, but when you write about your experience, how do you experience supportive feedback? In the same way you receive evaluative or interpretive feedback via comments or to your Facebook wall, you may receive supportive feedback. [Supportive feedback](#) communicates encouragement in response to a message.

Probing Feedback

As you've read an article, have you ever wanted to learn more? Increasingly, embedded links allow a reader to explore related themes and content that give depth and breadth to content, but require the reader to be self-directed. [Probing feedback](#) communicates targeted requests for specific information. As an author, you've crafted the message and defined what information is included and what is beyond the scope of your document, but not every reader may agree with your framework. Some may perceive that a related idea is essential to the article, and specifically request additional information as a way of indicating that it should be included. Rather than responding defensively to requests for specific

information and interpreting them as challenges to your authority as the author, see them for what they are: probing feedback. They are opportunities that you should respond to positively with the view that each is an opportunity to interact, clarify, and promote your position, product, or service.

Keeping a positive attitude is an important part of writing in general and feedback in particular. Not everyone is as skilled with words as you are, so their probing feedback may appear on the surface to be less than diplomatic; it may even come across as rude, ignorant, or unprofessional. But it will be to your advantage to see through the poor packaging of their feedback for the essential request, and respond in a positive, professional fashion.

Understanding Feedback

Rogers discussed the innate tendency for humans to desire to be understood (Rogers, 1961; Rogers, 1970). We, at times, may express frustration associated with a project at work. As we express ourselves to those we choose to share with, we seek not only information or solutions, but also acceptance and respect. We may not even want a solution, or need any information, but may simply want to be heard. [Understanding feedback](#) communicates sympathy and empathy for the source of the message.

As a business writer, you want your writing to be understood. When you receive feedback, it may not always be supportive or encouraging. Feedback is not always constructive, but it is always productive. Even if the feedback fails to demonstrate understanding or support for your cause or point, it demonstrates interest in the topic.

As a skilled communicator, you can recognize the types of feedback you are likely to receive from readers and can recognize that your readers may also desire feedback. Sometimes an author may communicate respect and understanding in a follow-up message. By providing a clarification, the writer can develop the relationship with the reader. Being professional involves keeping your goals in mind, and in order for your writing to be successful, you will need a positive relationship with your readers.

Key Takeaway

Feedback may be evaluative, interpretive, supportive, probing, or understanding, and it is always an opportunity for growth.

Exercises

1. Select a piece of writing such as an article from a Web site, newspaper, or magazine. Write at least one sentence of feedback in each of the five types described in this section. Do you find one type of feedback easier to give than another? If you were the author, how would you feel receiving this feedback? Discuss your thoughts with your classmates.
2. Review a Web site, article, or similar presentation of information. Focus on strengths and weaknesses from your perception and write a brief analysis and review. Please post your results and compare with classmates.
3. Find a blog or online article with comments posted after the document. Choose one example of feedback from the comments and share it with your classmates. Note any trends or themes that present themselves as you explore the comments.

4. Create a blog and post an opinion or editorial article. What kinds of feedback do you get from your readers? Compare and contrast your experiences with those of your classmates.

References

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- Rogers, C. R. (1970). *On encounter groups*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

8.4 Additional Resources

Online Writing Laboratory (OWL) at Purdue has a comprehensive guide to the writing process. <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

The newsletter *Managing Work Relations* offers an article on the grapevine and workplace gossip. <http://www.workrelationships.com/site/newsletter/issue1.htm>

Visit this About.com page for an informative article for managers on how to deliver feedback to subordinates. <http://humanresources.about.com/cs/communication/ht/Feedbackimpact.htm>

Read an inspiring story about feedback on this Helium.com page. <http://www.helium.com/items/1231747-communication-skills-providing-feedback-that-has-an-impact>

Read more about how to accept and benefit from feedback in this e-zine article. <http://ezinearticles.com/?Workplace-Communication—Accepting-Feedback&id=2147532>

Study Guides and Strategies presents an article on how to benefit from feedback when working with a tutor. <http://www.studygs.net/feedback.htm>

AllBusiness presents an article on the five main methods of market research. <http://www.allbusiness.com/marketing/market-research/1287-1.html>

Free Management Library presents an in-depth article on market research. http://managementhelp.org/mrktng/mk_rsrch/mk_rsrch.htm

Explore the home page of SurveyMonkey and learn about some of the decisions that need to be made in the process of designing a survey. <http://www.surveymonkey.com>

Read an article on how to organize a focus group by Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD. <http://managementhelp.org/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm>

Writers often receive feedback by having their documents edited. Read about what an editor does on the home page of KOK Edit. <http://www.kokedit.com>

ChangingMinds.org discusses Rogers's five feedback types with examples. http://changingminds.org/techniques/conversation/reflecting/rogers_feedback.htm