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Feedback: Who Needs It?

What do performance appraisals and editorial critiques have in common? Feedback. Unless you have the hide of a rhinoceros and the brain of a slug, you dread getting feedback as much as the rest of us. I'll never forget the first feedback I received at my first writing conference.

The conference provided me with a network of struggling writers, published authors, experienced editors, and inspiring workshop leaders. It also gave me the opportunity to have my work critiqued by the editor of a well-known writing magazine. However, the feedback I received was not exactly what I wanted.

Disappointment overwhelmed me as I read the editor's opening note on my article. His evaluation accurately described my work, but the criticism was painful to a beginning writer who clung to her words like lint to a black dress. Then the "F" word popped into my mind -- feedback. I went to the conference to improve myself. Learning to accept feedback was a necessary step in that process.

I looked closer at the editor's comments. Although he had discussed most of them with me earlier during our evaluation session, I was so intimidated that I scarcely heard a word he said. First he mentioned my prose needed pruning because I had a tendency to overstate the facts. Also, I repeated myself over and over and over and was redundant. I reviewed my manuscript and realized he was quite right that I often repeated myself over and over and was redundant.

In addition, he suggested, I sometimes rambled on in a wordy and convoluted fashion as though I enjoyed the sound of my own words like a preacher on Sunday morning who doesn't know when he has preached enough. Did he mean I needed to get to the point?

The next criticism really stung -- use active and descriptive verbs to give more punch to my passive writing. Punch? Punch? I'd like to show that editor a good punch. What was he talking about? Passive writing was completely unknown to me!

Cut down on unnecessary adjectives and adverbs, the next comment read. I rarely, hardly ever, used flowery, unnecessary adjectives or superfluous adverbs. Anyone who knew me realized that I would rather absquatulate than do such a thing.

Avoid using clichés or find a way to turn them around, the editor suggested. Get real! How can anyone avoid clichés? That criticism really burned me up. If I had a penny for every time an editor told me that, I'd be rich!

Finally, I reviewed the editor's other specific comments scribbled on my manuscript. Each suggestion improved my article enormously, but deflated my ego just

the same. My article was not as perfect as I thought. In fact, nothing about my writing was perfect. But that's why I attended the writer's conference -- to improve myself.

Hearing the truth about my writing was painful and difficult to accept, even when it came from a respected editor. But how could I possibly improve if I never knew what I was doing wrong? You get what you ask for, and I asked for feedback. Thank heaven, I got exactly what I needed.

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