

WORKING WITH FEEDBACK – OUTLINES

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This handout will help you consider how and why to give feedback on other writers' story outlines. It will also look at how to receive and apply feedback to your own projects.

Feedback is a crucial aspect of screenwriting, and it is important writers learn to work with it. If you want to work as a script reader or script editor, story analysis and feedback skills are absolutely essential, but you also learn a huge amount about writing by reading other people's scripts and working out why things work - or not.

It is crucial that as a writer, you learn how to receive and work with feedback to improve your own projects. Whether you eventually find yourself in television or film, you will always be in a position where you will receive feedback – whether from directors, producers, executives, actors, script editors etc. Sometimes you can receive a number of conflicting notes from various sources and it is your job as a writer to sift through them and work out:

- what are the real essential points you need to address
- what are the real problems behind the points being made
- how to address all wishes without diluting or compromising the project
- how to move the project forward in a satisfying and relevant way

This is not always easy, and below we will look at ways of “filtering” as an essential tool in knowing how to listen to and apply feedback.

Giving Feedback on Outlines

When reading your fellow students' story outlines and preparing feedback notes, consider the following areas:

- **CHARACTER** – whether you personally like them or not, are the characters engaging and credible? Do they have an arc; do they develop from beginning to end? Are there useful character dynamics and relationships (eg. protagonist-antagonist/s)?
- **STORY** – does the story make sense? Does it have a beginning, middle and end (ie. is it set up, developed and resolved) - whatever structure it chooses to employ? Does it progress from start to finish? Is there a sense of world where the events take place in? What is the pace like?
- **TONE & GENRE** – is there a sense of what genre this story belongs in? Does the writer know the genre conventions and work with them in a

productive and interesting way? Does the story have a distinctive and relevant tone?

- **WRITING STYLE** – is the outline clear, easy and engaging to read, with short paragraphs and simple language? Is it written in the tone of the genre (eg. funny, scary, emotional) with a flavour of the eventual film? Does it have a good opening and final sentence? Does it make you want to read the script?

Before sharing your thoughts and comments, whether orally or in written form, take some time to consider how to best offer them.

Try to start and end with something positive, that you honestly feel (don't lie). You can always find something that works – whether it is a world, character, turn of phrase, plot point etc.

Then be **CONSTRUCTIVE** in your criticism. Don't just say what you like or don't like, personal taste is not always relevant or useful (see below). Instead think about how to help the writer understand what may or may not currently be working. Consider the questions above. Think beyond the obvious – the problem is not always where it at first seems to appear.

You may want to offer suggested approaches or solutions – this can be very helpful but beware: this is not your project, so listen carefully to the writer to hear what **THEIR VERSION** is, so you help them achieve this, rather than rewrite it as the version you would do if it was your project. This is crucial to good feedback.

It is also important to think objectively about the idea and the way the outline is written. Move beyond personal taste and simply consider what makes the idea or story work or not work, and then offer feedback which helps to clarify and guide that to a better place.

That doesn't mean you should never share your personal feelings, it just means it is not the key element. Instead, **USE** your emotional reactions to analyse what works or not, and what could be improved. So consider how you feel and when, and then use that as a tool to reflect on what it tells you about the story, structure, character and pace.

A great way to give feedback is to **ASK QUESTIONS**. This helps the writer to find their own way through the material, and often opens up the story and creates new ideas, as well as focuses and clarifies the story's intention. So when giving feedback, consider what questions you'd like to ask of the idea/story, such as:

- What would you like to know more of?
- What didn't make sense?
- Why do the writer want to write this story?
- What is the story really about?

Receiving Feedback

Though it is nice to hear that people like your idea, we are not primarily engaging in feedback to massage each other's egos. We are here to work, and all share a common goal in that we want to make our ideas and stories the best they can be.

So when you receive feedback, don't take it personally. Put aside your ego and think about your idea and your story. This is about making it the best it can be, so stay open, listen to what people are saying, make notes and consider their feedback rather than dismissing them outright because you feel defensive.

However, don't accept people's comments wholesale. They may be giving you lots of good, interesting ideas but not all of them will FIT YOUR VISION of the story. Learn to FILTER FEEDBACK, to test it against your own ideas, and make sure you are not changing things just for the sake of it, because they feel fresher than what you already know or because you have lost confidence.

Working with and developing your story is a constant balance between being OPEN – not closing down too early, really listening to what people are saying, accepting the criticism in the spirit that it is meant (to help you improve your story and your technique), being honest with yourself, pushing the idea; and being CLEAR AND CONTAINED – knowing what it is you want to do with the story, where you want to take it, what the most important things are for you in it, what you are not prepared to compromise on, what it is really about for you.

A successful writer is one who can balance these two things and use them in the right way to apply feedback in the most relevant way for them and the project.

Finally, you may find yourself feeling a little “raw” or battered after receiving feedback, if you are not used to it. Stories are sometimes very personal things, and it can be hard to see them “torn down” by others. But remember, we often need to test the structure of a house to see if it is sturdy enough. If not, we will tear it down and re-build it to make sure it can really withstand the weather.

So after receiving feedback, remind yourself of why you wanted to write this idea. See if you still believe in it, give yourself a chance to re-connect to it and then COMMIT to it and believe you can make it work.

Be honest in what work needs to be done and make sure you have made the right choice, then have faith in your idea in yourself, and go on to make it good.

To sum up, these are the skills that will really help you work with feedback:

- Listen to and understand what people are really saying
- Leave your ego at the door, this is for the good of the project
- Filter the feedback, don't take it on or reject it wholesale
- Understand what the real problem is behind people's comments