asking you yet. Write it and give it to the world uninvited. Insist on being heard.

- But work things out so you also get invitations. Find a willing audience of real people who are interested in what you are writing about and who will actually enjoy reading it. If you start by sending your writing to magazines or publishers who are unlikely to take it or by trying to get experts to stop what they are doing and take you in hand, you are likely to snuff out your instinct to be heard.
- After you are getting the help and nourishment that comes from having a real audience, then make use of experts and try to expand your audience by wider publication.
- Look for writing situations that are half-way between invited and uninvited. For example, write letters to newspapers and magazines. They didn't specifically ask *you* for *your* thinking—they won't necessarily publish your letter—but they did ask for people like you and thinking like yours.

20

Writing for Teachers

Teachers are one of the trickiest audiences of all, yet they also illustrate the paradox that audiences sometimes help you and sometimes get in your way. I think I got much of my original deep feeling for writing because of one of my high school teachers, Bob Fisher. He took me seriously. He wanted me to write. He asked me to write about things that were important to me. He opened me out. He assumed that I could write creatively in ways I never would have thought of, and I could. He assumed I would be deeply interested in topics I had never thought of, and I was. With him as a teacher I came to like writing, to look forward to it, to feel I was doing something important when I put words on paper.

Many people have had this kind of teacher. A good teacher can be a perfect audience. Not just because he likes us or praises our writing—though that may be necessary for adolescents who lack confidence in themselves (is there any other kind?). Sometimes that good teacher's caring takes the form of fierce rigor, but he manages it so we still want to write for him.*

*I think of C. S. Lewis's description of one of his beloved teachers:

> I soon came to know the differing values of his three openings. The loud cry of "Stop!" was flung in to arrest a torrent of verbiage which could not be endured a moment longer; not because it fretted his patience (he never thought of that) but because it was wasting time, darkening counsel. The hastier and quieter "Excuse!" (*i.e.*, "Excuse me") ushered in a correction or distinction merely parenthetical and betokened that, thus set right, your remark might still, without absurdity, be allowed to reach completion. The most encouraging of all was, "I hear you." This meant that your remark was significant and only required refutation; it had risen to the dignity of error. Refutation (when we

With that good teacher, whether tender or tough, we feel we can go for broke, wrestle full out. We can write about truth, about God, about right and wrong, about Being, even about fear. With everyone else, it seems as though when we start to talk passionately about these issues or whatever else is burning a hole inside us, they look at us funny or change the subject or go blank. As adolescents, especially, we are subject to the tyranny of the crowd. Worse than being caught with your pants down is being caught caring deeply, being corny, vulnerable, pure. But a special teacher gives us permission to care about honor or Dostoyevsky or relativity or irony—not just gags or girls or cars. A good teacher seems to understand us. A good teacher can hear beyond our insecure hesitation or faddish slang to the authentic voice inside and reach in and help us use it.

I can't understand, now that I'm a teacher and know more about the conditions of work, especially for primary and secondary school English teachers, how those special people were able to be as good as they were. How could they listen so deeply and care for our pimply individual selves when we were one among the one hundred to one hundred fifty students they worked with each day? But they did it and do it. Most people have had a special teacher who was this good.

But other teachers later brought me to an anxiety and fear of writing that seemed just as deep as my original caring for it.* Writing became harder and harder till I finally reached the point in graduate school where I couldn't write anything no matter how hard I tried. (Being unable to write, I had to stop being a student and take a job as teacher.)

But I am not interested here in what is special about good or bad teachers. I am interested in the problematic relationship that

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got so far) always followed the same lines. Had I read this? Had I studied that? Had I any statistical evidence? Had I any evidence in my own experience? And so to the almost inevitable conclusion, "Do you not see then that you had no right, etc."

Some boys would not have liked it; to me it was red beef and strong beer. [From *Surprised by Joy*, New York, 1956, p. 136.]

*I don't mean to put all responsibility on my teachers for my feelings and actions. Long before I ever met Bob Fisher I already had a deep love of words and ideas. And long before I ever met those other teachers I already had a deeply insecure tendency to depend almost entirely upon the judgment of others for my opinion of myself. But in those two tendencies, did I really differ from most other adolescents?

exists between the student writer and the teacher reader—even when the teacher is a decent person doing a conscientious job.

Look then at the teacher engaged in being an audience. He sits at his desk reading student papers. He is half done with a batch, the unread stack neatly piled to his left, each paper tightly folded longwise; the graded pile a bit helter-skelter to his right, a bit unfolded, a bit like discarded clam shells at the end of dinner. It is late and he stops for another cup of tea, annoyed he didn't start earlier in the evening. Sitting down and setting the cup among the ring-stains on his desk, two dictionaries nearby, he picks up the next paper, reads through it, writes a few comments here or there in the margin and then writes a grade and a general comment at the end.

The papers are all on the same topic, which he chose. Sometimes he gives free-choice assignments, but when he does, more of the papers seem fruitless journeys down dead-end streets and he suspects that the students learn less about writing—though a few students take off and write something splendid. But he knows he's got to give free choice now and again just for relief to the troops. (If he is a junior or senior high school teacher he probably has one hundred to one hundred fifty students; if he is a college writing teacher he has something like fifty to one hundred students. Many, however, teach writing for only part of their load.)

If he is a conscientious teacher he assigns a paper every week to every student he has. But he also kicks himself as he sits there sipping tea because he is acutely aware of how it is *he* who brought this job down on his own head. Every time he stands up in class and assigns a paper he sees in his mind's eye that stack of papers on the corner of his desk waiting for him to grade. If he isn't so conscientious he assigns writing every few weeks but he feels guilty because he knows this doesn't give his students enough practice and it means that his comment and advice on a student's paper this time will probably have no useful effect at all on what the student writes next time. Or maybe he is one of those teachers who have simply given up on writing and don't believe that anything they do by way of assignments or comments makes any difference at all. There are probably as many teachers in each category: conscientious, middling, cynical.

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Really that brief image says it all. But I want to spell out more fully what kind of audience the teacher becomes by virtue of his role.

When you write for a teacher you are usually swimming against the stream of natural communication. The natural direction of communication is to explain what you understand to someone who doesn't understand it. But in writing an essay for a teacher your task is usually to explain what you are still engaged in trying to understand to someone who understands it better. You seldom feel you are writing because *you* want to tell someone something. More often you feel you are being examined as to whether you can say well what *he* wants you to say. Even if you are invited to write on a subject you know better than the teacher, the teacher's knowledge turns out to be the standard for judging whether you really do know it. There's nothing wrong with this as a testing or evaluative relationship, but it's peculiar as a communicative or audience relationship.

The result of this wrong-way communication is a pervasive weakness that infects much student writing—and persists in many people's writing for the rest of their lives: a faint aura of questioning which lurks behind assertions. The student writes "This is so and that is so," but somehow between the lines he is also saying "Is this so? Will you buy that?"

If it is a story or poem rather than an essay you are writing, it's hard to feel that you are doing what is most natural for someone writing a story or poem, that is, trying to give pleasure or enlightenment. It feels as though your task is to *satisfy* or *get criticism* from a teacher who must read from 25 to 50 such pieces in one sitting. Instead of *giving* the reader something with a definite gesture, hand thrust firmly outward, students usually hand in their stories or poems with a bent and hoping arm. Instead of a statement—"Here is something for you, here is a piece of me, take it"—the student often implies a question: "Is this ok? I hope I didn't do something wrong?" It's striking how often students actually say those words to you as they give you their papers: "I hope this is what you wanted?"

This subliminal question mark lurks in the writing even of some very skilled students, but skilled students more often risk a different infection. A student who wants to be a good student cannot

be content just to satisfy teachers. He must write a paper that will wake the teacher up and give him some relief when he is groggy from reading those twenty-five to fifty papers on the same topic. Such students must do something different, striking, unique with the same old ingredients. The school setting has rewarded generation after generation of good students *not* for saying clearly what is important and what they want to convey, but for doing some kind of better cartwheel or handstand. Good students often write not to communicate but to impress. Over and over again I have seen good students knocked off balance when they get out of school and try to write for an audience other than teachers and discover how unsuccessful those shenanigans are which used to win good grades. Real readers are different from teachers.

• • •

But that's the point. Teachers are not the real audience. You don't write *to* teachers, you write for them. You can feel the difference vividly if you write a regular essay assigned by your teacher and then go on to write something directly *to* him: write him a letter asking him to change your grade or to contribute money to your political campaign. You will find these writing tasks refreshing and satisfying compared to regular assignments—even if harder. It's a relief to put words down on paper for the sake of *results*—not just for the sake of getting a *judgment*. "Getting an *A* is results," you may say, but see how you feel if you write your teacher for a contribution and get an "A" instead of a check. The grade or comment says "good persuasion," but you know your words failed if there is no check in the envelope.

As teachers we come closest, perhaps, to being the real audience when we ask you to write an essay that persuades us on some issue. But in most cases there is something make-believe about the task, given our conditions as readers. If as a teacher I am reading a stack of papers all on the same topic I know I can't use completely realistic standards and only give a good grade to papers that actually change my mind. That would be unfair—too hard—especially since I probably know more about the topic than the student. I give good grades and comments to papers which seem "well argued" but which don't happen to budge my position at all. (And some papers, of course, are trying to persuade me of what I already believe. How can I measure success there?) For the most

part then my feedback is not really a measure of how much change the words actually produce in me but rather my guess about how much change they *would* produce on some (ill-defined) hypothetical reader. Occasionally a teacher says, "Your job is actually to change *my* mind," and really carries through—but more often he says, "Your job is to write as though you were trying to change my mind." Those two words, "as though," turn up often in writing assignments.

If you do write directly *to* your teacher on a persuasive or informative essay he will usually feel something wrong. If, for example, you write "I disagree with what you said last week in class about why Hamlet delays so long. Here are some difficulties with your readings of the play . . .," the teacher will probably say, "You are not supposed to write a letter to me, you are supposed to write an essay." In short there is usually something fictional about the transaction between reader and writer in most school writing—a mismatch between what's actually going on between student and teacher and what's allegedly going on between "the writer" and "the reader": the student pretends to explain something to someone who doesn't understand it; the teacher pretends to be this general reader reading for enlightenment.

(In most exams, by the way, the relationship between writer and reader more nearly matches the actual human transaction between parties. The teacher/reader is saying fairly openly, "Tell me what you know about the Incas—about why Hamlet delays—so I can see if you know what I think you should know," and the student/writer is saying just as openly, "I'm going to explain to you what you already know in order to show you that I know it, too.")

Pretending, in itself, is not a problem. All children are good at it and if a college student is not he needs to learn again. "Write to the Longshoremen's Union about manual versus desk labor," "Write to the third-grade student council about how to deal with bullies in the playground," "Write to Robert Redford about how he could best handle this scene from *Hamlet*." I doubt that there would be much problem with engaging in the fiction of writing to those audiences and then handing in your paper to an entirely different sort of reader, namely your teacher. Perhaps there's not enough pretending in school and college essay writing.

Or at least the problem lies in the slipperiness of a situation in which students must simultaneously pretend and not pretend

when they write to the audience for most school and college writing: the general reader. This "general reader" is a tricky character. Teachers seldom define explicitly who he is, but common practice in the educational and academic world is based on the assumption that he is a creature blessed by intelligence, a certain amount of education ("general"), and an open mind. Someone much more reasonable and *general* than those longshoremen or third graders or even Robert Redford; someone, in short, much more like—guess who?—the teacher. Except this reader is general, not particular like the teacher, and is not meant to be an authority on the topic or someone in a position of authority over the writer.

In short, the audience situation is confusing because of the tricky combination of make believe and no make believe. The student is writing *for* a teacher and *to* a general reader. But this general reader does not exist. He is a construct. He is not a particular person like the teacher who reads the words. And yet one of the main things about him is that he reads in a peculiar way in which no one else but teachers read: not because he has a special interest or allegiance or commitment to the subject—not from a position of engagement in the world—but because he seeks a kind of disinterested enlightenment or disembodied pleasure. As a construct, the general reader is 100 percent audience, 0 percent person.

Yet none of these tricky audience issues tend to be raised for discussion. It's no wonder then that students have only a vague, fuzzy or shifting sense of their audience and write in a vague, fuzzy, or shifting voice. (That's also the kind of voice, by the way, that people often use when they write in a bureaucracy. The problem is the same: you are writing to an audience that seems unreal and ambiguous. School essays could serve as good practice for writing in bureaucracies if teachers spent more time talking about problems and solutions of dealing with "unreal audiences.")

Because of this slippery way in which the "general reader" is both like and unlike the teacher, teachers, too, are often unclear in their own minds as they comment on a student's paper whether they are saying "This doesn't work for *me*—given my knowledge of the topic, my position on it, and my situation in the world," or "I don't believe this would work for a general reader who doesn't already understand what you are trying to explain or doesn't already have his mind made up on the topic." It's hard to argue well or

and then try to write a comment that will be helpful. And I mustn't express to the student the annoyance that I feel—sometimes the fury. Is it surprising if these feelings sometimes get through anyway? Or that I am not always as helpful and supportive as I ought to be toward these creatures who cause me weekly agony?

In short, teachers cannot easily give their real reactions to the writing of their students because their real reactions are usually too critical and sometimes unprintable. They know that their students cannot handle or benefit from a mirror which shows so devastatingly every single weakness and mistake. Therefore since teachers cannot communicate to students what it actually feels like to read these words, and since there is no one else who reads these words, the student *never* gets the experience of learning what actually happens to a real reader reading his words. He gets only the conclusions of a skilled cataloguer of weaknesses and (one hopes) strengths.

As a result of all this the student's job is both too easy and too hard. It's too easy in that the student knows his reader will keep on reading to the end, no matter how bad the writing is. The student never has that frustrating but healthy sense of a reader on the other end of the line making minute by minute decisions about whether to keep on reading or put it down. Nothing really gives you the strength you need for revising but that feeling of trying to keep a reader from hanging up on you; that feeling of having only one thin thread connecting you and the reader. Once that filament breaks, you have lost your reader for ever back to the wide sea—or at least until you manage to hook him again with some combination of luck and good bait.

And yet writing for teachers is at the same time too hard. For there is a price you must pay for having a reader who never stops reading your words. He never really takes your words seriously as messages intended genuinely for him.

In what is the trickiest audience situation of all, then, it is easiest not to think very much about audience—about whom your words are intended for and what you want those words to do. And not thinking about audience is one of the best ways to block improvement in writing. Most people keep up their school habit of not thinking enough about audience even after they leave school or college—unless they write a lot for real audiences and also get lots

of accurate feedback from these audiences about what their words actually did. Most people just struggle along as they are writing something in an effort to make it "good writing in general" instead of thinking carefully or precisely about "good for what effect on what reader."

Teachers, too, drift into ignoring audience. It is unhelpful, for example, to give assignments—as most teachers do and indeed I realize I tend to do—without specifying clearly who the audience is and what effect the words are supposed to have on it. Are these words meant to inform? To inform whom? How much prior knowledge do they have? To persuade? To persuade whom? How much do we know about their position on the issue? To give pleasure? To whom? What kind of reading do they like?

It is also unhelpful to evaluate and give feedback to student writing about its quality *in general*. It is meaningless, really, to try to tell a student how successful his writing is in general without saying how successful it is at achieving a certain effect on a certain audience. The only way you can give feedback on "quality in general" is by doing what teachers have historically tended to do: concentrate mostly on the conventions of writing as a medium, namely, spelling, grammar, footnotes, and paragraphing, and ignoring the question of how well it would work on what kinds of readers. It's not that the conventions of writing as a medium are unimportant or easy to learn. Quite the contrary. They are *too* hard and onerous to learn if you try to learn them by themselves—as mere push-ups—without the incentive of actually trying to use them in real communication to real readers.

Advice

Advice for anybody—whether currently writing for teachers or not:

- Check your writing for habits that may still undermine it even if you haven't written for a teacher in years:

  Are you still writing like a nervous student? writing to your examiner? tentative, hesitant, beating around the bush? Is there an air of worry in your words as though you are talking to someone who makes you uncomfortable? Is your writing like the speech of people whose tone of voice always curls up into a mini-question mark at the end of every sentence?

  Are you still writing like a timid student? always playing it

safe? Is your writing always scrubbed behind the ears? Are you always hedging your bets, always saying "On the one hand ———, but on the other hand ———," always ending with a sweet, positive, noncommital sentiment ("And so we see that this is a difficult problem though some significant progress has been made"), never daring assert any of your real convictions? Does your writing still pursue those gold stars for clean fingernails that you got (or didn't get) so many years ago?

Are you still, twenty years later, writing like that angry student who is covertly giving the finger to the reader who made you write when you didn't want to? Do your words, though perhaps civil on the surface, really carry a hidden message that says, "Dear reader, if you don't like this, screw you."

Are you still writing like that star student, working harder to impress the teacher—to show off, be fancy, or win points—than simply to get a message across? Does your writing try harder for an *A* than for communication with a human being? Are you turning off every reader except those few who are willing to relate to you as hot stuff?

These vestigial bad habits manifest themselves in infinitely subtle ways. You may be unaware of them. Even your readers may be unaware of them. A reader will complain about your argument or your organization—even your spelling—when really he is annoyed without realizing it by one of these half-buried ways of relating to your original school audience. But you can easily sniff them out if you just ask yourself and your readers "What is the relationship to a reader in these words? How do you feel that voice talking to you?" Even inexperienced readers will be able to detect those old and destructive tones of voice.

The best corrective for these old bad habits (in addition to getting feedback from readers about your tone of voice and stance toward readers—see Section V, "Feedback") is to make sure you engage in two opposite kinds of writing: very practical writing and very impractical writing. By practical writing I mean words designed to make something happen in the world—words you want to *work*, not be *judged nice*, for example, requesting a refund or a contribution, writing a resumé or a letter of recommendation, writing to a publisher with a prospectus or proposal. By impractical writing I mean words which in a sense don't matter at all: words for the wind or for the wastepaper basket, for example, freewriting

or exploratory personal writing that is not trying to make anything happen (except perhaps for yourself).

These two writing experiences are opposite yet essential. In the first case everything matters. The words you put down determine whether you get that money or whether the publisher asks to see your MS. Writing as *action in the world* intensifies the relationship between you and the words you put down on paper. With impractical writing, on the other hand, you get the experience of total freedom. Nothing matters. This intensifies in a different way your relationship to the words you write. There are certain trains of thought and feeling, and certain voices, that you never discover except by writing freely when nothing matters—as well as discovering that writing itself can be easy and painless. The opposite activities of practical writing and freewriting help you counteract the harmful effects of writing only for teachers where you get the worst of both extremes: all the anxiety yet none of the satisfaction of practical writing; all the ineffectualness yet none of the freedom of freewriting. That is, when you write for teachers you can be hurt by their verdict but you have no hope of actually making a dent on your reader.

Advice If You Are Currently Writing for Teachers

It can be a great gift to have a writing teacher—to have the services of a coach watching you play, suggesting exercises, and giving you feedback and advice. But you will miss most of this benefit unless you learn to take a certain amount of control of your situation and use your teacher as a service, a helper, an ally—not fight him as an adversary or go limp. Here are some concrete suggestions for getting the most out of teachers.

- Don't just hit balls to your coach, find someone to play tennis with. Give your papers to a friend to read—first for sharing, later for feedback. Get together with a small sharing or feedback group. If you give your writing only to teachers you get into a terrible rut of caring too much about your writing in one way—as an ordeal—and not caring enough about it in another way—as a message that matters to real human beings.

Once you start giving your words to someone in addition to a teacher you will feel an immediate relief: new perspective, new energy. Even if you *hate* the assignment you now have an interest-

ing challenge: taking your *friend* seriously enough to find something worth saying about that topic or to find a way of writing that gives pleasure. Both tasks, while difficult, turn out to be feasible and enormously rewarding.

• Work out alternative assignments with your teacher so that it will be easier and more natural to give your writing to others. If you make it clear to your teacher that you are really serious about your writing and if you accept the fact that he probably has a serious agenda of skills and techniques for his assignments, you can usually work out some alternatives:

Something quite close to the assignment. Simply ask if you can write about the topic exactly as given but in the form of a letter or personal essay to a friend, or a memo or article to some other audience you would enjoy addressing.

Significant variation. If you are supposed to write about some aspect of *Hamlet*, ask if you can write something you could submit to a literary magazine or to the arts section of a newspaper: something about *Hamlet* and some other play, novel, or movie that provides an interesting comparison—and promise to treat prominently that aspect of the play the teacher wanted you to treat. If you are supposed to write a history paper about a period in the relatively recent past, see if you can write it in terms of what it was like then for your ancestors and make it a piece of family history. If you are assigned a piece of persuasion on a topic of no concern to you, perhaps you could choose an entirely different topic where you have a real audience but where the *kind* of persuasion demanded is exactly the same as in the teacher's assignment. You may find the teacher more amenable if you ask him what skills or issues he is trying to emphasize in his assignment and then agree to emphasize them in your alternative assignment. For example, he may want you to document everything you say about *Hamlet* with quotations from the text; or to deal particularly with imagery; or to highlight economic conditions in the period of history you write about. You can do these things in your alternative assignments.

Something completely different. Something you need to write or want to write such as a short story, a memo, a letter of application, a political pamphlet, a letter to the editor. Emphasize the fact that you'll work at least as hard or even harder on it than you would on his assignment—and learn a lot about writ-

ing. Make sure, however, that you aren't just trying to do exactly the same kind of writing over and over again (for instance, nothing but science fiction stories about the future) since the teacher will probably feel, legitimately, that you won't be practicing the range of skills he's trying to stress.

- Ask teachers to specify clearly the audience and purpose for any writing assignment they give. It helps most if these audiences are actual people or groups even if the writing is not in fact delivered to them. And there is always a useful real audience available to whom writing can easily be delivered: other members of the class.
- Ask teachers to give some class time to discussing this issue of audience and if possible to bring in some outside readers—other teachers, magazine or newspaper editors, public relations officers of a business—to describe frankly their specific reactions to actual pieces of writing.
- You need to master the traditional genre of writing essays for that tricky general reader. But ask the teacher to explain more clearly who he thinks this general reader is and to sponsor some discussion of the matter. What level of knowledge should you assume a general reader has about the topic? What point of view should you assume this reader has about the issue? There is an easy way to remove this slippery issue from the realm of the hypothetical and that is to ask your teacher to specify for every essay assignment a particular magazine or journal in which it should be published. Then the readership and editorial policy of this publication can be discussed and people can look at some of the pieces that it actually publishes. (Remember of course that it may help you to do all your raw writing to a different, more comfortable audience, or no audience at all, and wait till revising to make your words fit the general reader or the readership of this publication.)
- Ask your teacher to assign pieces of writing where he is, indeed, the direct and real audience: pieces of writing designed to affect him in particular. If he is trying to persuade his own child to do something or trying to decide which brand of whatsis to buy, students could write genuine advice to him. Ask him to think of theoretical or political or practical issues where he cannot make up his mind. Also issues where he already feels strongly one way or the other. Since he is the real audience, he can give accurate feedback on how the writing worked and didn't work on him.

• Ask your teacher to grade and comment on your paper not just as to its quality in general but as to how he thinks it will work on the particular hypothetical audience. This change in feedback will come naturally if you have already persuaded him to specify audience and purpose more clearly—or worked out alternative assignments where you specify your own audience and purpose. And this change, interestingly, will usually lead him to do something else very helpful, namely to tell some of his own particular reactions—speaking as himself rather than as "representative reader." It will become easier for him to say things like "This would probably work on Robert Redford but it bothers me because . . ." or "I found this section particularly interesting but I don't think it will make sense to your third-grade readers."

• Almost all these suggestions involve asking for more and clearer feedback than your teacher usually gives. Find ways to make it easier for him to give it. For example, try attaching a sheet of paper to your writing with some questions on it that will permit him to say more in fewer words. On the next page is an example that can easily be varied.

If he didn't specify audience and purpose, you will have to say what your audience and purpose are on that sheet of paper.

See the next section on feedback for other questions to ask of a reader.

Offer a cassette (and cassette player) with your paper so he can speak his comment without writing. You'll get a much more human comment and learn more about how your writing affected him. (This is probably feasible only if he reads papers in his office. You can't ask him to carry a cassette player home.) Don't ask for conferences on every paper. That takes too much time.

• Ask your teachers to point out at least one thing you did well on each paper. If possible, one thing that's better than last time. (If they have too many students, however, you can't expect them to remember your last paper.) When teachers read huge stacks of papers they often drift into doing nothing but finding weaknesses. The goal of this request is not just to spare your feelings (though if you are too hurt you will learn poorly). Knowledge of what you did well is actually more potent in helping you improve your writing than knowledge of what you did poorly. If your teacher shows you what you did well, or even sort-of-well, you can do it again, more often, and even expand on it, because you already have the feeling

Please put a straight line alongside passages and underneath phrases that you like or that work for *you* as a reader; and a wiggly line alongside passages and underneath phrases that annoy or don't work for you.

Please write a brief comment here about the one matter that most affected your reading.

For the *intended audience*, which section(s) or aspect(s) of this piece do you think will work or be most successful? Why?

What do you think will fail or backfire on the intended audience? Why?

Here are some aspects of my writing that I especially want feedback on:

	strong	*adequate*	*weak*
• paragraphing	☐	☐	☐
• convincing argument	☐	☐	☐
• convincing evidence	☐	☐	☐
• liveliness of language or humanness of tone	☐	☐	☐
• punctuation	☐	☐	☐

What is the quickest simplest change I could make that would create the biggest improvement?

What one thing do you think I should try to work on or think about in my next piece of writing?

for how to do it. You need only improve a behavior you already possess and learn to use it in more contexts. And as you learn to get your strengths into more of your writing you naturally tend to get rid of some of the other weaknesses. But if your teacher only tells you what you did wrong you may not be able to fix it no matter how clearly he explains the problem: he's asking for behavior you've never produced before.

For example, if you have consistently terrible organization and occasional powerful sentences, you may well improve your organization more quickly by trying to expand that gift for strong sentences than by working on organization. For some reason you have a serious blind spot or lack of feeling for organization, and it seldom does much good in such cases for someone to shout at you "pay more attention to organization." *You* have to develop that feeling for organization, and often you can't do so until you improve enough *other* aspects of your writing that your imagination can finally work on organization.

• To get the most help from a teacher you need him as your ally and helper rather than as your enemy. You will go a long way toward that goal if you can get him to specify the audience for the writing assignments and then to grade them and give you feedback in terms of how he thinks your writing would succeed with that audience. This makes your teacher into a kind of coach helping you aim words at some third party. But there's a lot more you can do to overcome the structural features of school and college which make teachers into opponents and policemen (a role most teachers would like to get out of). Pretend, for instance, that in reacting and commenting on your paper, your teacher is a *friend* doing you a *favor*—not an employee doing a duty. (He certainly is doing you a favor if he does it well.) Think of the specific things you would do for your friend if you were asking a favor:

> You would probably make your paper neat and easy to read. I get mad at students when their papers are messy. I begin to feel them as the enemy.
>
> You would probably get your paper to him at a convenient time. I resent students who turn in papers late. It usually makes my life harder, and even when it doesn't, it makes me feel I have to be on guard against them.
>
> You would probably proofread and correct carefully to get rid

of all the mistakes you can. When I get a paper full of mistakes I know the student could have removed, I immediately feel like *not helping* him. I feel he's treating me as a servant who is supposed to pick his smelly socks off the floor when he could just as well do it himself.

You would probably make sure to stick to the assignment. When I come to a paper that avoids or drifts away from the assignment, I instinctively feel, "Uh oh, here's someone trying to get away with something. I'd better be on guard." I start relating to him as the enemy. (Usually, by the way, you *can* find a way to include almost anything that interests you, even if it seems quite distant, as long as you think carefully about how to make it *part* of something that does address the assignment squarely.) You can probably add to my list of suggestions for helping make your teacher into your ally rather than your adversary.

• None of those suggestions entails doing any *more* writing than what is already assigned to you by the teacher: merely giving that writing to other people and adjusting the transaction between you and the teacher. But the most powerful thing you can do to increase what you get from teachers is to write *more*. Not just because quantity helps—though that is probably the main fact about writing—but because you learn most from teachers if your writing for them is a *supplement* to other writing you are doing. Try to think of writing for teachers as sneaking off for a little help on the side, getting in some volleying with the coach between your real games of tennis. Writing more means working more, but the amount of writing your teachers ask for will suddenly seem small once you stop treating assignments as ordeals and scary performances for the enemy and start treating them like mere practice games or chances for feedback from an ally on a nearly final draft.

Once you can write more you can look to them for what they *can* give and look elsewhere for what they cannot. Teachers are good for giving criticism because they read papers in piles of 25 or 50. Take that criticism and use it. They are good at making you write when you don't feel like it, simply because they have authority. Instead of resenting this, try appreciating it and internalizing from it what may be the most important skill of all: the ability to write when you are in the wrong mood. They are *not* good at telling you

what your writing feels like to a real human being, at taking your words seriously as messages directed to them, at praising you, or perhaps even at noticing you. Get these things elsewhere. They are easier to find than what a teacher has to offer.

FEEDBACK

INTRODUCTION

No matter how productively you managed to get words down on paper or how carefully you have revised, no matter how shrewdly you figured your audience and purpose and suited your words to them, there comes the time when you need feedback. Perhaps you need it for the sake of revising: you have a very important piece of writing and you need to find out which parts work and which parts don't so you can rewrite it carefully before giving it to the real audience. Or perhaps you have already given an important piece to the real audience—it's too late for any revising—but nevertheless you need to learn how your words worked on the reader. Or perhaps you've simply decided that you must start learning in general about the effectiveness of writing.

Some people don't need to be encouraged to seek feedback; indeed, they need to be restrained. To some of you, that is, I would like to say, "Stop worrying so much about how your words work, about how *good* they are; just keep your mind on your writing, have fun, get confident, write lots." In short, if you are a compulsive worrier and keep leaking your attention away from *what* you are doing to *how well* you are doing it, forget about feedback till you have done enough writing and sharing and feel more secure.

But some of you need to be encouraged to get feedback. Probably you have been burned in the past. Most people experience feedback as painful, however they get it. After all, getting feedback on an early draft usually means getting criticized before you've had

a chance to make your piece as good as you can make it. But getting feedback on a final draft feels even worse because you are usually getting criticized for your very best work, and besides, you are so tired of working on it by now that you can't even bear to look at it any more. If you follow the suggestions I give in this section, however, getting feedback can be a useful and gratifying experience.

It's easy to know when you should start getting feedback. Just keep in mind what's more important than what: writing is more important than sharing your writing with readers; and sharing your writing with readers is more important than getting feedback from them. That is, if sharing begins to stop you from writing, then don't share. And if getting feedback begins to stop you from writing or sharing, then stop getting feedback. Writing is what's most important. But when you can share and get feedback *without* hampering your writing, then you will benefit enormously from those two activities.

It may be that getting feedback has been hampering you more than it needs to. For if you use the approach suggested here you can avoid the most common problems in getting feedback: people beating around the bush and not telling you anything at all; or giving you a vague wholistic judgment such as "B-plus" or "I liked it"; or going into a negative gear and "critiquing" you by finding every single real and imaginable mistake there could be ("I hope I didn't discourage you or anything"); or else trying to imitate what they remember getting from their teachers and talking about nothing but "topic sentences"; or else grabbing it out of your hands and trying to rewrite the whole thing the way they think it ought to be; or else just telling you everything your writing reminds them of.

The four chapters of this section help you take charge of the feedback process by showing you the options you have and then providing you the tools you need.

- In Chapter 21, "Criterion-Based Feedback and Reader-Based Feedback," I explore the two kinds of feedback you can get and the particular strengths and weaknesses of each kind.
- Chapters 22 and 23 provide the tools you need for actually getting good feedback—specific questions to ask readers to help them find more useful and substantive things to tell you than "I liked it" or "I didn't like it." Chapter 22 is a catalogue of questions for getting criterion-based feedback, 23 a catalogue of questions for get-

ting reader-based feedback. You may want to glance through these two chapters as you read this section but you can't really use these questions till you have a piece of your own writing in hand to which you want responses and a reader or two willing to give you feedback.

- In Chapter 24, "Options for Getting Feedback," I explain the many possible procedures you might use. At the end of the chapter, I describe one particular way that is especially valuable: getting feedback regularly in a writing support group.

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Criterion-Based Feedback and Reader-Based Feedback

Criterion-based feedback helps you find out how your writing measures up to certain criteria—in this case to those criteria most often used in judging expository or nonfiction writing. To get criterion-based feedback you ask readers four broad, fundamental questions:

a. What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?
b. How well is the writing organized?
c. How effective is the language?
d. Are there mistakes or inappropriate choices in usage?

But because these questions are so broad, you usually get better feedback if you ask much more specific questions such as these: Is the basic idea a good one? Is it supported with logical reasoning or valid argument? Are there too many abstractions and too few examples or concrete details? Is the whole thing unified rather than pulling in two or three conflicting directions? Are the sentences clear and readable? Chapter 22 contains twenty-four of these questions grouped under the four general questions listed above.

Reader-based feedback, on the other hand, instead of telling you how your writing measures up to preestablished criteria, tells you what your writing does to particular readers. To get reader-based feedback you ask readers three broad fundamental questions:

a. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading the piece of writing?
b. Summarize the writing: give your understanding of what it says or what happened in it.
c. Make up some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with you.

Here too you usually get better feedback by helping your reader out with more specific questions like these: Now that you have finished reading just the first one or two paragraphs or stanzas, are you an interested, cooperative reader or are you bored or resistant in some way? Point to the places where you had the most trouble and describe what kind of trouble it was for you. Summarize your understanding of the whole piece. What mood or voice do you hear in the words? What kind of people does the writer seem to be talking to: people in the know? nincompoops? interested amateurs? How is the writer giving it to you: willingly? slyly? grudgingly? hitting you over the head with it? The next-to-last chapter in this section, 23, contains forty-one of these specific questions grouped under the three general questions above.

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Criterion-based feedback, then, tells you how your writing measures up, reader-based feedback tells you what it does to readers. What is its quality? vs. How does it work? But the distinction between the two can sometimes, in practice, seem fuzzy. That is, sometimes when a reader gives you a piece of criterion-based feedback (for example, "This piece isn't unified"), it may just be his way of saying what was happening inside him ("I felt a bit in the fog most of the time I was reading—I didn't know where I was going"). Or if a reader gives you a piece of reader-based feedback ("When I got here, I stopped short and said, No sir! I won't buy that for one minute!"), it may just be his way of saying "Your logic is faulty here." Indeed, a reader cannot possibly give you a piece of criterion-based feedback except on the basis of something having happened inside him; nor can a reader give you a piece of reader-based feedback without at least implying a criterion of judgment or perception.

But that interdependence between the two kinds of feedback does not diminish the important difference between them. It will make a practical difference to you whether you ask readers for one or the other.*

*This reminds me of arguments about the relationship between form and content. Some people want to say there is no meaningful distinction between form and content because each can, in the last analysis, be expressed in terms of the other. But though that may be theoretically true, the distinction is still a real one that has immense practical importance. If you look for form you will notice things you miss if you look for content, and vice versa.

Thus if a reader tells you "This piece lacks unity," you can surmise that something happened inside him, but you don't really know *what* happened. Perhaps he felt foggy and lost, as I interpreted above, but perhaps he knew perfectly well where the writing was going, but he saw extraneous matter in it that didn't belong. Did it annoy him or did it just violate his sense of unity? Did he feel mosquitoes continually distracting his attention or just notice with calm disapproval the toys scattered on the floor? His comment on your lack of unity tells you nothing of how he experienced your words.

Conversely, if a reader gives you reader-based feedback—for example, "I felt lost here," he's giving you information about his reaction but not much about the writing: Is he lost because of your logic? your wording? Or do you have so many details here that he can no longer follow the main point?

So if you want messages about the writing you should ask for criterion-based feedback, and if you want to know what happened in the reader you should ask for reader-based feedback. That would seem to indicate that you should always ask for criterion-based feedback since it is writing you are trying to work on, not psychology.

But the crucial question about any piece of writing intended for an audience is not "How does it measure up against certain criteria" such as good sentences, good logic, or good paragraphs, but "*How does it work on readers?*" The quality of the sentences, logic, or paragraphs is irrelevant if the writing does to readers what you want it to do.

So that tips the scales back again to reader-based feedback as more useful. But of course it's not that simple. For even if you know all about what's going on in readers, you also need messages about your writing if you want to fix it or change it in any way. Otherwise you'll be stuck telling your reader, "I *know* you are lost, you've given me a vivid description of your lostness, but what is it in my *writing* that makes you feel lost? Is it my wording? My paragraphing? My logic?"

And so of course you should try for both criterion-based and reader-based feedback. Indeed, each kind of feedback enhances the other. Every time you get some criterion-based feedback, you can encourage the reader to tell you about the reactions he had which gave rise to his statement about unity or paragraphs or

spelling. And every time you get reader-based feedback you can encourage the reader to tell you what it was in the writing that caused these reactions in him—was it the logic, the use of evidence, the diction, or what? Nevertheless each kind of feedback has its own special virtues which make it particularly useful in certain situations.

Virtues of Criterion-based Feedback

- Criterion-based feedback is the kind of feedback most people are accustomed to—what they've usually gotten from teachers—and so it's the kind of feedback that comes most naturally to people's lips when you ask them for feedback. And because I provide such a long list of very specific questions, you can avoid one of the main problems of criterion-based feedback: people not knowing what qualities to look for in the writing or else commenting entirely on the basis of just a few favorite criteria.
- It's the more practical and easier to understand of the two kinds of feedback because it speaks more directly about your writing. You have an easier time figuring out how to improve your writing if someone tells you your piece is not clearly organized than if he tells you he felt vaguely uneasy the whole time he was reading. Thus, it is especially good for revising (rather than for general long-term learning about the effect of your words on audiences).
- Indeed, you can even use these questions to get feedback from *yourself* as you are revising—as a checklist for finding weaknesses in your draft. These questions help you see what you have just written through fresh "outside" eyes—through the grid of external criteria. Reader-based questions, on the other hand, would be hard to answer by yourself.
- Criterion-based feedback helps you isolate particularly troublesome aspects of your writing and then concentrate on them in revising and in future writing. For example, perhaps you have trouble getting rid of digressions or making clear transitions between sections. Once you learn this through criterion-based feedback, you can check each piece of writing yourself for these particular dangers. And you can ask readers specifically for feedback on these matters which they might otherwise neglect.
- Thus you can use criterion-based feedback more quickly if you

want to: just zoom in and inquire about a couple of areas and stop. It's hard to get reader-based feedback quickly.

- If you have only one reader for feedback, criterion-based questions will help him pay attention to a broad range of qualities in the writing—noticing things he might neglect if he just reacted naturally. Perhaps he mostly reacts to the kind of person or tone of voice he feels in the writing and neglects organization and logic altogether. Or perhaps he reacts almost entirely to logic and evidence but ignores tone of voice.
- Criterion-based feedback is good for readers who are insensitive to nuances or who are reluctant to talk about their own reactions.
- Criterion-based feedback is more verifiable than reader-based feedback. If a reader says your logic or spelling is wrong you can verify his judgment. If a reader says your organization or paragraphing is weak, you cannot verify his judgment, of course, but if you get three or four intelligent readers to give you their judgments too—and give you their reasons and discuss the question among themselves—you probably can reach a trustworthy objective conclusion.
- Criterion-based feedback is good if you want to work on your conscious understanding of the criteria used in judging writing. It helps you have brief and instructive discussions on the order of "What makes a good introduction?" or "Well, what *does* make a paragraph hang together?" It leads to discussions of conscious craft in writing.
- Criterion-based feedback is useful for readers who must comment on *many* pieces of writing in one sitting or in a comparatively short period of time. That's why teachers tend to use it. It's nearly impossible to read a whole stack of papers in one sitting and react to each one fully, for itself, and on its own terms. It's much easier—and perhaps even fairer in the long run—to choose a manageable set of good criteria and apply them to each paper as you read it.

Thus if I must read and comment on a large stack of essays in one evening I will tend to read each one in terms of criteria such as unity, argument, clarity of language, mechanics, and how well they fit the audience/purpose. I will also try to include something about how it felt to read this essay, but if I am too tired or bored or worried about something else, I may not have any feelings other

than the ones that are intruding on me from the rest of my life—boredom or irritation or impatience. Criterion-based feedback has the enormous virtue of permitting you to read with less than full attention and still—if you are practiced—give accurate feedback on specific criteria.

• If, in particular, your task is to *judge* or *rank* a set of writings—if, for example, you must choose among ten job applications or if you are on a committee to chose the best essay or poem for a competition—you can probably be more fair and accurate if you judge in terms of explicit criteria. Otherwise it's often a matter of judging apples against oranges—just a matter of each piece producing noncomparable reactions in readers. And if you *feel* one piece is clearly best, that feeling may be based entirely on one criterion that you especially value—for example clarity of language or the personal qualities that show through—and you may be neglecting seven other important criteria that are well achieved in some other piece of writing that happens to leave you cold.

• And so if you are writing something for a reader who will judge the writing according to criteria—perhaps for a teacher who will read and evaluate a large stack of essays in one sitting—criterion-based feedback may be especially helpful to you in revising your piece. You can try to find out what criteria he will use. Many requests or guidelines for writing tell you the criteria readers will use, for example, guidelines for a grant application or a letter of recommendation ("Applications will be judged on the basis of . . ."). It's worth asking a teacher to tell you about the criteria he uses in grading, even if he doesn't use them with complete consistency. But it's important to remember that people often judge on the basis of different criteria from the ones they think they are using.

Virtues of Reader-based Feedback

Despite all those strengths of criterion-based feedback, I find reader-based feedback even more useful. If you neglect reader-based feedback, you will miss many of the main advantages and pleasures of the whole feedback process.

• Reader-based feedback gives you the main thing you need to improve your writing: the experience of what it felt like for readers as they were reading your words. In the long run you get more out

of taking a ride inside your reader's skin than you get from a precise diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of your writing. That precise diagnosis can be surprisingly useless in actually helping you to *change* the way you write. It may even paralyze you.

Besides, readers often hide their own reactions behind criterion-based judgments about, say, paragraphs, the digressions, the diction. They don't feel comfortable saying, "I was bored after the first couple of pages" or "Actually I sort of felt you were badgering me and talking down to me" or "Somehow I found myself disagreeing with you more at the end than I had at the beginning but I didn't know why."

People are nervous about saying these things because they can't explain or justify them. Yet such felt reactions are often just what you need for improving your writing, especially if you can get the reader to tell you a bit more about where and why they arose.

- Reader-based feedback is the most trustworthy feedback because you are only asking for "raw data"—what they saw and what was happening to them as they read. With criterion-based feedback, on the other hand, you are asking them to *translate* those perceptions and reactions into a judgment about what is good or bad in the writing. That act of translation is tricky. It takes an experienced reader to translate his discomfort or annoyance into an accurate statement of what's wrong with your logic or diction. He may tell you "too many digressions," for example, or "too many generalizations," but perhaps the essential thing is that you didn't get him to be a cooperative reader. If you had, he wouldn't have complained about the digressions, indeed he would have seen them as integral to your argument. And even if you fix the digressions, he'll probably stay irritated and uncooperative and find something else to complain about. And all the while, you never learn the essential point: some tone or stance in your writing made him irritated and uncooperative. If, on the other hand, you can *enter into* his reactions and *feel* his irritation in those very words which you thought were perfectly straightforward and well-mannered—if you can learn to experience your words as he experiences them—you can usually find a way to translate all that into practical action: you can decide whether a change is needed (or whether his reaction was peculiar) and what kind of change will fix that irritation.
- Therefore, reader-based feedback has the advantage of keep-

ing you more in charge of the whole feedback process. Readers get to tell you what they saw and what happened in them, but *you* take over from there. You do all the translating. You get to decide what their reactions mean and what changes if any you want to make. One of the main reasons so many people hate feedback or fail to learn from it is that it makes them feel so helpless. Getting feedback has always felt like putting themselves entirely into someone else's power. You don't do that if you use reader-based feedback. (Of course, there *are* times when you are busy and tired and have great faith in your reader, so you say, "Don't bother me with your reactions, just tell me what's wrong and how to fix it.")

- Reader-based feedback has the enormous virtue of being available from *anyone*. You don't need experts or experienced writers. Teachers and editors have no special headstart. You can even read pieces out loud to people who can't read, and you will be surprised at what excellent feedback you get. You can use friends, children, people you like to work with, whoever is available, people who know lots about the topic but nothing about writing. The quality of their feedback has nothing to do with their ideas or theories about writing. In short, it is much easier to give good reader-based feedback than to give good criterion-based feedback. And more fun.
- If you are writing an audience-oriented piece such as a memo or a tricky letter—writing that must *work* on your intended reader rather than be good in some timeless or abstract fashion—reader-based feedback will be more helpful to you. Not only will it tell you a lot about how your words work on a real person, you can go out and get feedback from readers *just like* your intended reader—even if they are inexperienced or uninterested in writing. If you are writing children's stories, you can't ask children about the unity or diction in what you read to them, but you can ask them lots of these reader-based questions about what happened to them. If you are writing advertisements meant to work on small business owners, you *could* ask them about diction or digressions, but that's not the point. The point is what happens to them.
- Because reader-based feedback emphasizes the practical question of what the words are doing rather than the theoretical question of how good they are, it is less evaluative and judgmental. It usually leads to more listening and learning, less arguing. Criterion-based feedback, on the other hand, is based entirely on ideals or perfect models and so every item of that feedback is likely

to be a statement of how your words didn't quite measure up. It's hard not to be defensive and to argue against it: "Well, you may not *think* that's a proper introduction, but you just have a rigid, simpleminded notion of what an opening paragraph ought to be like." With reader-based feedback there is seldom anything to argue about. You can't say, "I disagree. You were *not* confused during that opening paragraph." And even if you think he was stupid to be confused, your act of simply listening and seeing it through his eyes will probably lead you to improve that first paragraph.

The main thing people feel when they first learn to get reader-based feedback is an enormous sense of relief that value judgments and "measuring-up" are not the focus of every statement. It's an exhilarating experience when, as sometimes happens, you get a rich set of reactions to a piece of your writing—you are getting good insights and taking notes like mad as you listen to this person tell you his reactions—and then it is all over and you start to listen to the next person give you feedback and suddenly it hits you: "Hey! I don't even know whether he *liked* it or not." Suddenly that tyrannical matter of liking and not-liking pales into its not-very-significant place.

Of course you often do get value judgments in reader-based feedback since liking or not liking is likely to be one of the events in the reader. But it's only one of the events and usually not the most important one. And it's easier to accept a value judgment and learn from it when it consists of a statement of how the reader is bothered or put off or made uncomfortable by your words than when it consists of a statement of how your writing doesn't measure up to some criterion.

• In this sense, then, reader-based feedback is the most *efficient* kind of feedback: it can lead to the fastest and most pervasive improvement. It is more apt to speak to the root causes of strength and weakness in your writing, not just the surface effects. That is, if you ask for reader-based feedback you are apt to hear things like this: "Damn it, stop beating around the bush and come out and say what's on your mind. Stop working so hard at fending off my possible disagreements. Just write what you have to say. Your constant defending is making it harder for me as a reader just to follow your thoughts comfortably, in fact it's making me angry." Think how much more useful it is to hear that than to hear someone say "It's

too long and wordy, too many dependent clauses, try for simpler syntax and a clearer progression of logic." Once a reader helps you hear a note of insecure beating around the bush in your own writing voice, you can strengthen your writing much more quickly and pervasively than if he just told you to get rid of dependent clauses and use simpler diction and better logic.

Reader-based feedback gives you someone saying "I get annoyed and don't take your argument seriously because I always hear a kind of whine in your voice," instead of someone saying "too many passive verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Not enough crisp verbs of action. Your diction isn't lively or energetic." (I'm not saying you can get rid of a habit of voice overnight once you hear it. Since it is a habit it will slip out again and again in speaking and freewriting. Indeed, now that you realize a whine is there you ought to invite it out as much as you can in freewriting—to exaggerate it, play with it, get a better feeling for it, and see what it is trying to tell you. This will improve your ability to *remove* it when you revise —and gradually to grow out of it.)

Reader-based feedback gives you someone saying, "I get mad at you when I read this because I feel you being arrogant and snotty. You just ski as fast as you can and you don't give a damn whether I fall down or not as I try to follow you. You never even look back." Most of the time that kind of reaction helps you more than "Too many abrupt changes, too few clear transitions, too many abstractions without illustration, and even when you do give illustrations they are not obvious ones." I'm not saying that the reader is always *correct* in his picture of you. Even though he is intimidated by you, you may not in fact be writing in an arrogant or snotty way, just having a good time enjoying your own powers—skiing fast because you have fun skiing fast. But you can often improve your writing more quickly and easily when you realize how it *feels* to a reader, even if that reader is making an incorrect judgment about you, than if you were given entirely correct statements about your syntax or paragraph transitions.

• Reader-based feedback is especially necessary for poetry, fiction, and other kinds of creative writing. There are so many different ways in which poems or stories can succeed—or fail—that it's impossible to spell out a list of specific criteria for them. Indeed I am nervous about having you depend too much on my list of criterion-based questions even for nonfiction or expository writ-

ing. It's a safe list. Most teachers would agree with most items. But many successful pieces of nonfiction *fail* to meet some of these criteria, for example, they digress or they are hard to read or they have peculiar paragraphing. And many unsuccessful pieces measure up well on most criteria, but fail to have that certain something that makes them succeed with readers.

Summary

I can summarize the complementary virtues of the two kinds of feedback by pointing out that criterion-based feedback forces criteria to be conscious and reader-based feedback allows criteria to remain unconscious. Conscious criteria help readers notice things they would miss if they just gave themselves over to natural or habitual reading. But these conscious criteria can also be a screen between readers and your words—a filter which keeps readers from contacting and experiencing your words directly—leading them instead just to compare your words to a model, hold them up against a template, check off categories on a list. Amateur readers, in particular, sometimes go into a peculiar gear when you ask them for criterion-based feedback. They don't just read the way they would normally read. They say to themselves, "Well, now I've got to give help on writing, let's see, I've got to be on the lookout for faults, now let's see what should I look for, good organization, spelling and grammar of course, that's important, paragraphing, yes, that's what my teachers stressed a lot. Tone. I had this terrific teacher who talked about tone all the time, but I never did figure out what he meant. And not too many adjectives; not too many long sentences." Readers can't tell you much about your writing when they have all that noise in their heads.

Reader-based feedback, on the other hand, by allowing criteria to remain unconscious, yields just the opposite virtues and defects. It allows readers just to relax and read your writing for enlightenment or pleasure, and to experience it on its own terms. It allows them to notice and react to more qualities in it than they could consciously analyze, and it allows them to be more sensitive to nuances—especially matters of tone and presentation of self that are difficult to categorize but often determine success or failure. Leaving criteria unconscious, however, can also permit narrow reading: reading that is a slave to one or two unconscious criteria—

for example, how a reader feels about the tone of voice or the "vibes."

In short, the two kinds of feedback encourage readers to take different roles. When you ask a reader to give you criterion-based feedback you encourage him to function like an expert, a coach, or a commentator, that is, to stand off to the side and watch you from the stage wings as you give your violin concert and not get too involved in your music. This helps him to tell you about your technique. When you ask your reader to give you reader-based feedback, on the other hand, you encourage him to function like an audience, that is, to sit right out there in front of you and experience your music. This helps him to tell you about what your music does to the audience.

The moral of the story, then, is to use both kinds of feedback. I present criterion-based feedback first here because it is more familiar and easier to understand, but generally you do better to ask for reader-based feedback first. That way readers can just read for pleasure or enlightenment and tell you about whatever happens to them when they read in their accustomed way—before you make them into more self-conscious and technique-oriented readers by asking them criterion-based questions.

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A Catalogue of Criterion-Based Questions

The twenty-odd questions in this chapter will help you find out about four basic qualities in a piece of writing.

a. What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?
b. How well is the writing organized?
c. How effective is the language?
d. Are there mistakes or inappropriate choices in usage?

These four criteria can be fruitfully applied to any kind of writing but most of the specific questions in this chapter are framed so that they fit expository or nonfiction writing better than poetry or fiction. The questions which follow are too many to ask any one reader on one occasion (although you could ask *yourself* all these questions if you were revising one of your own pieces as carefully as you could). As in the rest of the book, I am trying to help you take charge of things by giving you more recipes than you can use for one meal. Try out these questions on different pieces of your writing and on different readers so you gradually learn which ones are most useful for you and which ones will be most important under various circumstances.

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a. What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?

1. Is the basic idea or insight a good one?
2. Is it supported by logical reasoning or valid argument?

3. Is it supported by evidence and examples?

4. Is it really saying something or is it just a collection of thoughts or observations (however unified and well written) sitting there limply? Did the writer communicate why this whole thing matters?

5. Is there too much abstraction or generalization? So few details, examples, and explanations that it ends up dull, empty, impossible to experience? or perhaps even impossible to understand?

6. Is there too *little* abstraction and too much clutter of detail? Too little standing back for perspective? Too little forest per tree?

7. Does it do what it says or implies it is going to do? Does it satisfy the issues it raises?

8. Is there a point of view or is the writing just disembodied statements from nowhere? And is that point of view unified and consistent?

9. Is the piece fitted to its audience? Has the writer understood their needs and point of view?

b. How well is the writing organized?

10. Is the whole thing unified? Is there one central idea to which everything pertains? Or is it pulling in two or three directions or full of loose ends and digressions?

11. Are the parts arranged in a coherent or logical sequence?

12. Is there a beginning? That is, does it start off in a way that allows you to get comfortably started? (The safest and most common way of doing this is to give an introduction—for example, a quick explanation of what's to come. But of course that's not the only way. Indeed plunging the reader into the middle of things without warning *can* function as a good beginning.)

13. Is there a middle? A body, some girth or solidity, some sense of meat and potatoes, sufficiency? Or does it turn around and say good-bye almost as soon as it is finished saying hello?

14. Is there an ending? Does it give you a sense of closure or completion? (The safest and most common method of doing this is to end with a conclusion—not just repeating what went before but figuring out what everything means or adds up to. But again, that's not the only good way to end a piece.)

15. Were the paragraphs really paragraphs? Could you tell what each one was saying? Did they function as helpful and comfortable

units of thought: not too much to carry in your arms, but not so little that it feels like a wasted trip?

c. How effective is the language?

16. Are the sentences clear and readable?
17. Are the words used correctly?
18. Is it succinct enough for the purpose and audience? Not too long, repetitious, dull?
19. Is it full enough? Or does the writer squeeze out so much of the juice of human communication, the oil of actual spoken discourse, that the language, even if correct, is indigestible?
20. Does the diction, mood, or level of formality fit the audience and occasion?
21. Is the language alive, human, interesting? Either because of interesting metaphors or turns of phrase; or because of a voice or presence in the words—a sense of someone's actually being there?

d. Are there mistakes or inappropriate choices of usage?

22. Are there mistakes in grammar, usage, spelling and typing?
23. Are there mistakes in footnotes, graphs, or other special effects?
24. Is it neat and easy to read on the page?

23

A Catalogue of Reader-Based Questions

The forty-one questions in this chapter are just specific practical ways to ask your reader three broad questions about how your words affected him:

a. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading the piece of writing?
b. Summarize the writing: give your understanding of what it says or what happened in it.
c. make some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with readers.

Sometimes a reader can tell us without difficulty or hesitation exactly what was going on in him as he read our words—either because he was surprised by his reactions or because he was in a particularly meditative, self-reflective mood. But often it is difficult for readers to tell in any detail what was happening to them as they read. Nor is this necessarily a fault. One of the marks of good reading is wholehearted investment in the words and meanings and no attention to the self. If a reader can remember nothing at all about what was happening as he read your words that may be a sign of total success.

But as writers we need to know what was going on in our readers. It would pay us, if we could, to hook up little cameras in all the corners of readers' innards so we could see all the thoughts, images, feelings, and impulses that occur as they read our writing. I like to call reader-based feedback *movies of a reader's mind.*

Get a reader to answer enough of the following questions and

you will get those movies. Being inside his skin as he reads your words is the most valuable experience you can get as a writer. It is valuable for readers, too. They not only discover more than they knew about this particular piece of writing, they also learn to be much more perceptive readers.

Remember, however, that these questions—and I give a formidable number of them—are nothing but ways to help readers tell you how they experience your writing. Some readers will give you good feedback without your asking them any of these questions at all. You can just sit back and listen.

a. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading the piece of writing?

Stop reading after you have read only one or two paragraphs or stanzas.*

1. What was happening to you as you read this opening passage?
2. Tell which words or phrases struck you most or stuck out or had resonance.
3. What has this section just said? What do you now expect the whole piece to say? (In the case of a story: what happened and what are the implications? What do you expect in what follows?)
4. What ideas or beliefs or feelings do you bring to this piece that could influence the way you read it?
5. The writer has just, as it were, introduced himself to you. How did he do it? Formally? Casually? Intimately? Jocularly? Did he thrust out his hand for you to shake? Sidle up to you without looking at you? What sense of the writer do you have now—on the basis of this limited introduction?

*You may be reluctant to ask for feedback from a reader who has only read a little bit of your piece. You may feel you'll get nothing but unfounded snap judgments. But first impressions often influence how a reader reacts to the rest of your piece. If you wait for feedback till your reader has finished reading your whole piece you may not learn how your opening section really affected him. You may not learn, for example, that the real reason for his quarrelling with your argument or his failure to experience the main event in your story was because he got irritated at the very start and consequently read the remainder in a resistant, foot-dragging mood. If he had been a cooperative reader he might not have had any of those difficulties. Whether a reader is going to be with you or against you often gets decided in this opening section.

6. At this early stage, are you more *with* the writer or *against* him? dragging your feet or helping pedal?

7. What do you want, need, wish for now? If you are fighting the writer now, what would it take to get you pedaling?

8. Continue reading. If you have a copy in your hand, make light pencil marks to give a fuller record of how you are reacting to the words: put a straight line next to passages and underneath words and phrases that work or please you; a wiggly line in the same way for parts which don't work or bother you in some way.

Stop once again—half or three-quarters through the piece.*

9. What has been happening to you and what is happening to you now? Tell it in the form of a story: first this happened, then I noticed that, then I felt this, and so on. For example:

> First I was open and sympathetic to what I thought you were up to. But then without noticing I drifted into resisting what you've been saying. Something made me feel "Wait a minute! There are things that don't fit!" Somehow I became an adversary, you became my enemy. But now that I stop and think about it, basically I agree with you completely. The trouble is you seem so wide-eyed and innocent and naïve—as though you are always saying "gee, gosh, golly, isn't this idea wonderful and amazing." I want to attack this naïve childish tone. And yet your main assertion is something I agree with. I guess it makes me mad to have my wise sophisticated point of view look silly and naïve.

Make sure to tell everything. Even if it seems irrelevant. If you started daydreaming or thinking about your new shoes, that's feedback. The important thing is to tell the writer where you were in his writing when it happened. All feedback is mixed with subjectivity. Let the writer do the sorting.

10. What changes have occurred in you since before? If you

* It's true that you affect the reader's reactions somewhat by stopping him in midcourse and asking him questions. It probably makes him a bit more thoughtful and observant than if he just read through without pause. He will understand some subtleties—and perhaps also notice some ragged edges—that he might otherwise have missed. You may want to ask some readers to read straight through before giving you any feedback at all. But these interim responses solve the most frustrating problem of reader-based feedback, the problem of vaguely global reactions such as "It was pretty good. I liked it a lot." By stopping your reader in the middle you force him to tell you where he is in an unfinished sequence of reactions and thus to talk about your writing as a series of events occuring in time inside a reader's head—which is what any piece of writing is—not as a vague global thingified "it."

were *with* the writer earlier and now resist or doubt him, where did you start to part company? (Or vice versa.) Why? What would the writer have to do to get you back?

11. Point to the sentences or passages you liked especially. Point to the ones you didn't understand or which made you stumble or resist.

12. What do you expect next? What do you need before it ends?

Stop right after you have completed reading it all.

13. What is happening to you now? Changes in reaction or loyalty? What's the most important thing about the piece?

14. How would you instinctively *reply* or *respond* if you weren't trying to give feedback? Would you tell the writer something similar that happened to you? Ask him what was going on in his mind when he wrote? Quarrel with him? Ask for clarification on some issue? Ask: "Did that *really* happen to you?" Ask: "But then what happened after the funeral?" Comment on the meaning of the story? Ask something about technique, such as "What made you decide to start with the shooting instead of the quarrel?" Ask him out for coffee and seek to know him better?*

15. Describe the way the writer ended his piece. Describe it as though he were ending a letter, saying good-bye, ending a telephone conversation: Did he hang up abruptly? Stand around on the doorstep unable to finish his sentence and say good-bye? A sudden gush of warmth? Did he slip out without anyone noticing?

16. Which aspects of *you* does the piece bring out? Your contemplative side? Your childish curiosity or eagerness? Your motherly or fatherly helpfulness ("Let's see how I can help out this nice young writer")?

17. What kind of person has the writer turned out to be? How did he turn out differently from what you had first suspected?

18. What do you like about the piece at this point?

Remain silent and reflective for a few moments.

19. What is happening to you? What delayed reactions or second thoughts do you have? Which parts of the writing seem to have been written in invisible ink and to emerge only slowly as you hold it over a candle? For example,

*You may not have to *ask* readers this question. Just notice how they act and what they ask you when they finish reading. Don't get sucked into responding to what they say. Listen to it as feedback.

It's been obvious to me throughout that I disagree with you entirely. But it's only now dawning on me gradually that I haven't been *fighting* you very much. Somehow you manage to give me your meanings as wholly yours. You don't make me feel I have to agree or accept them—or even find them rational. I can be interested and curious from a safe distance. In fact I find my impulse is to come slightly *forward* toward you—not retreat or push you away—because you are giving me a chance to look safely at something I usually fight and push away. It's kind of a relief.

Now read the piece of writing again.

20. Tell the differences between what happens to you on this reading and what happened to you on the first reading.

*b. Summarize the writing: give your understanding of what it says or what happened.**

21. Summarize it. If you have difficulty, pretend you only have thirty seconds to tell a friend what this piece is saying. Tell him quickly and informally. You don't have time to get it right or prepare an answer because the train is just getting to his stop. Let the writer hear you fumbling to find the center of gravity. For example, "Well, it's about a trip in the mountains. Or perhaps it's about survival. I guess it's really about the difference between men and women." Then summarize it in a sentence. Then in one word: first a word from the text, then a word not in the text.

22. Summarize what you feel the writer is *trying* but not quite

*You may have to push readers to give you summarizing feedback. They often resist it because it feels too simpleminded, too mechanical, too much like they are being given a sixth grade test. It's worth insisting on a summary, however, because without it you may misunderstand everything else you hear. Imagine hearing your reader say "I found your argument irritating and I especially wanted to quarrel with you in the third paragraph and in your conclusion"—and doing your best to stand inside his shoes and find the irritating quality in your words—and all the while not realizing he thought you were saying something entirely different from what you thought you were saying.

Even if you have a poem or story, it's worth getting readers to summarize it; even to summarize the "moral" of the story or "meaning" of the poem. Many readers who consider themselves artistic will scorn to summarize a poem—feeling it is a lowbrow thing to do. But you need to know how your writing has settled or sorted itself out or come to a focus in their heads. You have to give them permission to do what feels crude or imprecise—permission to "do violence" to what you have written. Words won't get into anyone's head without a little twisting. You need to know the nature of the twisting that has occurred.

managing to say. Where is the writing trying to go—perhaps against the writer's will?

23. Summarize what you *wish* it were saying.

24. Give an exaggerated summary. How would you summarize it if you were making fun of it or making a parody of it.*

25. Negative summary. What is it *not* about? What is the opposite of what it is saying? What is it almost saying or refraining from saying? †

c. Make up some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with readers. ‡

26. What other pieces of writing does it remind you of? What *forms* of writing does it remind you of: a love letter? a federal interdepartmental memo? a "why-I-want-to-go-to-college" essay on an application form? a late night diary entry?

27. Tell how someone different from you might react. "If my *mother* read this, she would think it was silly and not very funny." "If John read this, he wouldn't have a *clue* what you were talking

* Don't ask for exaggerated summaries if you feel shaky about this piece or generally vulnerable about your writing. They can sting. But they improve the feedback immensely. So many readers beat around the bush and won't come right out and say what they see—they hem and haw and tiptoe around their reactions and they are so afraid of hurting your feelings that you can't even tell what they are saying. They just fill the air with smoke. But when you tell them to *exaggerate* or *make fun of it*, this clears the air and they can just *say* it, *plop* it right down on the table.

And when you get an exaggerated summary you find out how your words will probably be understood by readers who don't read carefully or sympathetically. I got the following parody summary of my earlier book about writing: "Writing is easy. You never have to try, it's never painful, just sit down and write whatever comes to mind and it will always come out just right." It makes me wince. I want to say, "Wait, wait, you made a mistake in your reading," but it's a perfect picture of how the book was perceived by readers with a strong antipathy to what I was trying to say. It would have been helpful to get that feedback before I finished revising the book.

† This sounds odd, but try it on readers and you will sometimes find subtle but important clues about tendencies in your writing and your reader's preconceptions and preoccupations. Sometimes you don't get the benefit of a reader's regular summary (or other feedback) till he gives his version of what your writing is not about or not saying.

‡ Here are some metaphorical questions which will help readers tell you reactions and perceptions they cannot easily express literally, and even some reactions they were not conscious of. Don't push readers too hard to explain or interpret these images. That will hinder them from giving you good ones. Just listen and trust that you will benefit from them even if you cannot understand them or translate them into advice.

about, he'd think you were just describing a dream." "If I were a man, I would feel attacked."*

28. Make up an image for the relationship between the writer and reader. Does the writer seem to have his arm draped familiarly over your shoulder? Is the writer shouting from a cliff to a crowd below? Reading to you from a stage? Sending a letter bomb? Speaking as daddy to his family from the head of the dining room table? Shaking his fist at you?

29. What do you feel the writer is trying to do to you? Beat you over the head? Trap you? Trick you? Surprise you? Make you like him?

30. Is the writer *giving* it? How? On a silver platter? Reverently for your worship—but only from a distance? Laughingly? Is he holding back? Is he giving it and taking it back—coyly giving you glimpses and closing the curtain again? Is he slyly trying to keep his meaning a bit hidden so only the right sort of people will get it—wearing sloppy clothes with hidden signs of taste so that only special people will know that he's special too?

31. Describe the writer's relationship to the reader in terms of *distance.* Close? At arm's length? Distant? Describe *changes* in distance that occur. For example, "I feel the writer backing off toward the end—clamming up, becoming a bit distant or formal—as though he is suddenly embarrassed or awkward at realizing how much of himself he revealed."

32. Find words or metaphors for the *voice* or *tone* in the writing: intimate? shouting? coy? tight-lipped? "I feel the writer being all cheery and jocular but really not letting himself show at all; the joking tone feels like a way of hiding or of not taking his own message seriously. Joe Jokester." Or "I can feel the writer's shyness and self-consciousness coming through the words like a cloud of fog. It's as though he is on stage giving a speech and because he is so nervous he makes *me* feel vicariously nervous. I want to say, 'Forget about us and just concentrate on what you are saying.' " Describe the voice in metaphors of color; of weather (foggy here, sunny there). You can describe voice by comparison, too; for example, like Jack Benny? Kissinger? Edith Bunker? Try not to be

*This can be very useful feedback taken at face value—clues to the reactions of different readers. But sometimes an element of make-believe or role-playing permits readers to express some of their own reactions which they weren't aware of or couldn't express.

influenced too much by the way he actually read his words out loud. Perhaps he read them shyly, but there is a domineering voice in the writing itself.

33. Look especially for changes in voice. Perhaps it starts out all stiff, but then loosens up. Where do you see that change? Perhaps it takes on another coloration for the conclusion, for saying goodbye.

34. Try conveying the voice or tone by mimicking it—probably with exaggeration. For example, "Look, buddy, I'm in the know. I've seen it all, I'm a tough guy, you can't fool me." My tone in *Writing Without Teachers* was mimicked in this way: "I'm *really* sincere. You can really believe me. I know just how you feel. I'm a good guy. I wouldn't steer you wrong. Only, don't get mad at me if it doesn't work. I'm really trying as hard as I can. Besides, I'm having a hard time with my writing too."

35. Do you feel a difference between the voice created or implied by these words and the actual writer who wrote them? If you know the writer personally you may hear the difference immediately and vividly: "How come you sound so pompous here when you never talk that way?" But even if you don't know the writer at all, you can still sometimes feel a gap of some sort between the voice *in* the words and the writer *behind* the words—as though the writer is playing some kind of game or being slippery or ironic in the voice he uses. If you can feel this kind of difference, describe it in terms of tone of voice, appearance, personality, whatever. For example, "Behind the sweet and reasonable voice in this essay I sense someone who is actually angry." Make up an image or metaphor for how these two people are relating to each other. (In the D. H. Lawrence passage I cite in Chapter 25 on voice, for example, I feel the author smiling in a somewhat sly and sophisticated way at the ranting and raving voice who speaks the essays.) How do they feel about each other? What would they say to each other if they spoke?

36. What images of the writer come to mind? Hunched over a desk? Sprawled on a divan? Sitting on a beach? How does the writer dress? Hold his body? Wear his hair? Let all images just be intuitive, uncalculated.

37. Use camera metaphors for how the writer handles his material. Where does he move in close, where fade back? Where is it

sharp or fuzzy? What is foreground and background? Is he using special effects or gimmicks? Do they work for you?

38. Whom does the writing seem to address? Strangers? An old friend? Dumbells? Prissy girls? Tough guys? Is it talking *up* or *down?*

39. Describe the punctuation or rhythms (or indeed any tendency in the writing) in terms of a transaction between writer and reader. My wife was once telling me about how I had too many semicolons. I was resisting her advice stoutly, but then she drifted into an image: she felt me trying to keep her, as reader, on a leash, keep her attention on a tight rein, never let her look away from the writing or take a deep breath or relax for a moment—as though I were insecure and afraid to give readers a full stop for fear they would drift off and not come back and pay attention to me. It made her feel continually tugged at. Suddenly I could feel what she was talking about and I had to stop arguing about the rules for legal semicolons and start listening.

40. Try other media. Made a doodle or a picture or a bunch of sounds or a body improvisation to represent the writing or your reaction to the writing.

41. As an alternative to answering any of these specific questions, try just reading the piece and then doing five or ten minutes of fast nonstop writing. You'll find that what you scribble down usually tells a lot about how you experienced the piece. This is a particularly useful procedure when you have gotten used to giving reader-based feedback.

24

Options for Getting Feedback

There is no single or right way to get feedback. In this chapter I will describe the advantages and disadvantages of various options. At the end I will suggest one process I believe is particularly valuable: getting feedback regularly in a writing support group.

• You can get feedback from one person or several. If you really want to know how your words affect readers, you can't trust feedback from just one person, no matter how expert or experienced she is. Besides it is somehow empowering to realize how diverse and even contradictory the reactions are of different readers to your one set of words. It's confusing at first but it releases you from the tyranny of any single reader's or teacher's judgment. It drives home the fact that there's never a single or correct assessment of a piece of writing. When you get conflicting reactions, block your impulse to figure out which reactions are right. Eat like an owl: take in everything and trust your innards to digest what's useful and discard what's not. Try for readers with different tastes and temperaments—especially if you don't have many readers.

But you can get good benefit from just one reader's feedback if you only want criterion-based feedback—if you only want to find out about your organization or logic or grammar, for example—so long as that reader understands those criteria well.* And if you want help on an early weak draft, you can also make good use of

*One careful reader can certainly find your mistakes in grammar, usage, and typing—a kind of criterion-based feedback that you should always get on any important piece of writing headed for an audience.

just one reader. You're not so much trying to find out how successful your draft is. You know it's inadequate. What you want is to have an interesting discussion about the topic, get your mind jogged, and end up with new insights. Feedback and discussion from one reader—perhaps a friend who is happy to read your rough work simply for the pleasure of hearing your thinking—can go a long way toward turning a shaky first draft into something so solid that others will enjoy reading it for their own benefit, not just as a favor.

- If you get feedback from several people you can get it from them in a group or by meeting with them singly. Usually you learn more in a group. Readers will notice more by hearing what the others say: "I see you are surprised," a reader will say, "by her reaction to that first paragraph, but the same thing happened to me. I hadn't been conscious of it till I heard her tell her response." Or "Her reaction makes me realize I had the opposite feeling when I read that third paragraph." Readers sometimes get into instructive discussions: three people with different perceptions may suddenly put their views together and see something going on in your writing that none of them could have seen alone.

But a group is much more trouble. People have to coordinate their schedules. It takes more of everyone's time (though less of yours). And some people hate groups and clam up—whereas they will give you lots of good feedback if you sit down with them one-to-one. And groups sometimes get sidetracked into useless arguments.

- You can get feedback from the same people all the time or use different people on different occasions. There is a great advantage to staying with the same people because they get so much better at giving feedback. And if you use people who want feedback from you in return, that further improves the quality of what you get: people are more honest and open when they need the same gift back from you. But, of course, sometimes you will need one-time-only feedback from particular readers with special knowledge or from readers who are especially like the real audience for your piece.
- Some readers do better if *you* choose the questions. They prefer, as it were, to be interviewed. Other readers will give you better feedback if you hand them the list so they can choose the ones they find most interesting and applicable. You'll have better luck

getting these choosey readers to answer particular questions if you give them free rein for a while.

• You can given people copies of your writing (or leave one copy where they can read it at leisure), or you can read it to them out loud. When readers have a copy of your words in their hands, they can often give you more detailed and precise feedback. And it saves time if they can read it before you meet—though they sometimes then don't have it fresh enough in mind when you meet. But in some ways you get more useful feedback when you read your piece out loud. (You must read it twice and leave a minute or two of silence after each reading.) Any passage that is not clear enough to be understood through listening is not really clear enough, even if it can be understood off the page. It is making your reader work harder than she ought to have to work and therefore making her more likely to resist your meaning. And the experience of reading your words out loud to an audience is beneficial in itself.

Since both methods of giving your writing to readers have contrasting advantages, I would advise using each of them at one time or another. It would be almost ideal if readers would read your piece and take notes of their reactions a few days before you meet; and then listen to you read your piece out loud when you meet so it will be fresh in their minds and so they can compare their reactions to the two different experiences.

• If you give readers copies of long pieces instead of reading them out loud, you will save meeting time and readers will probably be able to tell you more reactions. It's hard to listen to and remember something too long. But if that is hard to arrange you can still get very useful feedback if you read out loud just the first few pages of a long piece. If you can get the opening section to work—the introduction and a substantial section of the main body—you've gone a long way toward making the whole piece work.

• You can tell your readers something about your audience, purpose and context *before* they give you feedback: "This memo is meant to give advice to salespeople who will be trying to sell in a very competitive market to resistant customers. I am their supervisor and that makes them often resent my advice. But I want them not to feel any pressure. I want them just to take whatever they find useful in this memo and feel free to ignore what they don't like." If you have a tricky audience problem like this, or if

you simply care enormously about the words succeeding with a particular audience (for example, "If this letter doesn't work on her, I don't think I'll get visiting rights for seeing my children"), it is worth explaining the situation at least to some of your readers. They may have some good insights about how your particular audience would react and what that audience needs: insights they would miss if they just reacted as themselves. But if it's really important that your words work with a particular audience, it's worth struggling to find readers like your real audience. Find salespeople or women in a divorce proceeding like yours. Ask favors.

But on the other hand, when readers are busy telling you how they think *other* readers will react, they often miss some of their own reactions. Or they don't tell you some of their own reactions because they have a stereotyped vision of your audience: "Oh well, salesmen don't think about anything except making a sale," or "Women in the middle of divorce proceedings can't listen to reason." It's crucial to get at least some feedback that is not affected by knowledge of your audience and purpose. I always learn most from people's *own* reactions. I'm always saying, "Please don't spend so much time talking about how you think *they* would react, tell me more about how *you* actually did react." You can get the best of both worlds if you keep quiet at first, but then, after getting one round of unchanneled feedback, explain your particular audience situation.

- It's hard not to apologize as you give a piece of writing to your readers: "This is only a second draft and still pretty rough. I was up late last night trying to finish it. I know it's kind of incoherent. I still have lots of revising to do." Sometimes it does no harm and permits readers to be gracious and say things like, "I'm sure it's only because you haven't finished it yet, but I found that opening paragraph very confusing." But sometimes an apology makes readers wonder if you are afraid to hear criticism and afraid to say so. This makes them feel hesitant and uncertain and, as a result, they pussyfoot around. You never learn some of their most interesting reactions. It's usually better to keep your mouth shut and see what they say or else make an unambiguous request for no negative feedback.
- How much negative feedback can you productively use? If too much of it will stop you from working on a piece or slow you down in your writing, you have to be brave enough—and smart

enough—to admit it. Until you are secure in your writing—until, that is, you know you can produce lots of writing whenever you need it and that some of it will be good or can be made good—stick with plain sharing and noncritical feedback.

For readers will occasionally hate your piece. Don't ask for full feedback until you are able to *use* negative reactions to see new useful things about your writing—instead of just feeling put down, graded, or judged. Wait till you can say, "I certainly must have gotten something powerful into my words," when readers are angry at what you wrote. Wait till you can refrain from saying, "I answered your objection right there on page three," and instead just nod your head and think to yourself, "Oh, I see. That's helpful. You've shown me that what I say on page three doesn't seem to be working—for you anyway. I wonder if I need to do something about that." Wait till you don't feel you have to *please* readers, just use them. The goal is to hear what your readers tell you and not defend against it, and you can't do that if they have too much power over you. Even after you are used to getting full feedback, you sometimes need to say, for particular pieces of writing, "I'm not ready for criticism on this piece. Tell me what works, what you like, and what you think I'm saying and that's all." I've finally learned to do this.

Readers can give you the kind of feedback you need if you make your request clear and insist on it. Occasionally you need to interrupt them if they forget. And it's perfectly feasible to have a group where some people only share, others call for only noncritical feedback, and others want "the works." And people can change their request from week to week.

• Do you care more about immediately revising this particular piece of writing or more about learning in a long-term way about the reactions of readers to the way you write? When your goal is immediate revising, you will probably be interested in the direct suggestions for fixing your draft that arise from criterion-based feedback. You can frankly pick your readers' minds for advice and for their thinking on the topic. You can even let yourself interrupt them when they trigger a good insight: "Wait a minute! I just realized what I really *meant* to say. . . ." If it's an early rough draft, you may be more interested in discussing the topic and your general approach than in getting much feedback on your actual writing. You may permit yourself to argue with readers about the

topic as a way of bringing out new ideas and getting closer to the truth (as long as arguing doesn't make them unwilling to share their ideas and reactions). But don't neglect reader-based feedback. And make sure you spend plenty of time with your mouth shut. Often you write the best revisions only after you finally discover what it *feels* like inside your reader's skin: suddenly you are struck with a much better approach to your topic and a more effective voice—just by listening to someone utterly misunderstand what you were saying.

But perhaps you don't care so much about revising this piece of writing (though you may in fact revise it). What you care about most is developing a better feel for the interaction between your words and the consciousness of readers—a better feel for different fish on your line. When you want feedback for the long haul, you need to get it regularly and to emphasize reader-based feedback. And to listen.

For long-haul learning it pays to get feedback not only on middle and late drafts, but also sometimes on unrevised writing or even freewriting. You will feel naked and vulnerable because such writing has glaring weaknesses you could easily correct. But such feedback will tell you important things about your habitual tones of voice and spontaneous habits of language and thought. Such feedback can lead to deeper and more pervasive improvement in your writing than any other kind.

When you get feedback on unrevised writing, you should ask your readers to tell you about the tones of voice, habits of mind, and ways of relating to readers that they hear in your words—rather than emphasizing whether the words are successful. It is a more personal kind of feedback. In a sense you are inviting them to read your diary. It is crucial that both you and they understand it is fine—beneficial, in fact—for your most unacceptable voices and habits of mind to show. Don't let them make you feel bad when they hear an ugly snarl or hopeless whine in your words, for example, or some habitual verbal fidget. Only by getting better acquainted with such voices or habits of mind, inhabiting them and perhaps even experimentally exaggerating them, will you gradually learn to get control over them so they don't seep into all your writing in subtle forms.*

*"For years I've suffered from male leads in my books being afflicted with selfpity. My leads would whine, beg, play the little boy in ways that seemed to defeat all my

• How much arguing do you want vs. plain listening? The believing game or the doubting game? (See the appendix essay on these two processes in *Writing Without Teachers*.) I tend to favor the believing game. It's not that readers should try to believe or like the writing. But everyone should try to see the writing through the eyes of whoever is giving feedback at that moment. When it's your turn to give feedback you tell how you saw the words, but while another reader is reacting you never say "Wait a minute, that doesn't make sense because. . . ." By trying to see things through the other readers' eyes you deepen your own reading skills and you help produce an atmosphere of safety and trust that permits others to see and speak better.

But the believing game is not easy. It takes discipline. Some people have a hard time putting their full effort into trying to see through someone else's eyes. Sometimes the energy goes out of a discussion. People are merely putting on their Sunday manners and refraining from argument—not really entering into other people's perceptions. (There is a different kind of energy that occurs when people manage to play the believing game—quieter but no less intense.) And when it's your turn to get feedback on your writing, you need disciplined self-control. Readers will sometimes trick you into talking and not listening by asking you what you really meant here or how you came up with your approach

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purposes. In my new novel, the same sort of thing began to happen; Buck Ravel fairly pouted all the time I was striving to have him be fairly responsible and self-aware. For six weeks I brought in parts of the book to read, and I kept getting the group more and more pissed off and upset—particularly two gutsy women. They were tired of him, couldn't he buck up, what a baby he was, and who could be attracted to such a pathetic figure? Each week I got more and more depressed over the direction of the book, and I saw that I was going to lose six months of hard work on this book if I didn't handle where Buck was.

"What I did was to sit down and bat out a fast 3,500 words in which I MADE BUCK DO ALL THE THINGS I'D BEEN KEEPING HIM FROM DOING. If I'd been trying to keep him from being a baby, now I made him be a baby. If I'd been trying to keep him from whining, now he whined about everything. And if he was a pathetic figure, I made him more pathetic, till he was nothing but pathetic.

"That broke a dam in the book. Much of what I wrote I found a use for in the book, but much more importantly, I took responsibility for what was oozing out of Buck's skin. Instead of dodging it, I owned it, I made it mine. By HAVING it happen instead of pushing it away, I got in control of it."

Thus Donald Porter to me in a letter about his experiences using a feedback group for his writing. He runs workshops for writers: *The Writing Workshop*, in connection with the Hunter College Center for Lifelong Learning in New York City.

there. You have to turn their questions around into feedback: "What was happening inside you that led you to ask that question?" Readers will also goad you into arguing by misunderstanding what you made *perfectly* clear or criticizing your best passages. You can answer their questions and refute their calumnies after you finish really seeing it their way.

Needless to say, the doubting game can be equally powerful if everyone is up for it. Wrestling can lead to the truth. You can have instructive arguments about the merits of two different ways of organizing some piece of writing or between competing explanations for why most readers ignored the same passage in a piece of writing.

But doubting or believing, it's never useful to let an argument drift into a question of whether a reader was *right* to have the response she had. If readers get the sense that they may be criticized or ridiculed for having peculiar reactions, they will begin to censor and you will no longer get trustworthy feedback. I am leery even of pressing people too hard to *explain* their reactions for fear they will only give reactions they can justify. When you ask a reader to *explain* her reaction it almost always seems as though you are saying, "Prove that it's not wrong or crazy." If you just ask her to tell *more about* her reaction, it feels more like "Help me see the words through your eyes." Value peculiar reactions. They will teach you the most. The best feedback groups I have seen have been characterized by a combination of great frankness and great trust.

• Whether or not you are paying back readers with feedback on their writing, pay them back in other ways. Give them credit. Tell them how helpful they were, and when it fits the kind of writing you are doing, tell in footnotes or introductions that you are indebted to———or that your final version owes much to the helpful feedback of———.

Make sure you give them a manuscript that is neat and easy to read—even if you are asking a good friend for feedback on a very early draft where you haven't even figured out your main idea. It's all right in such a draft to be fumbling for what you want to say as long as your reader can follow you perfectly as you fumble. On the early draft you can help readers immensely by including passages where you talk straight, as though talking directly to them, clarifying your struggle: "What I'm trying to get at in this section is the

idea that . . ." or "I'm confused at this point because I argued one way in the first few pages, but here all my evidence is pointing in the opposite direction." (Besides, it helps to get in the habit of writing out these baffled musings as part of your draft—instead of stopping your pencil when they hit you and just thinking them. Writing them out often starts to untangle your confusion.)

You repay readers best by showing them that you actually use them. That doesn't mean always trying to follow their advice (even if they happen to agree with each other, which is rare). It's not their advice which is most valuable, but their perceptions and reactions. You can show them that you not only listen, but actually understand what they are saying. Practice believing it all, even when it's contradictory. Let them see you being shaken loose from your belief in something false or from your preference for a piece of your own weak writing.

Getting Feedback in Writing Support Groups

Adapted from a note to myself, about four years ago:

> I suddenly thought about how I don't have the kind of fear of the unknown I used to have when it comes to writing words down or reacting to words. I know very clearly what has caused this change. It's because I have engaged in feedback workshops over the last few years: getting feedback, giving feedback, hearing others give feedback different from mine; having discussions where the goal was not to agree with each other or figure out what is right, but to see the words through the other person's eyes; constant practice in experiencing and reexperiencing what a set of words can do. Events like this:
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> • I hear a particular reaction to a particular word or image and suddenly the whole piece is thrown into a different meaning. Neither mine nor the new one seems better or more complete—merely different.
>
> • Someone gets mad at a piece of writing. But then, after seeing movies of other readers' minds, he sees something he'd missed and changes his reaction completely. I end up understanding how natural it was to be mad when that piece was missing; and understanding what the writer needs to do to make sure other readers don't miss that piece.
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> • I am left cold by a piece of writing and then, through someone else's reading, suddenly the words open up for me and let me enter in, and I see things I hadn't seen. I reflect on what would have had to

be different in the words—or different in me—for the writing to work on me. I conclude that there is only the slimmest chance that such a piece of writing could work for me without the extra help of fellow readers. Yet I can now nevertheless see the virtue of the writing which before I dismissed as poor.

- Someone has a weird reaction to a set of words, but eventually we discover his reaction reflects very accurately some feeling in the writer which had nothing to do with what he was writing. The reader felt the writer mad at him, but it was just a clean, straightforward piece of explanation. No one else felt anything like that. But the writer reveals he was furious at someone at home when he was writing. The rest of us then can get a few whiffs of anger lurking behind the words. We would never have discovered the truth in that strange reaction—the tiny ingredient in the writing that probably affects all readers even subliminally—if we hadn't worked hard to see the words through that one reader's seemingly peculiar eyes.

  It must be like what a psychiatrist or therapist might feel after working years and years—if she doesn't go numb or cynical. A sense of having *seen* more of people than most get a chance to see, not being shocked or frightened by what goes on. Nothing human seems alien. Yes, that's what I feel. Not shocked or dismayed at the unexpected things words can do, at the bewildering variety of ways people can react to words. It's a mystery and a mess, but now I can get inside it and see that in fact it makes sense.

  I don't run away from the mess any more. I'm more willing to get my hands dirty, to try and make sense of what words actually do to readers, to try and do things to people with words, to try and understand why my words succeed or fail in any given case. From a few years of writing groups I seem to have gotten something I didn't get in many years of study and teaching.

The most effective way to get feedback for overall improvement of your writing and for learning about the effects of words on readers is in a writing support group that meets regularly. This is also the most enjoyable way to get feedback. You need a group of from four to ten people who have promised to come for at least eight meetings—perhaps weekly or biweekly—and bring a piece of writing each time. (It needen't be good writing. If someone says, "I'll bring something if I'm satisfied with it," you haven't got a member.) It takes a while for people to get practice and to trust each other and they need to be able to count on each other to be there.

You can devote all your time to feedback, but I think it helps to

give a certain amount of time each meeting to sharing. You could start each session with a quick freewriting exercise and have everyone share some of it; or start with a reading of short pieces people brought with them. A simple method is to have half the group bring pieces for sharing and the other half bring pieces for feedback. This makes it easier to handle writing from a larger group. And it promotes a natural cycle: one week just share an early and perhaps exploratory draft; let it settle and work on it some more; and then get feedback on a revised version the next week. Sometimes people can give particularly helpful feedback because they heard last week's rough writing.

Time. It is hard to give feedback to more than five or six pieces of writing in one sitting. You probably need fifteen minutes per piece—longer if it must be read out loud. And much longer if you want to get into discussions rather than just listen to each other's feedback.

It's important to decide at the start of each meeting how long you have and how many pieces need feedback so you can divide up the time equally. You seldom feel "done" when the time is up so a timekeeper needs to be blunt about calling time, and the group must ruthlessly move on. Otherwise the later people get cheated. You can try giving more time to longer pieces of writing but that leads to tricky computations. There is nothing wrong with the simple proposition that everyone deserves the same amount of time because everyone *gives* the same amount of time. Then each person gets to spend her time as she prefers—on a long piece or a short piece.

Leadership. The best sort of leadership is provided if each writer takes charge of her own time. She needs to say what she wants (for example, no negative feedback, or arguments are welcome, or whatever). It's her job to use her own time best—ensuring, for example, that she hears from each of the readers, or that some important aspect of her writing is not neglected. The writer could, of course, delegate leadership to someone else: "Here, you take charge. I want to be free to listen and take notes." Or you could have people take turns being in charge of each meeting. Or if one person is much more experienced, she could be in charge of all meetings. But I think the writer learns more in the long run—and that is the goal, after all—if she is in charge of the feedback process for her own writing. It helps overcome the main thing that