How to give feedback

Reviewing content and copy as objectively and efficiently as possible.

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Feeding back on a piece of text that someone else has written is a task we all face from time to time.

However, few organisations have a standard process for giving feedback. Even fewer give guidance and training on how to do it.

So people do their best. They pick up their red pens and they get to work.

But approaching feedback in an ad-hoc way can be inefficient. It can be frustrating for the people giving feedback – and it can demoralise the person or teams who originated the document.

At Wordtree, we've worked with hundreds of organisations and seen many different approaches to giving feedback.

This guide sets out the approach we think works best.

It makes the whole process work beautifully – and keep everyone happy and involved.

Why ask for feedback?

The text under review might be for anything from a piece of marketing, through to a policy document. But typically, before it's shared with its intended audience, it will be checked for:

- Accuracy
- Brand alignment
- Compliance with any regulatory constraints
- Appropriateness for audiences

Who gives feedback?
The number of people involved in signing off a piece of text varies. Two to four is typical. We've also worked on documents where there have been 16+ people involved. Usually, reviewers include:

- Technical specialists
- Brand and marketing specialists
- Other stakeholders

What should feedback <u>not</u> be about?
Feedback is about getting documents and text right for your company and whoever is going to read them. It shouldn't be about:

- Personal preferences
- "Marking" work – that's what teachers do to pupils, and you're a professional working alongside other professionals
- Giving feedback for the sake of being seen to give feedback

MANAGING FEEDBACK

1. Define roles and responsibilities

At the very start of a project, set out who is going to be involved in reviewing the work, and set out what their responsibilities are.

Feedback often becomes muddled because reviewers don't know to set aside time. Frustrations also creep in when reviewers think their remit is to correct what they view as "wrong" grammar or words they don't like personally.

Make it clear what you need each of your reviewers to contribute. Typically, the tone and messaging of the work should be the responsibility of marketers or brand experts. Accuracy and compliance, meanwhile, are typically the responsibility of legal and compliance specialists. Subject matter experts should be tasked with making sure that product and service descriptions are accurate.

Defining roles and responsibilities saves time in the long run, because it prevents situations where your rule-loving compliance officer may spend unnecessary hours "correcting" the language, when what you really want them to do is flag up any areas of regulatory risk.

At this stage, you should also be super-clear about how much time reviewers will need to dedicate to the project, exactly when materials will be available for them to review, what their deadlines are – and what the consequences of them missing deadlines could be (for example, delays and additional project costs).

So if you anticipate three rounds of amends, let everyone know when to expect revised drafts and how much time they're likely to need to set aside.

You also need to make sure that everyone who needs to be involved takes part in each round of amends – otherwise you may have someone looking to make radical changes just at the point when you think you're ready to publish.

2. Mandate colour-coded feedback

The problem with feeding back on written communications is that most people have only seen it being done in schools, universities and business schools. So when they're asked to feed back, they step into the role of teacher.

This usually isn't helpful. Reviewers should not think of their task as "marking" someone else's work. They should think of it as contributing an element of insight and/or expertise.

So when you're asking people to feed back, ask them to indicate inaccuracies or compliance concerns in **red**. Then ask them to highlight personal opinion in **blue**.

Make it clear that inaccuracies will be corrected – and that personal opinion will be listened to, but maybe not acted upon.

Often, companies that adopt this approach find that reviewers begin to offer less personal opinion, and the process becomes smoother.

3. Collate and rationalise feedback

It's common for different reviewers to have different opinions. Sometimes, these opinions can contradict one another.

It's also common for people to feed back in different ways – some with scanned, hand-written notes, some with stickies and some with tracked changes.

If you're working with a communications professional to create a document, don't just ping all the feedback on to them, because they may not know what to do with it.

Read through it, rationalise, consult with your reviewers and hand one, consolidated set of comments on to the document creator. Try to make sure the feedback is all in one format – like tracked changes.

GIVING FEEDBACK

1. Create some distance

Remember, the document you're feeding back on isn't about you or your personal preferences. It's about persuading your customers or audiences to think something, feel something, buy something, know something or do something.

The style and tone of the document should express your brand.

The messaging should answer the requirements of your brief. So it can be a very good idea to revisit your brief before you read through a first draft. Use it to remind yourself of what your audiences need – and what you need them to think, feel and do as a result of reading it.

2. Plan to read the document more than once

First time
Read the draft as though you're its audience. Well, as much as you can. Read it through in one go. DO NOT pick up a red pen, or any kind of pen. Just read and keep reading. Why? Because when your audiences read the document, they'll be doing it to extract information and maybe to be entertained.

They will not be looking at it with a critical eye and a red pen. In other words, they won't be assuming the role of "teacher". Instead, they'll simply be trying to find out what you're offering them.

Second time
Now read the document more critically. Is it accurate? Are there any ambiguities? Is anything missing?

Make notes of any inaccuracies, ambiguities and omissions.

3. Remember it's impossible to give positive and negative feedback at the same time

Once you've started to think negatively – for example, "I don't like this" – it's almost impossible to see positives. Your brain is looking for patterns, so it will pick out more negatives. Before long, you will think the entire piece of work you're reviewing is terrible.

So instead, go through the piece of work once, thinking: "What can I see that I like?" And feed back on this. It's a great motivator to know what someone likes – and it also helps the creator of the document to know what's good for in future.

Then go through and think: "What don't I like so much? And why?"

If you try to do both things at once, your feedback will feel muddled and is likely to err towards the negative.

4. Always give feedback directly

It's always more effective to give your feedback directly to the original author of the document.

So even if you're super-important, or super-busy, don't dictate feedback to a junior member of your team and then expect them to be able to feed back to your copywriter and get the results you need.

A decent copywriter or agency like Wordtree will always be happy to schedule a call at a time that suits you to hear your comments. Then, if they don't understand any of your feedback, they'll be able to ask you directly, rather than wait for a junior member of your team to relay questions to you… and possibly never hear back from you at all.

Like so much in the creative world, investing even a small amount of time up-front can save you a lot of hours and frustration further down the line.

5. Use colour-coded feedback

Remember, use **red** to show inaccuracy and compliancy concerns. Know that your **red** feedback will always be acted on.

If you're expressing personal opinion, for example:

- You don't like the text
- You think it should be structured differently
- You don't like a particular word or sentence structure

…then feed back on this in **blue**. Know that this feedback will be listened to and considered, but it might not be acted on.

How to phrase feedback

NOT SO USEFUL FEEDBACK...	USEFUL FEEDBACK...
I don't like it.	I'd rather we said X because… I'd rather we didn't use this phrase because…
This isn't right.	This isn't quite right for the brand because… This is inaccurate. The most up-to-date figures are…
I'm not sure about this.	This isn't right for the brand because…
Please refer to the brief.	Section two, point six of the brief explains what we need to say here…

If you can spread a little cheer, then do. Positive feedback is always welcome, it can motivate individuals and teams – and it makes negative feedback easier to take.

IF YOU EVER WANT TO TALK ABOUT FEEDBACK – OR DISCUSS ANY ASPECT OF THE CONTENT CREATION PROCESS – PLEASE GET IN TOUCH. WE'LL BE HAPPY TO MAKE SUGGESTIONS.

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