**Lesson 6:**

**Say what you like (and would like)**

**Or, giving and getting helpful feedback**

by Nestor Walters

If you’ve ever asked your LPO to look over an email before you sent it to Senior Chief, or you’ve checked with a buddy before you sent that borderline-funny/offensive Tinder message, you’re familiar with the process of reviewing and revising. Professional writers do this all the time: they have cliques of writing buddies that look over their work and offer suggestions for improvement.

But Nestor, you say, shouldn’t my writing process express me? What’s all this fuss about getting someone else to approve of the way I express myself?

And you’d be right. At the end of the day, it’s your essay and no one’s opinion matters as much as your own. There is a caveat though: when you’re writing to communicate a specific message to someone (in this case, to convince the admissions officer that you should study at their school) then your work has to––at a minimum––be comprehensible. Some people won’t appreciate what you write, and that’s ok. But it shouldn’t be because they don’t understand it.

Here’s an example:

Khan Academy has been an invaluable source for me since three years ago, when my intellectual awakening began. I have learned all of my post-high school math from there, beginning with a pre-algebra review, and making it through calculus. I used it to supplement the physics, biology, and chemistry classes I took in college.

Nothing extremely wrong with it (besides sounding a little extra.) But if I didn’t know the person who wrote this, I would wonder what they mean by “intellectual awakening.” That’s a dramatic statement that deserves to be developed. Also, saying “classes I *took* in college” implies that the person is done with college or took it some time ago. But the writer was taking night classes at the time and was also on active duty and that’s important for the reader to know.

That’s the thing with a personal statement: it may make sense in your head where you have all sorts of context for it, but be hard to follow for someone who doesn’t know you.

With that in mind, there are two very broad types of pre-readers(someone who reads your essay before you send it): people who know you well and people who don’t.

*People who know you* can remind you of events or experiences that are relevant and important that you might have forgotten. Your mom, for example, might say “Oh, funny you wrote about your dog, remember how happy you were when it first climbed out of its crate?” And that may give you a nice detail to tug on.

*People who don’t know* you might say things like “I’m reading this dog story, but I don’t see how it fits in,” or “wait, where did the dog come from again?” Questions that a reader who knows you might answer for themselves.

And if you’re a reader? I’m glad you asked. Here are some general tips:

1. Read the essay at least twice. One for content, the second for details.
2. Say what you like and what you would like
3. Remember that everyone’s experience is valid

Here are some things to look for:

* What you like or stands out to you
* Breaks in continuity
* Changes in tense/tone (this might be intentional)
* Unclear vocabulary (including technical terms)

(Leave minor grammar and spelling errors for the pre-final and final drafts. If you mark them up too soon, there might just be too many comments on the essay.)

On biases, generalities and over-simplifications: you should absolutely point these out, but with two things in mind: 1. Assume good intent from the author. 2. Remember that they might only seem like biases/generalities from your perspective.

Here are some useful phrases:

* I’m not sure I understand this part
* I would like to know more about…
* This felt out of place because…\*
* To me, this came across as racist, sexist, homophobic because…\*
* Consider rephrasing/expanding/condensing, etc.
* This part throws me off a bit

And of course:

* This is amazing/incredible/moving etc.
* This captures that emotion/experience exactly
* Great verb/noun/adjective/story
* LOL/haha/LMFAO\*\*

\*Note: even if you don’t know *why* something feels off, it’s still useful to point it out.

\*\*Other note: in general, don’t *try* to be funny (especially puns) because it shows. But don’t shy away from it either, and if something was funny, let the author know.

Next is an essay with some sample comments. The comment applies to the whole underlined phrase, the way Google docs would work. I’m writing them as I would address the writer, and I encourage you to do the same.

Sample short essay: “Avionics to Engineering”

(Stanford) Please use the space below to provide details about the change in progression since secondary school that you indicated above. (250 word max)

At the age of 16, my parents dual-enrolled me at Saint Johns River Community College.1 As the first and only person in my immediate family to attend college, this was both exciting and daunting. As2 eager as I was to obtain a higher education, adverse circumstances interfered. First, the lack of social development that came as a result of homeschooling prevented me from reaching out to school faculty and peers when I needed help filling in the gaps left by my non-traditional education. Then during my second term, increasing instability at home eventually led me to move in with my biological father and discontinue my homeschooling. Finally, newly acquired living expenses pushed me to prioritize work over continuing my studies.

In 2008, I attended Motorcycle Mechanics Institute in Orlando, FL. I realized soon after graduation that the path of a motorcycle mechanic was not best for me, and I enlisted in the Navy as an Avionics Technician. This led to a post-service career in aviation, where I developed a passion for engineering. In pursuit of that passion, I enrolled at Portland Community College in 2016.

I’m now in the process of completing the requirements to transfer into a university.3 There, I intend to obtain both bachelor’s and master’s degrees that combine computer science, electrical engineering, and human-computer interaction.4

1: Great starting sentence. Carries a lot of information.

2: Two sentences in a row start with “As.” Consider rephrasing.

3: Can you say this in a simpler way? Feels like a lot of long words in a row.

4: Great, clear conclusion. Nice use of the What-So What-Now What model.

Finally, remember that when someone asks you to read their essay or personal statement, they’re trusting you with something potentially vulnerable to them, either because of content or quality or both. Be honest, considerate, and, above all, thorough. Take the time to show them that their work matters.