

Want to Know More?

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- One-stage writers:

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- Link between quality and revision:

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- Polishing too soon leads to writer's block:

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- Praise what employees can control:

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Resources for Practice

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Giving Employees Feedback on Writing

Why Does My Boss Hate My Writing? is the title of a book by Becky Burckmyer. The question makes it obvious that there's a problem. But this feedback is unlikely to bring change; it demoralizes without giving guidance about how to improve.

Focus on the Task, Not the Person

Before seizing a pen to savage a badly written memo, remember that many people regard their writing as an extension of themselves. Harsh criticism of their writing is taken as an attack on their personal worth.

Think of yourself as a helpful reader rather than an omnipotent judge: "Even after rereading, I find this new procedure confusing. Can you break it into a series of steps?"

Task-focused feedback is especially helpful to those who suffer from writing apprehension. Much as math anxiety leads people to believe "I can't get math," writing apprehension causes people to view themselves as "non-writers." When forced to write, their progress tends to be slow and painful, and they have little confidence in the results.

Manage Expectations

Apprehensive writers can gain confidence if they know that you don't ask for perfection on the first try. Tell them that only beginners are "one-stage writers." Expert writers expect to review, revise, and rethink through several drafts.

Time Your Feedback

Provide feedback at critical points in the drafting process. First, help employees analyze the writing task: Who needs this information? How will they use it? What is the best way to get the message across—a quick e-mail? a formal memo?

If the piece will be a long one, set up review points. At the first review, check the tone, scope, and overall organization. Have the writer correct problems with these global issues before moving on to the next stage.

What should you do if you receive a draft like this:

Our procurement process has been tiresomely slow and cumbersome. A long-aweighted reform will be implemented next week! You must comply!!!

Resist the temptation to hunt down every misspelling. Instead, focus on global issues: Does this writing achieve its purpose? How does the writer relate to the reader? Address any global concerns before allowing the writer to move forward.

Avoid the temptation to hunt down misspellings that might not even appear in the final draft. Ask how the writer would react to being ordered to follow a new procedure. Explore less abrasive ways to encourage compliance. If you have an example of a well-written memo, share it and point out features you would like the writer to emulate.

When you and the writer are satisfied with content and tone, it's time to move on to polishing and proofreading. When you point out mistakes, explain why they matter: "These misspellings may make clients wonder if they can trust us to handle the details."

With novice writers, you may need to proofread carefully. More experienced readers may need only an objective eye to look for fatigue-induced errors.

Support Efforts to Improve

If you want to coach your employees to develop their writing skills, ask them to develop a personalized list of errors to watch for, provide resources, and give ongoing feedback. In some cases, you might want to provide workshops or one-on-one coaching.

When praising employees' efforts to improve, remember that comments like "You're such a good writer!" may reinforce apprehensive writers' fear of failure. Praise only what is within employees' control: "You've applied the guidelines for writing plain English, so this memo is easy to read."