How to comment on draft academic research reports

Guidelines for NGO stakeholders and reviewers

tearfund

Contents

Introduction

The purpose of this short guide is to promote thinking and best practice in giving formative feedback on draft academic research reports. The main intended readership is Tearfund staff, but it may be of relevance to other NGO practitioners engaged in NGO–academic research. Carefully crafted and well timed feedback from stakeholders can make a big difference to the quality of research reports, the usefulness of recommendations made, and the morale of all those involved.[1] By extension, it is key to the success of NGO–academic research collaborations.[2]

The guide is structured in two parts. Part 1 considers *how* to give effective feedback, with tips for giving feedback 'in the margins' of an electronic document (eg adding comments or tracking changes in Google Docs or Word). Part 2 considers how to approach a draft research report as Tearfund staff and/or NGO practitioners invited to comment, and presents a framework for *what* to provide feedback on.

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[1] Green and Walsh (2019).

[2] Green (2017).

1 How to give effective feedback

1.1 What makes feedback effective?

The word feedback was first coined in the 1860s during the Industrial Revolution, to describe information that was returned to machines, and it was not until the mid-20th century that the term was applied to interpersonal landscapes.[3] It has since gained significant traction, especially in business and education. Contrary to its original meaning, feedback in these contexts is not simply 'a process of providing valid data', as if to a machine.[4] Instead, in order to promote learning and improvement, it ought to be a dialogue, something that goes 'to and fro' to establish a common understanding.[5]

This interpersonal, non-mechanistic view of feedback implies that the intended effect of feedback (ie to cause the recipient to make a change) cannot always be assumed. Multiple characteristics of feedback influence its effectiveness, one of the most talked about being whether it is positive or negative. Ample evidence from the fields of psychology and education studies points to the value of positive *and* negative feedback. When feedback is affirming and evokes positive emotions in the recipient, those emotions serve an important purpose. Psychology studies show that they create a temporary state of heightened awareness in which the individual takes in more information and can be more creative with it.[6] Business experts argue that 'only positive feedback can motivate people to continue doing what they're doing well, and do it with more vigor, determination, and creativity'.[7]

Negative feedback is also important, even if it differs from the recipient's own viewpoint or 'self-rating'.[8] Possible responses to negative feedback can be explained as either 'flight' or 'fight', whereby the recipient either rejects it outright, or enters a process of internal and/or external dialogue and discussion with the individual who offered the feedback, seeking to come to a mutual understanding of what was meant and what can be done.[9] Extremely discouraging feedback, which evokes extreme negative emotions in the recipient, is more likely to stimulate 'flight', whereas negative feedback that is nonetheless measured (not overly emotional), specific (without being prescriptive) and non-judgemental (describing a perception *of the work* rather than undermining the *author*) is more likely to create space for dialogue.[10] Business experts argue that 'frequent or exclusively negative comments can spark defensive reactions that cloud perceptions and dampen motivation' and 'effective criticism needs to be delivered with respect and care'.[11]

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[3] Jug et al (2019).

[4] Udai (1977) p 275.

[5] Soden (2013) p 25.

[6] Fredrickson (2013).

[7] Zenger and Folkman (2013) (no page numbers).

[8] Smither et al (2005) p 47.

[9] A process that has been termed 'calibration' (McConlogue, 2020, p 122). See also: Fredrickson (2013); Udai (1977); Soden (2013).

[10] Udai (1977); Chappelow and McCauley (2019).

[11] Chappelow and McCauley (2019) (no page numbers).

1.2 Tips for feeding back well

In the context of NGO–academic research, many research reports contain or constitute feedback about our work as organisations. Therefore, as NGO practitioners we may have to contend with receiving feedback – some of it negative, some of it relating to our day-to-day work – at the same time as giving feedback. This can give rise to tensions (see case studies below).[12] The following tips, drawing on the literature summarised above, may help to navigate these tensions.

- Be respectful and kind. Remember that someone who has (hopefully) given their best to the report will read your comments.

- Consider 'introducing' yourself, and mention your role, in the first comment that you make.

- Ask questions, as if to start a conversation with the author, to encourage mutual reflection.

- If you want to make recommendations on how to make an improvement, try not to present these as the only way forward (unless you are clearly making a correction). It is the tone that matters here.

- Be affirming. Emphasise specific points, paragraphs and insights that you really like.

- Whether your comment is a criticism, affirmation, recommendation or question, be as specific as possible. Also, be as accurate as possible; avoid exaggerating, for example.

- Avoid negative emotive statements and 'shouting' in capital letters. Bear in mind that the recipient is likely to react emotionally to the feedback, and that these emotions matter: they play a role in determining the recipient's subsequent response.[13]

- Take your time and, if necessary, ask the project manager for more time to comment.[14] If you have to be brief in your comments due to time constraints, a short comment acknowledging this at the start can help avoid coming across as curt.

- If the report contains critical feedback, ask yourself whether you are affected by it emotionally. If so, you could consider coming back another day to add comments. It may be productive to describe how reading the report made you feel, yet to do so constructively, taking your time.

Examples – commenting well

- Have you considered including *xyz* in this paragraph?

- Would it be possible to expand on this idea? It is very relevant to…

- Could you rephrase this sentence to increase clarity? Perhaps you could say…

- This case study addresses the research question very effectively.

- What do you mean by this phrase? Do you mean…?

- This insight is really helpful and lends itself to being elaborated on in the conclusion.

- To be truthful, I found this conclusion challenging to read, as it is quite critical. However, (a day on!) I realise that it is right that we be challenged. Perhaps you could expand on the evidence behind the conclusion?

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[12] Fransman and Newman (2019); O'Reilly and Dhanju (2010).

[13] Smither et al (2005).

[14] Green and Walsh (2019).

Examples – comments to avoid

- I don't get what you are saying here.
- This is A FACTUAL ERROR. You don't understand Tearfund!!!!!!
- You must change the structure of this report. Move *xyz* to the top and end the report with *abc*.
- You make a whole series of statements that I don't agree with. They are not based on evidence.
- I have to say I feel unbelievably disappointed, reading this. It is not as I hoped it would be.
- This is too long, needs cutting and has 50 million other problems. Hopeless!

Case study: The NGO partner as a red pen censor

In a study of seven different research partnerships between UK-based INGO practitioners and academics, several academics reported having experienced their respective INGO partner as a 'red pen censor'.[15] This affected the research outputs: what made it through multiple rounds of feedback and drafting to publication; and when, and in what form, publication took place. These were all examples of broadly successful research partnerships, most of them characterised by mutually supportive relationships and friendship between partners. Yet such friendship sometimes made critique – giving and receiving it – all the more uncomfortable.[16]

Case study: 'Your report is completely wrong!'

Academic research conducted with an NGO in Rajasthan, India, concluded with a return trip by the academics in 2007, to seek feedback on the research report from NGO staff.[17] The academics initially faced a backlash by staff members, who each struggled to reconcile their responses to interview questions with the final report. The critical analysis that had emerged from the research was upsetting. Although subsequent revisions to the report were made, some senior members of staff maintained that it was 'completely wrong' – in coming to terms with the critique addressed to them, they were unable to give constructive feedback to the researchers.[18]

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[15] Fransman and Newman (2019) p 535.

[16] Fransman and Newman (2019).

[17] O'Reilly and Dhanju (2010).

[18] O'Reilly and Dhanju (2010) p 290.

2 How to approach a draft research report – 'Wearing two hats'

As NGO practitioners, including Tearfund staff, we want to give effective and helpful feedback to our academic collaborators and consultants that will a) improve the quality of their reports, and b) shape an academic report into an 'NGO product' that will readily inform and enhance our practice and programming. We need to keep these two aims in mind when reviewing reports, as if we are 'wearing two hats' simultaneously.

Wearing two hats when reading an academic draft report means that we need to think in parallel about the different roles of those who will receive and act on our feedback. While the majority of comments are addressed to the academic who will incorporate our feedback into the final academic report, some comments may be more specifically suitable for the project manager who will help the academic to shape the executive summary, conclusions and recommendations, and may produce additional products, such as a blog, infographic or learning report.[19] De Bono's (1985) work suggests that focused 'parallel thinking' as a tool enables groups to think together more effectively in order to achieve goals in a cohesive way.[20]

Two men in hats. Photo: Sahil Pandita/Unsplash

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[19] By 'project manager', we refer to an NGO staff member who holds a direct working relationship with the academic author and will pass stakeholder feedback to them. They play an important role in clarifying stakeholders' comments and helping the academic to prioritise and act on them. Prior to stakeholder feedback, they are likely to have reviewed emerging drafts/individual chapters of the report.

[20] De Bono (1985).

Commenting to other stakeholders

Remember that your comments should not usually be addressed to other stakeholders. You may like to respond in brief to a comment made by another stakeholder, especially if you agree with their feedback and can corroborate it. However, avoid having lengthy 'discussions' within the document (ie creating 'chains' of more than two or three comments). Have these discussions outside the document, including the project manager if appropriate.

2.1 'Hat Number One': comments for the academic author

The aim of this 'commenting hat' is to improve the quality and accuracy of the academic report as a stand-alone piece.
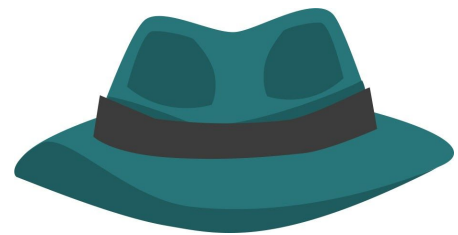
Consider the following points.

- **Begin by re-reading the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the research.** Remind yourself of the research question(s) and look to the report to see whether these have been addressed. This will help you to keep the remit and big picture in mind, as well as enabling you to identify any gaps or missing elements.

- **Look for clarity in writing.** Point out sentences and paragraphs which are difficult to understand or lacking in clarity. Ask questions to help the author clarify their thoughts: *'Did you mean x or z here, or something different altogether?'*

- **Check that findings are evidenced.** A good academic research report should make clear arguments based on evidence (such as secondary literature, interview material, quotes, fieldwork observations etc). Point out any paragraphs where evidence of the claims being made is missing.

- **Consult the reference list or bibliography,** to understand what secondary literature the academic author has read and referenced. Look at the author and publisher names, and places of publication. Does the list seem to represent strong, contextualised and diverse expertise on the topic and region(s) under study?

- **The role of technical advisers.** Technical advisers/specialists should skim the report and comment on the sections relevant to their area of expertise. Have terminologies been defined accurately and used coherently? Is anything significant missing? Has all relevant secondary literature been considered?

If things get tricky – serious concerns

So far, we have presumed that the report chapters are in line with broad expectations and of reasonably good quality. In this case the purpose of our comments is to improve an already decent report further. However, if some of the report chapters are of very poor written quality and/or do not meet the basic requirements set out in the ToR, it can get tricky. In some cases the direction of the academic report might differ significantly from your expectations.

In these scenarios it would be best for reviewers and stakeholders to make a single, overall comment in the document, and then to have a conversation with the project manager. The project manager can then discuss and explain the concerns with the author and negotiate significant revisions.

In this situation, also consider whether you are commenting under 'Hat Number One' or 'Hat Number Two'. Do you have serious concerns about the quality of the research and/or quality of the report? Or are your reservations about: the way your organisation or its work is represented, or the usefulness of the research for your organisation? Both positions are valid, but it will be helpful for the project manager (and academic author) to understand where you are coming from.

2.2 'Hat Number Two': comments for the project manager

The aim of this 'commenting hat' is to help the academic author and (particularly) the project manager to shape the academic report (especially the executive summary, conclusions, recommendations) and any additional 'summary' products (such as a blog, learning report or infographics) so that they will readily inform and enhance our practice and programming. This can be achieved through stakeholders highlighting key messages, sections, paragraphs and quotes, keeping the end product and target audience in mind.

Consider the following points.

- **Focus on the executive summary.** While you read the main report, jump back and forth between the chapters and the executive summary. Does the summary capture all the main findings? Point out any sections/key insights which have been missed and need to be included in the executive summary.

- **Consider the recommendations.** While you read the report, identify any insights or findings that stand out to you or are particularly interesting. What would it look like to apply these insights to your work? If the academic author has already drafted a series of recommendations for the organisation, review these. Do you understand what the author means? Do you feel that the recommendations are based on evidence? In your view, are the recommendations actionable?

- **Ask for more information.** Consider whether particular points or messages need to be elaborated upon in order for you or your colleagues to apply/learn from them.

- **Scan the report for anything that is potentially sensitive or confidential,** which should therefore be significantly reframed or removed before publication.

Using a colour scheme

Project managers might consider asking stakeholders to use a colour-coding scheme, such as the one outlined below, to highlight messages, sections, paragraphs and quotes. Highlights (more so than comments) can be easily left in the document until much later in the report's production. Left in the document, they can inform a number of different processes, not only final report edits by the author, but also copy-editing and design.

YELLOW
Themes, sections, paragraphs or sentences which you think are key. These may well be direct 'answers' to the research questions, so should be emphasised in the final report and any summary products. A note can be added to make relevant suggestions for how emphasis could be added (eg inclusion in recommendations, through design elements).

GREEN
Anything key that has been missed in the executive summary specifically and that should definitely be added to it.

PINK
Anything that is potentially sensitive, confidential or contradictory, which should therefore be significantly reframed or removed before publication. Only very few pink highlights would usually be added.

BLUE
Any key insights or findings that stand out to you or are particularly interesting. These may not be direct 'answers' to the research questions, but may, nonetheless, be areas you'd like to explore with your team and apply to your work. Blue highlights constitute a note to self and other staff, unless you add a comment to ask the author and/or project manager to elaborate or provide further detail.

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