

GIVING HELPFUL FEEDBACK ON DRAFT RESEARCH PAPERS AND REPORTS

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Commenting on draft papers and reports is an important, if unglamorous role. It stimulates collective discussion and builds capacity and networks both within and between organizations. Constructive feedback can make all the difference to the quality of research publications and the morale of those involved. But it also takes time and effort, so the first thing to check when you are sent a draft is whether feedback is genuinely being invited, and whether there is still time for it to be incorporated.

HOW TO APPROACH A DRAFT

Try to focus your comments on those sections that are most important in terms of impact, namely the [executive summary](#), the conclusion and the top and tail of each section or chapter.

But you do need to read the whole thing. Is the paper internally consistent? Have any nuggets ([killer facts](#), telling graphics, case studies, genuinely surprising or new findings) failed to make it into the executive summary?

As a reader, you are also likely to be better placed than the author to point out places where some extra narrative would help – for example, suggesting linking text between paragraphs to improve the flow, or explaining why a certain piece of analysis is significant and worth a reader's time.

Here is a list of questions to ask and things to think about:

- **Is the good stuff at the top?** It is likely that a large percentage of readers will not read the final paper all the way through to the end. So the best, most powerful ideas and arguments need to be up front, preferably in an executive summary, but if not, at the top of the paper.
- **Remember what the paper is for and do not try and expand its remit.** If possible, take a look at the original [Terms of Reference](#) for the paper. They should set out the audience and purpose.
- **Think about what is *not* there.** This is difficult but can be really useful – it is easy to critique what's in front of you, but often more helpful to stand back and identify what is missing – in terms of arguments, approaches or sources. Don't just step back but try to look sideways – the author is likely to be a specialist in a particular subject. Is there anything they could usefully import from different issues or disciplines?
- **Style and language matter.** Dealing with bad writing is tricky, especially if the writer does not have English as a first language, but people are usually grateful for specific suggestions and edits. If rewriting the whole paper is not feasible, concentrate on making the executive summary accessible.
- **How strong is the evidence?** An important role for reviewers is to check that the paper's

conclusions are backed up by evidence. Nothing should be in a summary or part of a set of recommendations if it has not been raised and examined in more detail in the paper itself — even if it's addressed in the long part of the paper that very few will read.

- **How clear are the proposals?** A common weakness is papers that are strong on diagnosis and exposition of the problem, but weak on what to do about it. Does the paper have specific, well argued suggestions for how to improve things or are the recommendations bland and generic?

FEEDING BACK

And here are some tips on the trickiest part of the process:

- **Be kind.** It's time to feed back to the author. Take a deep breath. However brilliant/damning your critique, start by reminding yourself that there is a human being on the other end of this. They have tried their best, even if the result needs work. You need to help them, not cast them into despair. Talking to the author in person rather than sending an email will help you remember this, and be more sensitive in the way you feed back.
- Start off saying what you like about the paper, then what could be strengthened, but finish off by stressing what is worthwhile. This needn't be phoney – there is usually something to applaud in any piece or work. And even if people know what you are doing, it still makes it easier to absorb and respond to criticism. Some people prefer to ask questions rather than make direct criticisms.
- **Power Matters.** Think about your status relative to the person you are feeding back to. If you're senior to them, you need to be even more aware of how they are likely to receive your comments.
- Separate general and specific points. Don't just say 'there's some good stuff in here'. Give examples: a particular sentence that is nicely written, a particularly powerful paragraph, a quote judiciously used. Knowing what works (and hence what to retain) can be helpful as well as good for (battered) authorial morale – even more so when you suggest improvements. To a harassed author on a deadline, comments like 'needs more on gender', or 'you should read Amartya Sen' are unlikely to help. Suggest specific text changes only, if possible.
- If you have overall comments on the paper, pull out the two or three most important ones. Then add a separate list of more minor comments by page/paragraph.
- **Check what format the author/editor wants.** Depending on the nature of the feedback process, they may prefer track changes, on-screen comments or for comments to be in a separate document. If you don't follow this advice, your comments will be less useful and may even be ignored.
- If your comments are detailed and extensive, then go through them with the author, explaining and discussing as you go along. This can be an especially valuable exercise for younger and less experienced writers.

DOS AND DON'TS

Here's a summary of some of the main points above:

Do	Don't
Be kind, remember that the author is a human being.	Use this as an opportunity to show how caustic you can be.
Try to put yourself in the shoes of the target audience and think what would interest or inspire them.	Comb through the document looking for/inserting references to your particular hobbyhorse!
Spot and correct bad writing – impenetrable jargon, excessive use of the passive tense, shrill tone, e.g. 'the IMF must do X, Y, Z'.	Say 'it's too long, needs cuts and here are another ten issues you need to cover'!
Give examples of what you like as well as what you don't.	Give general but unhelpful criticisms like 'needs more on gender'.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you're an author, you might also want to check out the following Oxfam research guidelines before you start research and writing:

If you're an author, you might also want to check out the following [Oxfam research Research guidelines Guidelines](#) before you start research and writing: [Writing Terms of Reference for Research](#) (along with the [Terms of Reference for Research Template](#)), [Undertaking Research with Ethics](#), [Integrating Gender in Research Planning](#), [Writing for Impact: Lessons from Journalism](#), [Creating Killer Facts and Graphics](#), and [Writing an Executive Summary](#).

See also '[How to write the recommendations to a report on almost anything](#)'.

Lastly, here is the draft of this guideline on the [From Poverty to Power](#) blog, together with the readers' comments that have helped to shape it: '[How to Read and Comment on a Draft paper – Your Suggestions Please](#)'.

LINKS

All links last accessed March 2019.

Writing an Executive Summary: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/writing-an-executive-summary-579649>

Creating Killer Facts and Graphics: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/creating-killer-facts-and-graphics-253013>

Terms of Reference for Research Template: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/terms-of-reference-for-research-template-253035>

Oxfam Research Guidelines: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-approach/research/research-guidelines>

Writing Terms of Reference for Research: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/writing-terms-of-reference-for-research-253034>

Undertaking Research with Ethics: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/undertaking-research-with-ethics-253032>

Integrating Gender in Research Planning: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/integrating-gender-in-research-planning-620621>

Writing for Impact: Lessons from Journalism: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/writing-for-impact-lessons-from-journalism-253033>

How to Write the Recommendations to a Report on Almost Anything:
<http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-to-write-the-recommendations-to-a-report-on-almost-anything-introducing-friday-formulae/>

From Poverty to Power blog: <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/>

How to Read and Comment on a Draft Paper – Your Suggestions Please:
<http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-to-read-and-comment-on-a-draft-paper-your-suggestions-please/>

© Oxfam International March 2019

This guideline has been prepared by the Oxfam Research Network (ORN) for use by development practitioners and researchers, including Oxfam staff and partners. It was written by Duncan Green and edited by Martin Walsh, with thanks to Franziska Mager, Irene Guijt, John Magrath, and Katherine Trebeck for their inputs. Special thanks are due to all those who commented on the draft of this guideline that was posted on the From Poverty to Power blog in May 2016. It was first published in July 2016 and this update has been edited by Martin Walsh.

The text may be used free of charge for the purposes of education and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. Email publish@oxfam.org.uk

Oxfam welcomes comments and feedback on its Research Guidelines. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this document, please contact research@oxfam.org.uk. For further information on Oxfam's research and publications, please visit www.oxfam.org.uk/policyandpractice

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-0-85598-754-1 in March 2019.

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK. Oxfam is a registered charity in England and Wales (no 202918) and Scotland (SC039042).

Oxfam is an international confederation of 20 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty.

www.oxfam.org

