

# **SUMMARY OF WAYS OF RESPONDING**

(Description and Synthesis by Stephanie Dunson, PhD)

(from Elbow and Belanoff's "Summary of Kinds of Responses," in *Sharing and Responding*)

*Here is an overview of several valuable ways of responding to writing  
and a few thoughts about when each kind is valuable.*

## **Pointing:**

↳ "Which words, phrases, or passages somehow strike you, stick your in mind, or draw you in?"

## **Center of Gravity:**

↳ "Which sections somehow seem compelling, resonant, or generative to you?"

*Pointing* and *Center-of-Gravity* are quick and easy forms of response, so and they're good for timid or inexperienced responders and for early drafts. They readily help you establish a sense of contact with readers. *Center-of-Gravity* response is particularly interesting for showing you rich and interesting parts of your piece that you might have neglected, but which might be worth exploring and developing; it also can help you see your piece in a different light and suggest ways to make major revisions. Note that when you ask for a *Center-of-Gravity* response, you're not necessarily asking readers to figure out the main points but rather to identify sections/passages that resonate, linger in mind, or generate particular interest for them. Sometimes a seemingly minor detail or example, even an aside or a digression, can be a center of gravity.

## **Summary:**

↳ "Please summarize what I've written in your own words."

↳ "How would you explain the central argument and key idea in my writing?"

(Variation: "Which phrase from or paraphrase of my writing could you imagine as a title for this piece?")

## **Sayback:**

↳ "Please say back to me in your own words what you feel I'm getting at in my piece."

*Summary* and *Sayback* are both useful at any stage in the writing process in order to see whether readers "got" the points you are trying to "give." But *Sayback* is particularly useful at early stages when you are still groping and haven't yet been able to find what you really want to say; for instance, even if you share a collection of exploratory passages, you can still get very helpful *Sayback* response. When readers say back to you what they took from your writing (whether it's what you expected or not), it can lead you to find exactly the words, thoughts, or emphasis you need to move your ideas forward.

## **Almost Said:**

↳ "What is suggested in my writing but not directly stated? What ideas are lurking in the periphery of what I've written?"

## **Tell Me More:**

↳ "What ideas in my writing pique your curiosity? What do you want to hear more about?"

*Almost Said* and *Tell Me More* are useful kinds of responses when you need to develop or enrich your piece—particularly when you sense there is more you want to say but that you haven't yet been able to articulate. This kind of response gives you substantive help because it leads your readers to open your eyes to possibilities in your writing that you might have overlooked. Remember this too: what you imply but don't directly state in a draft may an emerging idea that reframes and unifies your true focus. (Extreme variations: "Given what you've read, what would you imagine might have been on my mind that I didn't actually write about? If I had a hidden agenda for writing this piece, do you imagine it might be?")

## **Reply:**

↳ "What are your thoughts about my topic? Now that you've heard what I've had to say, what do you have to say?"

This kind of response is useful at any point, but it's particularly useful at early stages when you haven't worked out your thinking yet. Indeed, you can ask for this kind of response even before you've written a draft; perhaps you jotted down

some notes. You can just say, “I’m thinking about saying X Y, and Z. How would you reply? What are your thoughts about this topic?” (To invite a discussion is actually the most natural and common response to any human discourse.)

**Voice:**

- ↳ “What’s your sense of the voice in my writing?”
- ↳ “What kind of voice(s) do you hear in my writing? Timid? Confident? Sarcastic? Pleading?”
- ↳ “What kind of person does my writing sound like? What side(s) of me comes through in my writing?”
- ↳ “Do you trust the voice or person you hear in my writing?”

This kind of feedback can be useful at any stage. When people describe the voice they hear in writing, they often get right to the heart of subtle but important matters of language and approach. Requesting this kind of response frees your readers from using technical terms to address the style of your writing (e.g., “You seem to use lots of passive verbs and nominalized phrases”), and instead allows them to use more accessible and descriptive language (e.g., “You sound kind of bureaucratic and distant, so I wonder if you actually believe what you are saying”).

**Metacognitive:**

- ↳ “What are you thinking as you read my writing, both about content and style? Please be frank and specific.”

*Metacognitive Response* is like a movie of the reader’s mind; it’s most useful when you have a fairly developed draft and you want to know how it works on readers. Metacognitive response can be rich and valuable, but requesting it of your readers requires that you have faith in their support and confidence in yourself.

There are three powerful ways to help readers give you this kind of response: (a) Interrupt their reading a few times and find out what they’re thinking about your writing at that moment. (b) Get them to tell you their reactions in the form of a narrative of their thinking as they read. (c) If readers make “It-statements (e.g., “It was confusing”), ask them to them translate these into “I-statements” (e.g., “I felt confused reading this section. . .”).

**Believing:**

- ↳ “Pretending to believe everything I’ve written (even if you disagree or find it crazy), whole-heartedly give me more evidence, arguments, and ideas to help we make my case better.”

**Doubting:**

- ↳ “Pretending to doubt everything I’ve written (even if you’re actually in agreement), find all the arguments that can be made against me.”

*Believing* and *Doubting* are forms of feedback that obviously lend themselves to persuasive essays or arguments, though the believing game can also help you flesh out and enrich the world of a story or poem. Believing is good when you are struggling and want help. It is a way to get readers to give you new ideas and arguments and in fact improve your piece in all sorts of ways. Doubting is best when you feel you’re almost finished with a piece of writing but would like to find additional ways to assure it will stand up to critical readers who might resist your ideas.

**Criterion-Based Feedback:**

- ↳ “Can you give me your thoughts/observations about X specifically?” (E.g., “Does this sound too technical?” “Is this section too long?” “Does my argument hold together here?” “Do you feel I’ve addressed the objections of people who disagree?”)

*Criterion-Based Feedback* invites readers to share their observations about criteria that you’re unsure of or struggling with, so it works best when you have very particular questions about specific aspects of the piece you’re writing. It also works well when you want to focus on traditional criteria for essays (e.g., sentence structure, organization, reasoning, clarity, originality) and also when you want to assure that you’ve fully addressed the paper assignment. The credence of this kind of feedback depends on the skill and experience of your readers; even with capable readers, individual feedback may be subjective, so you should still take it with a grain of salt. (In some ways *Metacognitive Feedback* is more reliable because it gives you a better picture of the personal reactions behind particular judgments.)