

How do I...

MAKE THE MOST OF FEEDBACK

Feedback – it can be a hard pill to swallow. Often our natural instinct is to become defensive or run away from this perceived “attack”, especially when we have put so much time and effort into our work. Yet, receiving and processing critical feedback is an integral part of learning, particularly in academia where feedback from your supervisor and peers is the predominant teaching mechanism.

Learning how to graciously receive and effectively process feedback is a useful skill for excelling not only throughout your graduate research candidature but in life in general. Feedback can come in many shapes and forms: useful critiques, baseless criticisms, vague comments; verbal, written, even body language; kindly communicated or abrasive. And it is important to note that the *delivery* of feedback doesn’t always correlate with the *usefulness* of the advice. Ultimately, it is up to you to determine what you do with feedback and to learn how to make the most of the information received (regardless of how it is given). So here are a few tips on how to make the most of feedback.

GENERAL ADVICE

- Never “accept all” changes made by the reviewer: (1) you will never learn if you do not review the suggestions individually, and (2) not all edits may be appropriate.
- Save the revised version as a *new document* (set up a filing system to make it easier to work out which version is the most current) and keep a copy of the unedited version. You never know when you may want to reuse something that was written in a previous draft but has since been deleted. Being able to go back to older versions can save you from having to rewrite something from scratch (and it is not uncommon for supervisors to change their opinion between draft 1 and draft 5 on whether you need a piece of information in a section).
- Before responding, give yourself time to process any negative emotions that may arise. It’s normal and ok to be disappointed, upset, or even angry. Remember, however, it is **not ok** to be abusive or destructive as a result of these emotions.
- Give yourself time to reflect on the advice. Remind yourself that these critiques are an *opinion* about *your work* (and how the reviewer thinks you can improve it). They are **not** facts about *you*.
- Remind yourself that *processing* the feedback is not the same as *taking on* the feedback. You don’t have to take on board every single suggestion and indeed, there are often cases where you should not.

- Take note of any recurring feedback; this may be indicative of an area of academic writing you need to develop, such as a discipline convention that should be followed.
- Thank the reviewer. Remember, 99.9% of the time the reason why someone is giving you feedback is because they want you to succeed. They see the potential in you and they are willing to take the time to help you become the best you can be.

RECEIVING ORAL FEEDBACK

- Ask the reviewer if you can record the conversation. You can easily use your mobile (most come with a recording app or you can download one) or if you are having an online meeting, use the recording function within that platform. This enables you to go back to the conversation later.
- Often when we receive feedback orally, we have the chance to discuss and explain what our intentions were or what we were trying to achieve. Try to avoid being defensive. Instead, use this space to workshop/talk through the meaning or message you wanted to convey and identify clearer words or presentation to convey that meaning. Again, recording this discussion can be very helpful for when you go back to writing.
- If you do find yourself becoming emotionally distraught, ask the feedback giver if you can take a break and come back to the discussion when you are feeling calmer. We have all had to go through the process and so most individuals will be highly understanding in this situation.



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PROCESSING FEEDBACK

1. Break up the advice into the following sections:
 - **Macro-level structural changes:** whole sections, ideas or arguments need reordering/rewriting / deleting (and possibly more reading and planning);
 - **Mid-level paragraph changes:** the overall content or concepts are there, but sentences within paragraphs may need reordering; and
 - **Micro-level proof-reading changes:** errors or non-standard usage in word forms, vocabulary choice, sentence level grammar, spelling, and/or punctuation impede clarity or professionalism.
2. Read through each comment. Do you understand the comment/edit?
 - If not, flag it. Once you have flagged all the comments you do not understand (or are too vague), ask to meet with the reviewer to discuss and clarify these comments.
 - If so, use the flow-diagram below to determine if the feedback should be incorporated into your writing, and edit as appropriate. For large structural changes where reordering or rewriting is required, you may want to use the reverse-outline method to determine a more appropriate flow of information.
3. Once you have made all the changes within a section, set it aside for a few days (time permitting) and then reread that section with “fresh eyes” to ensure that the content still makes sense. Make any additional changes if needed.

DEALING WITH CONFLICTING ADVICE

Most graduate research candidates have at least two supervisors. Feedback can also come from your peers, colleagues or an external entity like a Graduate Research Development Advisor. With so many individuals, it is not uncommon for you to receive conflicting feedback. When faced with conflicting feedback, consider both the expertise of the reviewers (e.g., is one more familiar with the area than another?) and why they may have given their respective advice. Based on these considerations, you should be able to determine which piece of advice (if any) is most appropriate for your situation.

DEALING WITH FEEDBACK YOU WEREN'T SEEKING

You may find that the feedback you received was not what hoped to attain (e.g., you wanted to know if your ideas and arguments were logical and appropriate but instead you received micro-level proofreading corrections). In these cases, thank your reviewer and then ask if they could provide any additional thoughts or comments on the type of feedback you wanted (to help with that, see “How do I get constructive feedback from my supervisor(s)”). At the same time, take the time to review the feedback you did receive as there is often useful information there, even if it wasn't what you wanted or expected.

RELATED “HOW DO I...” GUIDES

- Get constructive feedback from my supervisor(s)
- Respond to reviewer comments
- Get my thesis professionally edited

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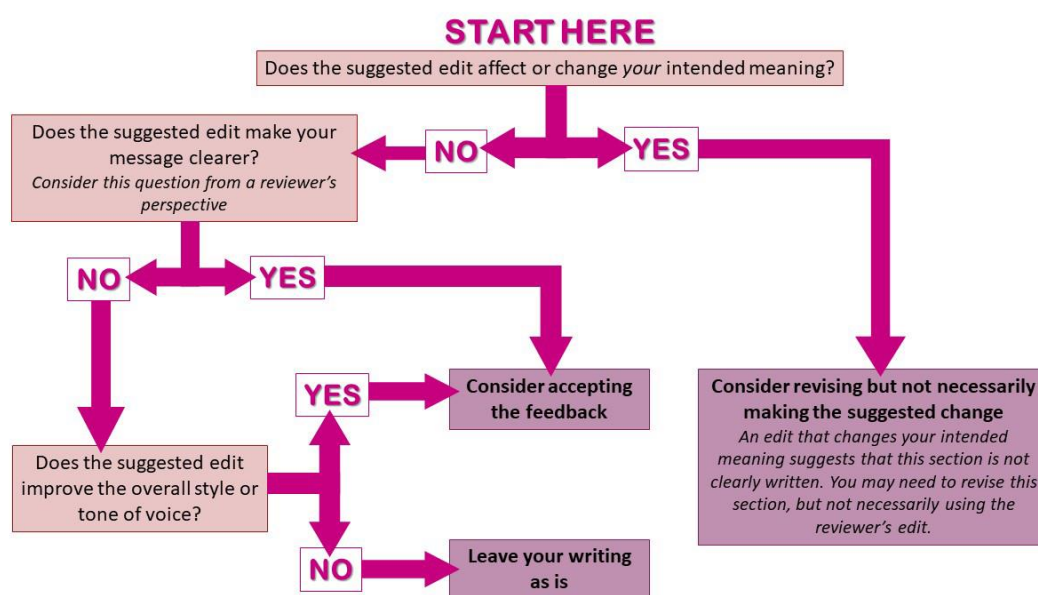


Figure 1: Flow-diagram showing how to process feedback

How Do I...? Guidelines are produced by the Graduate Research Development team for graduate research candidates. They provide succinct, user-friendly advice consistent with best practice and MQ Policy and Procedures at the time of writing.

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