How to soften the red pen's blow:
Tips for editing a colleague's work

Bridget E. Pfefferle
Brightstar Inc., Libertyville, IL, USA

Correspondence to:
Bridget E. Pfefferle
82 S. DuBois Ave., Elgin, IL 60123
+1 630-66-0235
bridget.pfefferle@gmail.com

Abstract
Applying the dreaded red editing pen to a colleague's work can be nerve-racking for professional writers. But there are some concrete steps every writer can take that will improve his or her ability to communicate the type of clear, constructive feedback any co-worker will appreciate. Here I discuss five of these steps: be clear, use the author's preferred way to receive feedback, provide examples, take your time, and praise effort.

All professional writers know that the job description often includes fielding editing requests from colleagues – as well as friends, family, and the occasional neighbour. While you're probably happy to assist and wish to provide genuinely helpful recommendations, you may also be worried you'll bruise the author's ego.

But if the idea of taking the dreaded red pen to a supervisor's or a colleague's work fills you with anxiety, at least you can take comfort in the fact that you're not alone: according to a 2014 assessment conducted by Harvard Business Review, most people actually prefer receiving feedback to giving it.[1]

So, when the next edit request drops into your e-mail inbox, first take a deep breath and know that the odds are the author truly wants your feedback, not just a rubber stamp of approval. Second, try out the following tips to make the editing process smoother for both of you (see also Table 1).

1. Be clear
Sure, you could strike out a whole paragraph with a big red cross and move on down the page. You may know why some text isn't necessary, or why it could even be detrimental to the piece overall, but will the author? If you want to provide feedback that your colleagues will value, it's important to take a minute to provide clear reasoning for your edits when you can.

For example, if you reword a section of text from passive to active voice, make a note specifically describing this and why you've done it. If you're editing a digital document, you can also provide a link to relevant editorial preferences or a website on grammar, such as Purdue University's Online Writing Lab.[2]

2. Use the author's preferred means for feedback
You may have heard there are three different learning styles: visual, auditory, and tactile (or kinaesthetic).[3] But according to a 2004 study, there are a lot more than that – at least 71![4] Don't worry, there's no need to memorise them all. Use this much easier shortcut: ask the author how he or she prefers to receive edits, and then accommodate.

For instance, does your co-worker swear by tracked changes? Or would she prefer you sit down over coffee to watch you mark up the document with a red pen? Does your supervisor want an intensive re-write of his presentation, or is he just looking for your cursory thoughts on the tone? Save your time and energy – and theirs – and get these questions answered before you begin to edit.

3. Provide examples
In most professional writing environments, and perhaps especially in medical writing, you're very rarely inventing the wheel. There's a good chance you have old journals, presentations, research, websites, regulatory documents, etc., that you can reference for examples on everything from a strong introduction to a well-structured bibliography.

4. Take your time
Tempting as it may be to push these edits further and further down your to-do list (after all, this isn't even your project!), if you want to be a team player you've got to make it a priority.

You also don't want to rush the process. This

tip applies to your own writing too. You might think you work well, or even better than usual, under pressure from a fast-approaching deadline, but that's a bit of a myth. In fact, a 2001 study found people working to tight timelines actually make more mistakes than people who have more time.[5]

5. Praise the effort

Recent research tells us that while seasoned professionals (like you!) are more open to negative feedback, novices prefer positive responses.[6] So if you're editing for someone who is new to writing, you might try the "sandwich method": compliment, feedback, compliment.[7]

But medical writers beware: The feedback sandwich could backfire and cause you to appear condescending, especially if you're working with someone who has more experience in the field.

If you do choose to provide praise in addition to suggestions for improvement, be sure to be transparent and focus that praise specifically on effort versus innate talent. This is particularly important if you want to help improve your colleague's writing in the future. Studies conducted by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck showed that when praised for effort – even when that effort resulted in a failure – students became more resilient and determined, whereas students who received praise based solely on talent or ability became more risk averse and sensitive to setbacks.[8]

So, as you edit, be sure to keep an eye out for which aspects of the piece work well (for instance, a conclusion that ties back to the introduction) and how the author can use those strengths to improve other areas (such as a weak introduction).

Finally, after you put the cap on your red pen or hit "save" for the last time, be sure to either write a positive note to go along with your feedback or share your praise face to face.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Author information

Bridget E. Pfefferle (née Bowen) is a senior copywriter and communications specialist with a degree in journalism and more than a decade of marketing and business writing experience.

Table 1. Five tips for providing edits

Tip	Example
Be clear.	Be specific with notes about why you made the changes you did. Provide links to editorial guidelines or other resources as applicable.
Use the author's preferred means for feedback.	If the author is an auditory learner, they might prefer to have a phone call or in-person meeting to go over your edits.
Provide examples.	If the author struggles with passive versus active voice, provide a few examples from other articles.
Take your time.	Estimate how much time it will take you to make the edits, and then plan extra time before making deadline commitments to authors.
Praise the effort.	For less-experienced authors, point out what he or she did well – but try to focus on specifics. Praising talent alone isn't as motivating as praising persistence, effort, and growth. For more seasoned authors, you might consider skipping praise altogether as it can be seen as condescending.