



The Feedback Garden

Grow the work. Keep the self.

A practical fieldbook for making sense of criticism,
requesting better observations, running smaller experiments,
and keeping authorship over your work.

20 SCENES / 10 REVISIONS / 5 REQUEST EXERCISES / WORKSHEETS

A NOTE BEFORE WE BEGIN

A comment is not a court ruling

Feedback contains information about a meeting: a particular piece of work, a particular observer, a particular purpose and a particular context. It is never a complete description of the person who made the work.

This fieldbook is designed for writers, students, makers, colleagues, teachers and anyone who has ever received a comment that felt larger than the thing being reviewed. Its aim is neither to praise every draft nor to dismiss every critic. It is to give you better questions.

Use it in three passes: **identify** what kind of claim arrived, **interpret** the claim against your goal and evidence, then **experiment** if a change seems worthwhile. You may also decide not to revise.

Keep two ideas together

A useful criticism can be uncomfortable. An uncomfortable criticism is not necessarily useful. Separate its accuracy, relevance, tone and testability before acting.

Inside this fieldbook

01 / The four lenses — observation, interpretation, suggestion and insult.

02 / Twenty field notes — fictional everyday comments with careful readings and possible tests.

03 / Ten revised artifacts — precise changes without sacrificing an original intention.

04 / Request better feedback — five exercises with prompts and small experiments.

05 / A practical kit — reply scripts, an author's decision rule, writable worksheets and a group exercise.

The categories are original teaching heuristics, not a diagnostic or psychological test. The examples are fictional. Education research informs the general approach, but does not prove universal outcomes in work, craft or relationships.

01 / SEE THE SHAPE OF A COMMENT

Four lenses, not four verdicts

These labels describe the dominant move in a sentence. Real comments can combine several moves. Check what each part does before you decide what it deserves.

Observation

“The first page contains three undefined abbreviations.”

What it gives you: A report about something that can be located and checked. Accurate observation is useful, but the observer may have missed context or used an irrelevant criterion.

Better question: Which passage? Can the intended audience interpret it?

Interpretation

“The opening feels impatient.”

What it gives you: A meaning or impression formed by an observer. An interpretation can reveal reception without establishing the author’s intention.

Better question: Which sentences prompted that impression? Does the intended audience agree?

Suggestion

“Open with the example instead of the theory.”

What it gives you: A proposed response, not automatically an obligation. It should be judged for fit, cost, reversibility and the author’s purpose.

Better question: Try both openings with the target reader; ask what each clarifies and obscures.

Insult

“You are not talented enough to write.”

What it gives you: A statement that demeans a person, rather than supplying usable information about a task. You can set a boundary or disengage.

Better question: Look for task-specific feedback from another source; do not make contempt the price of learning.

An important complication

"You always bury the main point, so move the conclusion up." This mixes an overgeneralisation ("always"), a possibly checkable critique ("main point is buried") and a suggestion ("move the conclusion"). You can split the parts without accepting the package.

02 / THE WORKING PROTOCOL

The four-question pause

Use this before you rewrite anything. You can do it on paper in under five minutes.

01 What can be checked?

Extract the smallest concrete claim. What passage, behaviour, count, reaction or observable result is being described? If nothing is checkable, identify the reviewer's experience or preference as such.

02 What is being inferred?

Notice any story about motive, character, intention or cause. Make at least one alternative explanation possible without pretending every explanation is equally likely.

03 What is the actual goal?

Name the audience, purpose and practical constraints. A suggestion that helps one audience may break the piece for another. Your work can have more than one legitimate goal.

04 What is the cheapest honest test?

Prefer a reversible change when possible: two versions, a brief trial, a question to the right reader, a usability check. Decide what evidence would count against your favourite version.

The author's permission slip

You may accept a precise observation and reject its proposed solution. You may ask for examples. You may preserve an unusual creative choice on purpose. You may decline a personal attack. None of these responses requires pretending the work is perfect.

A one-sentence decision rule

"Given my purpose and the evidence, I will **test** / **adopt** / **defer** / **decline** this suggestion because ____."

03 / THE SORTING TABLE

Twenty field notes

Each scene is invented to practise separating what a comment literally claims from what you might choose to do next. The suggested tests are examples, not prescriptions.

01 / WRITING / OBSERVATION

“The opening sentence contains three unfamiliar acronyms.”

Read: It points to something a reader can locate in the text. It does not tell us whether those acronyms are inappropriate for the intended audience.

Consider: Test: ask a reader in your target audience which terms, if any, need definitions.

02 / CRAFT / INTERPRETATION

“The handle looks uncomfortable to hold.”

Read: “Looks uncomfortable” is a viewer’s prediction, not yet a measurement of how the object feels in use. It might still be a useful warning.

Consider: Test: invite people with different hand sizes to hold the prototype and describe what happens.

03 / TEAMWORK / SUGGESTION

“Put the decision and owner at the top of each meeting note.”

Read: This proposes a concrete change. It may solve coordination problems, but only if it serves the team and does not obscure other context.

Consider: Test: try the format for two meetings, then ask whether decisions became easier to retrieve.

04 / STUDY / INSULT

“You are obviously too lazy to understand this topic.”

Read: This attacks a person’s character while supplying no specific evidence about the task or a useful next step.

Consider: Response: you can disengage. If there is a real learning gap, look for a specific example from a safer source.

05 / RELATIONSHIPS / OBSERVATION

“When plans changed on Friday, I received the message after I had already left.”

Read: The speaker reports a specific sequence of events. You can discuss details without deciding anyone’s intentions.

Consider: Test: agree on a cutoff time for changing plans, then see whether coordination improves.

06 / WRITING / INTERPRETATION

“This ending feels more defensive than the rest of the essay.”

Read: The word “feels” makes the reader’s experience visible. It is information about reception, not proof of the writer’s motive.

Consider: Test: ask which sentences created that impression, then compare an alternate ending.

07 / CRAFT / SUGGESTION

“Replace the pale labels with darker type and test them in daylight.”

Read: A specific revision and test are proposed. Whether it helps depends on legibility, aesthetic goals and context.

Consider: Test: compare both labels at a realistic reading distance under natural light.

08 / TEAMWORK / INSULT

“Your ideas are worthless, and so are you.”

Read: The statement collapses the work and the person into contempt. There is no usable task-level evidence here.

Consider: Response: set a boundary or leave the conversation; seek concrete review elsewhere.

09 / STUDY / OBSERVATION

“You used the same definition in both answers, although the questions asked for different concepts.”

Read: A comparison can be checked against the two answers and the questions. The observer could still have misunderstood the assignment.

Consider: Test: underline the requested concept in each question, then distinguish it in a new answer.

10 / RELATIONSHIPS / INTERPRETATION

“I took the short reply as a sign you were upset with me.”

Read: The speaker names an inference about emotion, not an established fact. Several explanations might fit the short message.

Consider: Test: ask directly what the reply meant, without making either person defend a guessed motive.

11 / WRITING / SUGGESTION

“Move the strongest example before the abstract explanation.”

Read: This is a proposed structural edit, not an identity judgment. It is worth testing with the actual reader, not adopting automatically.

Consider: Test: show both orders to a reader and ask which makes the claim easier to understand.

12 / CRAFT / INSULT

“Only an idiot would choose that colour.”

Read: A personal put-down is doing the work of an aesthetic preference. It gives no context, criterion or usable observation.

Consider: Response: decline the insult. If the colour matters, ask someone else about contrast, intended mood or material.

13 / TEAMWORK / OBSERVATION

“Three task owners were missing from the handoff document on Monday.”

Read: The claim concerns a count and a document that teammates can check. It does not establish why the names were absent.

Consider: Test: inspect the handoff with its author, then add a visible owner field to next week’s template.

14 / CRAFT / INTERPRETATION

“The fragrance opening feels too sharp for the quiet atmosphere of this room.”

Read: “Too sharp” and “quiet atmosphere” are context-bound sensory readings. They are valuable impressions, not universal properties of a fragrance.

Consider: Test: compare the sample with two alternatives, keeping room size and concentration in mind.

15 / STUDY / SUGGESTION

“Draw a diagram of the forces before calculating the answer.”

Read: The reviewer proposes a procedure that may reveal an overlooked variable. It is a testable method, not a rule for every problem.

Consider: Test: solve one comparable problem with and without the diagram and inspect the reasoning.

16 / WRITING / INSULT

“If you write like this, you must be stupid.”

Read: This converts a judgment about one draft into an attack on intelligence. There is no precise claim to test.

Consider: Response: disengage or ask another reader which sentence, if any, is unclear.

17 / RELATIONSHIPS / OBSERVATION

“We made two plans this month without agreeing who would book the tickets.”

Read: It describes a potentially verifiable coordination pattern, without alleging carelessness or bad intent.

Consider: Test: ask whether both people recall the same plans, then explicitly assign booking for the next one.

18 / STUDY / INTERPRETATION

“Your argument seems stronger when you discuss the exception.”

Read: This is an evaluation of which passage persuades the reader. It invites investigation, not automatic rewriting.

Consider: Test: ask the reader where their confidence changed and compare versions with different paragraph order.

19 / RELATIONSHIPS / SUGGESTION

“Could we agree to check in the day before making weekend plans final?”

Read: The comment proposes a negotiable communication practice. It is neither a demand nor proof of what a relationship should be.

Consider: Test: make a mutual agreement for the next two weekends and check whether it works for both people.

20 / TEAMWORK / INSULT

“Anyone who needs instructions has no place on this team.”

Read: The remark attacks a group of people for needing clarity, instead of describing an actual coordination cost.

Consider: Response: avoid treating contempt as useful review; ask for a concrete example of what instructions are missing.

04 / THE REVISION SPECIMENS

Ten changes worth examining

In each example the author changed a specific feature, but retained a purpose, tone, argument or relationship. The goal is not maximal compliance.

01 / WRITING – The opening paragraph

AIM	Help a newcomer understand a research idea without flattening it.
BEFORE	“The IAG architecture operationalises agentic discrepancies across complex contextual inputs.”
FEEDBACK	A first-time reader cannot tell what the model tries to explain.
AFTER	“Why do we sometimes fail to do what we say matters? The identity-action gap is one way to examine that question.”
CHANGED	Replaced an unexplained label with the motivating question.
KEPT	The research question and the possibility of a technical explanation later.

02 / CRAFT – A ceramic mug label

AIM	Make care instructions findable at the moment of use.
BEFORE	“HANDCRAFTED. UNIQUE. A PIECE OF ART.”
FEEDBACK	Customers repeatedly ask whether the mug is dishwasher-safe.
AFTER	“Handcrafted stoneware. Hand wash recommended; allow to cool before rinsing.”
CHANGED	Made practical handling information visible.
KEPT	The handmade identity, without claiming every object is the same.

03 / TEAMWORK – The hand-off note

AIM	Let a colleague pick up a task without another meeting.
BEFORE	"Website updates are in progress. I'll share them soon."
FEEDBACK	I do not know what is finished, who owns the next step or what you need from me.
AFTER	"Homepage copy: revised. Mobile layout: under review. Priya: please check the menu by Thursday. I'll ship after that review."
CHANGED	Named status, owner, next action and timing.
KEPT	A short, human message rather than a sprawling report.

04 / STUDY – The history answer

AIM	Explain a cause without presenting it as the only cause.
BEFORE	"The printing press caused the Reformation."
FEEDBACK	This makes a complex historical process sound inevitable and monocausal.
AFTER	"Print accelerated the circulation of reform ideas, alongside political, religious and local factors shaping how they spread."
CHANGED	Replaced a single-cause claim with a more qualified account.
KEPT	Print as an important explanatory factor.

05 / RELATIONSHIPS – The plan-making message

AIM	Communicate a preference without inventing the other person's motive.
BEFORE	"You never care about my time."
FEEDBACK	The word "never" feels unfair; I did not realise you were waiting.
AFTER	"I waited 25 minutes yesterday without an update. Next time, can we message each other when plans change?"
CHANGED	Shifted from character judgment to an event and a request.
KEPT	The concern that timely updates matter.

06 / WRITING – The event invitation

AIM	Make a friendly invitation actionable.
BEFORE	“Come hang out at our little creative event sometime next week!”
FEEDBACK	I like the idea, but I cannot tell when or where it happens.
AFTER	“Join our open sketching evening on Wednesday, 6–8 pm, at the community studio. Bring any notebook; materials are optional.”
CHANGED	Added fictional example logistics and what to bring.
KEPT	A warm, low-pressure tone.

07 / CRAFT – A perfume sample card

AIM	Describe a fragrance experience without making universal claims.
BEFORE	“This scent will make everyone feel confident.”
FEEDBACK	Fragrance is subjective; this promise overstates what a perfume can do.
AFTER	“A bright citrus opening gives way to soft woods. Designed to feel energetic to its maker; your experience may differ.”
CHANGED	Replaced a universal emotional promise with notes and a transparent intention.
KEPT	The creative mood the perfumer wanted to explore.

08 / TEAMWORK – The project retrospective

AIM	Learn from a delay without searching for a villain.
BEFORE	“We fell behind because people did not communicate.”
FEEDBACK	We are missing the actual point where decisions stalled.
AFTER	“The design review had no named approver for three days. Next cycle, assign an owner and escalation date before review begins.”
CHANGED	Named a bottleneck and a process experiment.
KEPT	The goal of improving team communication.

09 / STUDY – The mathematics explanation

AIM	Show how an answer was reached, not just a final result.
BEFORE	“Answer: 24.”
FEEDBACK	The result may be right, but I cannot check your reasoning.
AFTER	“There are 6 rows of 4 seats: $6 \times 4 = 24$ seats, assuming each row is full.”
CHANGED	Made the operation and its assumption inspectable.
KEPT	The concise answer.

10 / RELATIONSHIPS – The shared-house request

AIM	Negotiate an expectation without pretending it is universal.
BEFORE	“Obviously, people should clean up after themselves immediately.”
FEEDBACK	We disagree about what immediately means after a shared dinner.
AFTER	“Could we agree to wipe the counter and wash shared pans before bed, even if dishes wait until morning?”
CHANGED	Turned an implicit rule into a specific, negotiable agreement.
KEPT	The wish for a usable shared kitchen.

05 / REQUEST BETTER FEEDBACK

Five exercises for a better conversation

The question you ask can determine the kind of evidence you receive. Below, each exercise includes a real prompt, the information it seeks and a miniature practice task.

01 / Ask for a location, not a rating

Weak ask: "Is this good?"

Ask: "Where did you first lose the thread, and what did you think the piece was saying there?"

Why: The answer points to a location and a misunderstanding you can inspect. It does not force a yes/no verdict.

Practice: Share a 200-word draft. Ask one reader to mark the first point where they hesitated. Do not defend the passage until you have written down what they understood.

02 / Specify the intended reader

Weak ask: "Does everyone understand this?"

Ask: "As someone who has never used this tool, what would you need before your first click?"

Why: The question makes expertise and audience explicit. An expert reviewer can unintentionally optimise for other experts.

Practice: Show one interface or explanation to a newcomer and an experienced person. Record one useful difference between their questions.

03 / Ask for a counterexample

Weak ask: "Do you agree with my theory?"

Ask: "Can you think of a case where this claim would fail or need qualification?"

Why: One counterexample can improve the scope of a claim without requiring you to abandon the whole idea.

Practice: Write your strongest claim, a credible exception, and a narrower version that survives the exception.

04 / Ask what should survive

Weak ask: "Tell me everything wrong."

Ask: “What part already works for its intended purpose and should remain recognisable?”

Why: Change without preservation can improve legibility but erase personality, nuance or function.

Practice: Before revising, highlight one sentence, design decision or constraint you will preserve unless the test gives a specific reason not to.

05 / Ask for one low-cost experiment

Weak ask: “What should I do?”

Ask: “What is one reversible change we could try, and how would we know whether it helped?”

Why: A test focuses on evidence and trade-offs instead of simply transferring authority to the reviewer.

Practice: Produce A and B versions. Ask two target readers to complete a specific task; compare results and note what neither version solves.

06 / SPEAK WITHOUT SURRENDERING

Twelve useful reply scripts

These are starting phrases. Keep your own voice. Not every review deserves a reply, especially where disrespect or safety is involved.

01 / When the comment is vague	"Could you point me to one place where that shows up?"
02 / When the experience is subjective	"That is useful to hear. What in the piece gave you that impression?"
03 / When you need context	"What audience or goal are you evaluating this against?"
04 / When the suggestion is expensive	"I can't change the whole system this week. Which smallest edit would reveal whether this is the right direction?"
05 / When several people disagree	"What criterion would help us compare these options without treating preference as fact?"
06 / When feedback arrives too late	"The decision is locked for this release. Can we capture this as a question for the next version?"
07 / When you want to preserve a choice	"I see the trade-off. I am keeping that element because it serves this particular goal."
08 / When the reviewer is mistaken	"I may have explained this poorly. The constraint is X. Does your concern still apply with that context?"
09 / When a mixed comment includes contempt	"I'm willing to discuss a specific issue in the work, but not personal remarks."
10 / When you need time	"Thanks. I want to check the examples before deciding what to change."
11 / When you are asking a colleague	"What decision is blocked, and what information would let you move forward?"
12 / When the feedback helps	"That example made the problem clear. I changed X, kept Y, and would appreciate a quick check of the result."

07 / A PRINTABLE WORKSHEET

The feedback decoder

Copy a real comment below, or use any of the twenty examples. Separate the layers before deciding what is worth your attention.

The original comment (literal words)

What can I check? (location, event, observable result)

What is interpreted or assumed? What else might fit?

What goal and audience am I serving?

What is one reversible test? What evidence would help?

What will I deliberately preserve or decline?

08 / A PRINTABLE WORKSHEET

The revision ledger

Treat versions as experiments. “More revisions” does not mean “better person.” Record what you changed and whether it served the goal.

Artifact and purpose

Original version / excerpt

Comment worth examining

Version B / specific change

What became clearer? What became worse?

Decision: keep, combine, undo, or test again? Why?

09 / RUN A SMALL REVIEW

A 25-minute feedback conversation

A facilitator can use this in a writing circle, design critique or project retrospective. Adapt the process to the group; it is not intended for abusive situations or high-risk decisions.

00–03 min / Name the brief

The maker states the intended reader, outcome, constraints, and one question where feedback would actually help. Reviewers ask only clarifying questions.

03–08 min / Silent reading

Reviewers inspect the artifact independently. They record two observations, one interpretation (explicitly labelled as such), and one question. Silence reduces premature consensus.

08–14 min / Share evidence first

Each person reads a concrete observation before suggesting a fix. Others may ask for the exact location or conditions. No one narrates the maker's character.

14–19 min / Generate alternatives

The group suggests small possible changes and names likely trade-offs. At least one option should preserve a distinctive element of the original.

19–23 min / Maker chooses

The maker names one test and one thing to keep. They may also decline a change with a goal-based reason. No "public score" is given.

23–25 min / Close with uncertainty

Each person notes what the group still does not know. End with a next experiment, not a verdict on anyone's talent.

Group guardrails

Ask permission before sharing sensitive work. Do not equate disagreement with dishonesty. Protect private information. If a power imbalance makes dissent unsafe, use anonymous or independently facilitated channels where appropriate.

10 / YOUR TAKE-HOME CARD

The three-sentence harvest

Finish a review with a note that belongs to you, not a permanent grade.

I HEARD — One specific observation, perspective or question that deserves attention.

I heard:

I MIGHT TEST — A small change with a visible way to evaluate it.

I might test:

I WILL KEEP — The purpose, voice, value or design feature that matters here.

I will keep:

Takeaway

Keep the work open to revision. Keep the person bigger than the work.

SOURCES, SCOPE AND AN INVITATION

Read further; keep asking

The method in this fieldbook is an original synthesis and teaching device. The cited sources support broader ideas about formative feedback and self-regulation, mostly in learning contexts; they are not validation studies of this four-label taxonomy.

Education Endowment Foundation. *Teacher Feedback to Improve Pupil Learning*. Evidence-informed guidance on principles, timing, purpose and opportunities for students to act on feedback.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/feedback>

OECD. *Using formative assessment and feedback*. Discussion of feedback within teaching and learning, including task goals and opportunities to act.

https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/unlocking-high-quality-teaching_f5b82176-en/full-report/using-formative-assessment-and-feedback_189fb6dc.html

Noba Project. *Self-Regulation and Conscientiousness*. Introductory treatment of self-regulation, goal monitoring and behavioural adjustment; adjacent concepts, not direct evidence for this method.

<https://nobaproject.com/textbooks/mara-breen-new-textbook/modules/self-regulation-and-conscientiousness>

Three limits worth remembering

A classroom learning intervention cannot automatically be generalised to a friendship, a perfume prototype or organisational life. People can reasonably value different goals. When the stakes are high, consult appropriate subject experts and real-world evidence, not a worksheet alone.

Likewise, an insult is not valuable merely because it is forceful. A supportive comment is not accurate merely because it is kind. Precision, context, evidence, agency and respect matter separately.

This is a living field guide

Made for The Feedback Garden, a project in the Sahil Tayal universe. Explore more ideas at sahiltayal.com; visit the interactive garden at feedbackgarden.sahiltayal.online. Suggestions, questions and disagreements: sahil@sahiltayal.com.

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