Deliberate Practice for Academic Writers
Part 4: Finding the right kind of feedback to improve your writing

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June 3, 2021

This is the final post in a series of four about deliberate practice and writing. The first introduced deliberate practice, the second discussed academic writing, and the third combined them to show how a writer can address shortcomings in the clarity of their work.

In these final remarks, I'll talk about how audiences experience our writing and how can we get useful feedback as part of the process of deliberate practice.

Writing usability testing

Before I started graduate school, I worked the customer service desk for a small software company. I got dozens and sometimes hundreds of emails per day about the problems our users were having. Most of the time I was the only one responding to those messages, so I had a lot of work to do.

To lower the customer service email count, we decided to redesign our website. The goal was to build it such that users could visit and find answers to their questions without contacting me. We made new menus and trees of questions a customer could click through in order to identify and resolve their issue.

We finished the project and launched the new site. It seemed to have an impact on the email, account, but we weren't sure. To get better information, we hired usability testers to visit the site.

A usability tester visits a website just like everyone else. What's special about them is that they narrate their *experience* of a site out loud, in real time, as they are interacting with it. They also record the narration.

So, for example, you might tell the tester to go to the site and find an answer to a specific service question. The tester would then record what they're thinking as they view the home page, look for the menu, and reason through what to click next. They would note any confusion they had or any otherwise off-putting impressions created by the site.

The usability testing taught our software company a lot. While the new site was an improvement, we learned how to streamline it further to make answering questions much easier. We were able to make changes we wouldn't have understood without discovering how someone experienced our site, and what they were thinking as they did.

My time in customer support taught me a lesson about feedback with writing. There are many ways to respond to a piece of writing, from quick reactions to an exhaustive survey of the grammar. But for improving the clarity of my work, I found that I needed to know how people *experienced* my writing, just as my company needed to know how people experienced our website. What I needed was a writing usability tester.

Usability testing for our writing is something that we can't really give ourselves. It's more than just whether we are writing with a certain audience in mind—it's about what is in the *minds* of others as they read what we have written. It's about us understanding what goes on for them when they encounter our work, when they have nothing to rely on to interpret it except what we have put on the page.

The first time my writing got usability testing was in graduate school, in my Writing is Thinking class with Toril Moi. We got feedback every week but it only took two or three cycles for me to see how serious my shortcomings were. Toril could communicate the place in a piece where things got confused—she would point out the exact place on the page where comprehensibility broke down. With this feedback she was narrating for us her experience of our writing, and giving us precious insight into the mind of someone trying to grasp our meanings through our sentences.

Getting the right feedback

For deliberate practice to improve our writing, we need feedback. That feedback should focus on our weaknesses and make suggestions for improvement. We can then take those suggestions, make efforts to implement them, and continue getting better.

Now for two suggestions. The first is that writing usability testing is among the very best feedback we can receive to improve the clarity of our writing. The second is that the Writing Is Thinking approach orients toward giving that kind of feedback.

If we want to improve the clarity of our work, we need to know where the clarity breaks down, and why. As someone explains to us where they begin to lose track of our meaning, we will be able to identify the failures of clarity. Then we can fix them. We may be surprised to find that these failures occur

early in our writing, as we use unfamiliar terms or make implicit logical leaps that our audience cannot follow. Experienced readers can tell us about these things.

One way to get this kind of feedback is to form a writing group that practices giving this kind of feedback to one another. UNC's Writing Center provides a Writing Group Starter Kit for starting your own writing group. You could choose to form a Deliberate Practice themed group or a Usability Testing group. Peter Elbow's classic "Writing with Power" also has useful resources for starting writing groups and for giving "reader-based" feedback.

Another option is to find readers who specialize as writing usability testers. A software company hires usability testers to save their employees time and to get their products into their customers' hands. A writing usability tester ensures your ideas reach your readers. They can save you and your reader both from misunderstandings and misinterpretations that slow you down.

"Writing is Thinking" approaches writing to optimize the reader's experience. Not everyone wants to undertake a program of deliberate practice for their writing, but everyone can benefit from mindful readers giving usability feedback about their work. That's what Writing is Thinking excels at. Getting the right kind of feedback is like having someone narrate their experience as they read your work. Issues with clarity will come to the forefront—they will be obvious right away, just like a website visitor who can't find the customer service menu.

Deliberate practice is the best way to improve our writing. To practice this way we need the help of others, but not everyone can help us to the same extent. Services from Writing is Thinking offer first-rate opportunities for getting better both as writers and as thinkers.