

*Ways of Responding*  
A MENU.

FROM:  
"Summary of Ways of Responding"

Elbow, Peter and Pat Belanoff. *Sharing and Responding*.  
New York: Random House, 1989. Print.

*Menu layout by Kristin Serafini, 2016.*

# The PARADOXES of RESPONDING

## FIRST PARADOX:

*The reader is always right; the writer is always right.*

*The reader gets to decide what's true about her reaction: about what she sees of what happened to her, about what she thinks or how she feels. It makes no sense to quarrel with the reader about what's happening to her (though you can ask the reader to explain more fully what she is saying).*

*But you, as the writer, get to decide what to do about the feedback you get: what changes to make, if any. You don't have to follow her advice. Just listen openly—swallow it all. You can do that better if you realize that you get to take your time and make up your own mind—perhaps making no changes in your writing at all.*

**SECOND PARADOX:** *The writer must be in charge; the writer must sit back quietly too.*

*As the writer, you must be in control. It's your writing. Don't be passive or helpless. Don't just put your writing out and let them give you any feedback. You need to decide*

what kind of feedback (if any) you need for this particular writing. Is your main goal to improve this piece of writing? Or perhaps you don't really care about working any more on this piece—your main goal is to work on your writing in general. Or perhaps you don't want to *work* at anything—but instead just enjoy sharing this piece and hearing what others have to say. You need to make your own decision about what kind of feedback will help you. Don't let readers make those decisions.

Therefore ask readers for what you want or need—and insist that you get it. Don't be afraid to stop them if they start giving you what you don't want. (Remember, for instance, that even after you are very experienced with all kinds of feedback, you may need to ask readers to hold back *all criticism* for a piece that you feel tender about. This can be a very appropriate decision; stick up for it.)

*Nevertheless, you mostly have to sit back and just listen.* If you are talking a lot, you are probably preventing them from giving you the good feedback they could give. (For example, don't argue if they misunderstand what you wrote. Their misunderstanding is valuable. You need to *understand* their misunderstanding better in order to figure out whether you need to make any changes.)

Let the readers tell you if they think you are asking for inappropriate feedback—of for feedback they can't give or don't want to give. For example, they may sense that your piece is still unformed and think that it doesn't make sense to give judgement. They may think say-back or descriptive feedback would be more helpful. Or they may simply hate giving judgement. Listen to them. See whether perhaps you should go along: they may be right.

If you aren't getting honest, serious, or caring feedback, don't just blame your readers. It's probably because you haven't convinced them that you really want it. Instead of *blaming* the readers, simply insist that they give you what you need.

## *Desert* (READER-BASED RESPONDING)

### MOVIES OF THE READER'S MIND

*Get readers to tell you frankly what happens inside their heads as they read your words.*

*Here are ways to help them:*

**Interrupt** *their reading and have them tell their interim reactions.*

*Get them to tell reactions in the form of a story (first... then...).*

*Get them to give subjective "I statements" about what is happening in them, not allegedly objective "it statements" about the text.*

*If they are stuck, ask them questions (e.g., about where they go along and where they resist, about their feelings on the topic before and after reading).*

**Pairs well with:** Movies of the reader's mind are useful at any stage—but they depend on a relationship of trust and support with readers. They can lead to blunt criticism. They're most useful for long-range learning; they may not give you direct help in improving this particular draft.

## *Take Away* (FEEDBACK FROM YOURSELF)

### DESCRIPTIVE FEEDBACK

*Certain kinds of descriptive feedback sharpen your eye, help you see things about your text you hadn't noticed (e.g., summarizing; describing the structure; the voice and point of view; level of abstraction/concreteness; language, diction, syntax).*

### DESCRIPTIVE OUTLINE & SKELETON FEEDBACK

*Particularly powerful analytic structures that help you see what's strong and weak in any essay.*

### PROCESS WRITING

*Don't forget that if you do process writing about what you have written, you will probably come up with helpful suggestions for yourself. Talk about what pleases you and where you are troubled; spell out your frustrations.*

(CRITERION-BASED RESPONDING for  
IMAGINATIVE or CREATIVE WRITING)

*Hot Drink*

### DESCRIPTION

*Vividness of details. Do we experience what's there?*

### CHARACTER

*Do we find characters real or interesting?*

### PLOT

*Is it believable, interesting, or meaningful?*

### LANGUAGE

*Not just "Is it clear?" but "Is it alive and resonant with meaning?"—perhaps through imagery and metaphor.*

### MEANING

*So what? Is there a meaning of impact that makes it seem important or worthwhile?*

(CRITERION-BASED RESPONDING  
for EXPOSITORY or ESSAY WRITING)

*Cold Drink*

### FOCUS ON TASK

*Does it squarely address the assignment, question, or task?*

### CONTENT

*You might want to distinguish three dimensions: ideas; details or examples; reasoning.*

### CLARITY & ORGANIZATION

*Can the reader follow your line of reasoning?*

### SENSE OF THE WRITER

*Voice, tone, stance toward the reader.*

### MECHANICS

*Spelling, grammar, punctuation; proofreading.*

*Appetizer* (NO RESPONDING)

### SHARING

*Just read your words out loud; see what they sound like.*

*You probably learn more from the act of reading in the presence of listeners than from any kind of feedback.*

**Pairs well with:** When you don't have much time. Or at a very early stage when you're just exploring or feeling fragile about what you've written and don't want criticism. It's also useful when you are completely finished with a piece: you've finally got it the way you want it or you don't have the time or energy to make any changes—so it's time to celebrate by sharing it with others and not getting feedback at all.

(DESCRIPTIVE RESPONDING)

*Salads*

### SAYBACK

*Ask readers: "Say back to me in your own words what you hear me getting at in my writing. But say it more as a question than as an answer—to invite me to figure out better what I really want to say."*

**Pairs well with:** At an early stage when you are still groping, when you may not yet have been able to write what you are really trying to say. If readers say back to you what they hear—and invite you to talk—this often leads you to *exactly* what you want to write.

### POINTING

*Ask readers: "Which words or phrases stick in mind? Which passages or features did you like best?"*

**Pairs well with:** When you want to know what is getting through. Or when you want a bit of confidence and support.

### SUMMARIZING

*Ask: "What do you hear as my main point or idea (or event or feeling)? And the subsidiary ones?"*

**Pairs well with:** When you know what's getting through. If a reader says she disagrees with you, you need to know what she thinks you are saying.

### WRITING STYLE SAMPLE PLATTER

*Ask readers to describe each of the following features or dimensions of your writing: structure; voice, point of view, attitude toward the reader; level of abstraction or concreteness; language, diction syntax.*

**Pairs well with:** Any stage. When you need more perspective.

(DEEPER DESCRIPTIVE RESPONDING)



### WHAT'S ALMOST SAID OR IMPLIED

Ask: "What's almost said, implied, hovering around the edges? What would you like to hear more about?"

**Pairs well with:** When you need new ideas or need to expand or develop what you've written—or when you feel your piece isn't rich or interesting enough. What you don't say in a piece if writing often determines the reactions of readers as much as what you do say. If this is an important piece of writing for you, you had better look to feedback about the implications.

### CENTER OF GRAVITY

Ask readers: "What do you sense as the source of energy, the focal point, the seedbed, the generative center for this piece?" (The center of gravity might well not be the "main point" but rather some image, phrase, quotation, detail, or example.)

**Pairs well with:** When you need new ideas or need to expand or develop what you've written—or when you feel your piece isn't rich or interesting enough. What you don't say in a piece if writing often determines the reactions of readers as much as what you do say. If this is an important piece of writing for you, you had better look to feedback about the implications.

### METAPHORICAL DESCRIPTIONS

Ask readers: "Describe my piece in terms of weathers, clothing, colors, animals. Describe the shape of my piece. Give me a picture of the reader-writer relationship. What's your fantasy of what was on my mind that I wasn't writing about ('substitute writing')?"

**Pairs well with:** Any stage. When your writing feels stale and you need a fresh view. If readers learn to give this kind of feedback, their other feedback tends to improve. Sometimes young, inexperienced, or naive readers can't give you other kinds of feedback but give very perceptive metaphorical feedback.



(ANALYTIC RESPONDING)

### SKELETON FEEDBACK

Ask readers to tell you about these three main dimensions of your paper:

**Reasons & support.** "What do you see as my main point and my sub-points—and the arguments or evidence that I give or could give to support each?"

**Intended Audience.** "Who do I imply as my audience? How would my reasons work for them? How do I seem to treat them in general?"

**Assumptions made.** "What does my paper seem to take for granted?"

**Pairs well with:** When writing a persuasive essay or any essay that makes a claim. At an early stage when you have a lot of unorganized exploratory writing, skeleton feedback is a way to get help from your readers in adding to and organizing your material. At a late stage, readers help you analyze strengths and weaknesses. It's also helpful for giving yourself feedback.

### BELIEVING AND DOUBTING

Ask readers: "Believe (or pretend to believe) everything I have written. Be my ally and tell me what you see.

Give me more ideas and perceptions to help my case. Then doubt everything and tell me what you see.

What arguments can be made against what I say?"

**Pairs well with:** The believing game alone is good when you want help and support for an argument you are struggling with. Together they are useful at any stage. They provide strong perspective.

### DESCRIPTIVE OUTLINE

Ask readers: "Write me says and does sentences—for my whole essay and for each paragraph or section."

Does sentences shouldn't mention the content of the paragraph—

i.e., shouldn't slide into repeating the says sentences.

**Pairs well with:** Descriptive outlines make the most sense for essays—and are particularly useful for persuasive pieces or arguments. They give you the most perspective. Only feasible when the reader has the text in hand and can give a lot of time and care. Particularly useful for giving feedback to yourself.