

## CHAPTER 23

# *Providing quality advice on candidates' writing*

Kate Cadman  
Margaret Cargill  
The University of Adelaide

### INTRODUCTION

A significant focus of doctoral education, and thus of doctoral supervision, is on writing, both as a process-oriented skill and as a primary product of intellectual inquiry. In Australia, in most Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) a single piece of writing represents the whole research journey and its outcomes, and is all that is examined. As a result, in different ways at different points in candidature, writing becomes a target for attention by both supervisors and candidates. Supervisors' advice to HDR candidates about their writing has a sustained and critical role, not only in the research education process, but also in determining the perceived scholarly contribution of the final, substantial work that publicly represents many stakeholders: the novice scholar, the supervisory team, the disciplinary area and the university.

In this context, supervisors' advice on drafts of thesis chapters and related conference papers carries a high information and purpose load; supervisors' comments simultaneously communicate content information, provide evaluative assessment and point to learning directions for candidates, as well as contributing to the interpersonal supervisor–student relationship on which they are predicated. Yet, despite such a critical role in the progress of a student's candidature,

providing feedback is something that supervisors often do without reflecting on actually why, and how, they are going about it.

In this chapter we examine these issues and offer some strategies for advising candidates on their writing. In doing this, we are drawing on our combined experience of over ten years work with supervisors and their candidates across the university in relation to their feedback on draft reviews of literature, research proposals, thesis chapters and conference papers. Through this work we have had first-hand experience of a wide range of supervisor practices in giving feedback in diverse academic disciplines, and we have focused specific attention on its meanings and impacts for candidates. The occurrences we cite here are real-life examples drawn from this experience.

## CLARIFYING EXPECTATIONS

Supervisors' advice to doctoral candidates may take oral or written form, and the purposes it is perceived to fulfil may be interpreted quite differently by the supervisors who deliver it and the students who receive it. Where there is a misunderstanding of intent, or a mismatch of expectation, not only are opportunities lost but, sometimes, there are seriously negative outcomes for the student's progress. A profitable way to proceed is to make discussion of writing feedback one focus of the initial negotiations around supervision expectations, and then periodically to raise the processes initially agreed on for review, in line with changing expectations as candidature develops.

A useful strategy for doing this is to devise cover sheets for individual writing drafts. This activity can promote discussion of the different kinds of drafts that are appropriate at different stages of writing or of candidature; examples might include a Planning draft, a Review draft and a Near-final draft (see Figure 23.1 overleaf). Early Planning drafts, which involve writing for creating rather than for expressing ideas, integrate the process of writing into the design of the project and require specially tailored response from supervisors. When the assumed expectations of different drafts are made explicit, candidates can be required to indicate on the cover sheet what kind of draft they are submitting, as well as when they expect it back, and even any particular focus for comment that they would appreciate.

In our view, it is particularly valuable for both candidates and supervisors to canvass as many feedback issues as possible, with as much detail as they can jointly identify, early in the candidature in order to create a shared understanding of the structures in which they will be working. These structures can always be modified to suit changing conditions, but without them, false or ill-informed expectations are easily generated. The following are issues we have met, with indications of some of the detail that has been overlooked in negotiations, with counter-productive results.

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**Turnaround time**

Is there a published institutional recommendation, or a departmental norm? What is realistic in light of this supervisor's work patterns? Whose interests will be given priority in setting the agenda?

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**Types of feedback**

What is the preferred form— a discursive report? hard copy annotations in pen or pencil? electronic track changes? discussion in a meeting? email? phone conversations? some combination of these? Whose preferences will dominate in deciding?

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**Subsequent action**

What is the candidate expected to do with the annotated draft or comments? Who says what the candidate will write next? Is the candidate expected to incorporate any learning opportunities from this draft into future writing?

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**Parameters for changes**

Is there a preferred way to 'write' the discipline? To what extent does the candidate need to conform to established patterns, or is variation possible?

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**Ownership**

Who owns which words? Can the candidate import the supervisor's comments into their text? Should the candidate aim to sound like the supervisor, or like themselves? Whose word is final?

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Figure 23.1 **A cover sheet to identify the type of draft being submitted**

(After Schwom & Hirsch 1994)

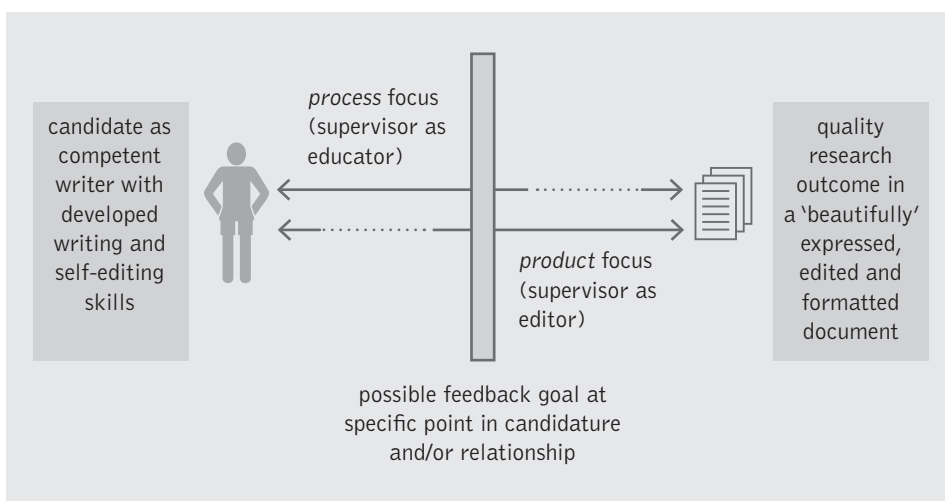
COVER SHEET FOR DOCUMENT DRAFTS		
Topic/Name:		
To:		
From:		
Date submitted:		Date to be returned:
Type of draft (select one only)		
<p><b>PLANNING DRAFT</b></p> <p>This is a draft to clarify what information needs to be presented and what is the best way to present it. It can be:</p> <p>(a) a draft written to discover what the writer thinks, or</p> <p>(b) a set of tables/figures plus dot points of proposed 'take-home messages' from the data.</p> <p>It is primarily a learning document that is not ready for detailed review or close editing.</p>	<p><b>REVIEW DRAFT</b></p> <p>This is a well-organised draft that results from comments on the 'Planning draft' or from previous discussions.</p> <p>It is subject to on-going revisions for learning purposes.</p>	<p><b>NEAR-FINAL DRAFT</b></p> <p>This is a draft that is ready for stylistic revision and close editing for public scrutiny. It should not be reworked in major ways unless it has significant omissions.</p>

In setting out to make such normally implicit expectations visible for candidates, often supervisors do not articulate the motives underpinning their advising practices even to themselves. They may have a variety of motivations and emphases that are not necessarily made explicit, and consequently are often not fulfilled by their advisory comments. At some points, supervisors use their feedback as a pedagogic strategy to promote a *process* of education for their student candidate towards competence as a writer of the discipline; at other points, their focus is on editing the text as a *product* and acting as a gatekeeper of the perceived disciplinary conventions and 'standards' appropriate for an examinable piece of writing at this level. A helpful strategy for supervisors to clarify their goals and communicate them to candidates is to locate their commentary on a pair of continua indicating these positions (see Figure 23.2) so that they and the candidate can see what the purposes are, and how they have been prioritised for the given draft, the stage in candidature and the given candidate. In this way, mismatching of expectations can be minimised, especially in relation to how the candidate is meant to respond to the feedback they have received.

## PROMOTING LEARNING

From our own perspective, these process and product approaches do not have equal merit at most stages of candidature. Clearly when documents are reaching the point of 'going public', supervisors have a special responsibility to help candidates to produce a presentable draft that conforms to disciplinary expectations, or to

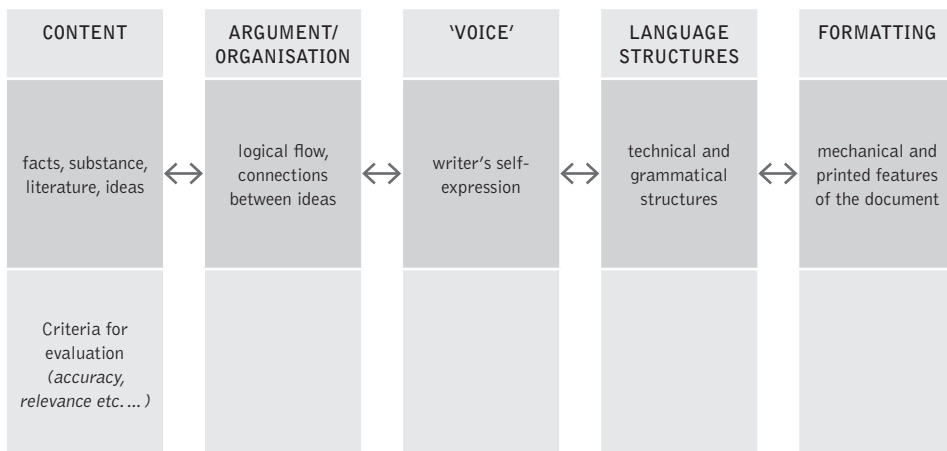
Figure 23.2 **Clarifying process and product goals for supervisors' and/or candidates' revisions of draft writing**



make appropriate arrangements for that to happen, such as by external editing or educational support from within the university. However, it is common practice for supervisors to unreflectively and routinely correct errors and insert their preferred form of words into a candidate’s text, simply to make each draft represent a nicely expressed written document. If, in fact, an important goal for the supervisor is that candidates should learn how to express *themselves* in this preferred way, or how to *self*-edit their drafts, then significant problems can occur. In practice, these skills are very unlikely to develop as a result of this process. Candidates often come to expect that their supervisors will ‘clean up’ their drafts and so do not put their own energies into it. Many do not see their candidature as requiring them to improve their writing and editing skills because there is an unarticulated assumption among their supervision team that the dominant focus is on making the current document ‘read well’.

Our work with both mother-tongue candidates and those with English as an Additional Language (EAL) has led us to appreciate the potential for pedagogy within doctoral supervision, and to see the value of supervisors setting up a pedagogic process for writing development rather than concentrating on editing. For teaching/learning purposes, supervisors can adopt specifically targeted ways to tailor their advice (for a range of useful perspectives see Hyland and Hyland 2006). First they can clarify different possible focuses for feedback on draft writing and brainstorm with their candidates their expectations of the multiple criteria for successful texts in their discipline. Figure 23.3 suggests a model for doing this, while recognising that in real-life drafts these categories are not discrete but overlap and interact in complex ways.

Figure 23.3 **Possible focuses for supervisor feedback or candidate self-editing of draft documents**



A range of questions related to these focus categories can help to clarify and enrich discussions:

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### **Argument and organisation**

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- What is meant by 'logical flow'? How are texts like this one usually organised, and how do headings and subheadings usually signal the structure? How are connections of ideas usually represented?
  - What is the 'story' in this piece of writing? What is its 'take-home message'?
  - How is independence of thought recognised by readers in this discipline? How is 'plagiarism' avoided in discussions of literature? How successful is this draft in these respects?
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### **'Voice'**

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- What kind of 'voice' and mode of address are most appropriate for this discipline and/or paradigm of research? Should the candidate use 'I' with an active verb, or is the passive voice preferred?
  - How much jargon is conventional? To what extent are informal vocabulary and forms of expression acceptable?
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### **Language structures**

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- What types of grammatical or surface-level errors recur in the draft (for example, unwieldy clause constructions, errors of sentence connectors, vocabulary, articles, subject–verb agreements, verb forms and/or tenses)? How serious are they? Which ones occur most often?
  - How might the candidate develop an understanding of their errors, and work best to avoid them in the future? Who will proofread the final draft? Will funding be required?
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### **Formatting**

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- How should the footnotes, references and/or bibliography be formatted? Is 'EndNote' or equivalent software an appropriate tool?
  - What are the university's specifications for formatting a thesis?
  - What help is available for the candidate to produce a polished, formatted document?
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If the relevant processes and responsibilities have been openly discussed at the outset, it will be a natural step for supervisors—ideally in consultation with their students—to select one or two focuses to address in depth, making it clear what they will *not* be commenting on, and with the understanding that the candidate will show development in these areas in subsequent drafts. Where more than one focus of attention has been decided on, a variety of strategies can be employed, such as: coding interventions to represent their focus (C, A, V, L, F); using different-coloured ink for different categories of comment; using the left-hand margin for comments on argument and logical flow, and the text body and right-hand margin for noting grammatical errors or infelicities of expression, and so on.

In these ways, candidates can be encouraged to address identifiable and manageable learning targets incrementally without being overwhelmed by seemingly insurmountable and amorphous problems. Furthermore, these strategies can be

just as readily employed when giving feedback electronically. Microsoft Word 'track changes' is now quite widely used in connection with email, and more sophisticated options such as the commercial version of Acrobat are extremely versatile, allowing for text boxes, talk circles with colour coding and inserted audio comment. Such tools are particularly effective for interposing probing questions about content and argument, as well as requesting clarification of points, adding suggestions for further reading and/or argument development, re-ordering material and so on. They also overcome issues surrounding the legibility of advisers' handwriting, which can be acute for EAL candidates whose home language uses a different script type. However, relying on software can be time-consuming, and can restrict the adviser's access. Furthermore, if a 'track changes' approach is used primarily to insert correct and/or preferred alterations into a candidate's text, an attitude of 'This is how I would say it' is easily generated in the mind of the adviser. The use of such software also runs the risk of the candidate accepting the changes without considering them in detail, or seeing them as a focus for their learning.

Whatever the preferred medium, successful learning outcomes will be greatly enhanced if supervisors envisage a process of drafting and redrafting similar to that proposed by Bartholomae in 1985, where no 'perfect' version of a text is targeted, but together teachers and learners work to complete 'successive approximations' to purely notional conceptions of successful texts. This of course requires that, where possible and appropriate, supervisors see their feedback as contributing to a well-defined redrafting structure, and use their commentary to engage the candidate in learning how to diagnose their own avenues for improvement, and to edit their own drafts effectively. Clerehan and Moodie (1997) provide a pedagogic model for doing this, with the important note that supervisors must build their own progressive withdrawal into the process. Providing advice and feedback on drafts needs to be underpinned by a view of doctoral candidates developing skills, competence and autonomy as disciplinary writers.

## INTERPERSONAL CONSIDERATIONS

If a priority is to encourage doctoral candidates to engage positively in their learning opportunities, then it is crucial to consider the interpersonal dimensions of supervision. All advisory comment on candidates' writing presumes a listener or a reader, and aims to communicate with them. By its very nature feedback is contextual and dialogic, not decontextualised and monologic. Most presupposes action of some kind on the candidate's part. This means that key to the effectiveness of the educational outcomes, especially when feedback is in writing, is the tone and manner of address employed in the comments.

Interestingly, supervisors as well as candidates have significant identity and emotional investments in the language they use. Cultural and gender issues

can influence how a person feels about their language, as well as how strongly they believe that certain linguistic forms represent intrinsic social values. How supervisors and candidates are positioned in relation to these issues is rarely made explicit in supervision discussions. If the atmosphere can be made sufficiently comfortable, supervisors might reflect on their own emotional positions, perhaps recognising that these are not necessarily representative of other academics'. They may raise related questions with their candidates; for example:

- What kind of feedback do you generally find most useful?

Candidates have said:

I love the beautiful scientific phrases he gives me.

She has such good ideas for my methodology.

I have told him, no praise please. I only want to know how to improve.

- Who hates what?

Supervisors have said:

He just massacres the English language.

It's tedious—I can never work out where it's going.

A candidate has said:

I **hate** the way she starts my sentences for me.

- Are there any issues that either of us feels really strongly about?

Supervisors have said:

I will not read another draft unless it has been edited into comprehensible English first.

The Introduction **must** be written first.

A candidate has said:

I can't hand her anything to read—I feel just too exposed.

For educational outcomes it is extremely important that supervisors take into account how their comments will be interpreted by the particular candidate for whom they are intended. If action is recommended, it will rarely be promoted by completely covering a candidate's draft with red or green ink. Derogatory comments (such as *Rubbish!* and *What on earth does this mean?*), sarcasm (*Oh really!*), and hostility (*You should know better than this by now*) are clearly counterproductive and in danger of paralysing the candidate altogether. All too easily the marking pen can become a sword—one candidate told us with a touch of irony she was sure that when her supervisor had run out of red ink he would not hesitate to use student blood! Even prompts (such as *So what?* or *Why are you telling me this?*) seem



more often to represent the unfocused emotion of the supervisor than guidance for the candidate. Interestingly, formulaic or randomly enthusiastic comment such as ticks in the margin, or *Yes!* or *Right!*, while mostly very positive to receive, are not always seen as helpful to a candidate's redrafting.

For a student-reader to know what to act on and how to act, the most useful advice is clear, specific and detailed—and it sustains a respectful relationship with the particular personality and position of the candidate. This can be facilitated by comment that addresses a candidate's arguments and language choices in descriptive rather than judgemental terms (for example: *The meaning is not clear here*, rather than *Faulty expression*), and suggestions that focus on the written text rather than on the student-writer (for example: *It would be useful to add some key literature here*, rather than *You've omitted some key literature*). Exclamation marks and underlining usually impact negatively and are best avoided. It is also useful to consider to what extent it is helpful to mitigate expressions of criticism with individual candidates, and how to issue commands. In some circumstances, *You might want to think about adding X here* will arouse a candidate's motivation; in others, perhaps for international students, it may confuse, and *Add X here* may be more appropriate. It is important to remember that advice and feedback always exist in the specific context of a relationship. They are ongoing dialogues in the broader conversations of supervision, and when understood as such, supervisors' and candidates' expectations are less likely to conflict in destructive ways.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this chapter we have raised several issues of particular interest to us, especially the potential for supervisors' advice on draft writing to contribute to a positive learning experience for candidates. In our view, it is especially important for supervisors to clarify, both for themselves and for their candidates, how they see their role as a reader of a given draft by a particular candidate. At different stages in candidature, a supervisor may want to act as a supportive colleague and mentor in relation to their candidate's writing; at other stages, as an expert in the field with the ability to contribute to the ideas and arguments expressed; or as a judge and gatekeeper of the appropriate content and 'standard' of doctoral writing in their discipline; and at some points, primarily as an editor of expression and the grammatical structures of the language. We have presented here some strategies that we have found useful for clarifying these roles and for identifying the multiple purposes and focuses underpinning supervisors' advice. Above all, we want to emphasise how important it is to consider the interpersonal and affective dimensions of this advice in the broader dialogues of supervision, if candidates are to develop their disciplinary writing skills through doctoral education.

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**QUESTIONS**

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- 1 Think back to your own experience of receiving advice on your written work—perhaps by your own doctoral supervisors, blind journal article reviewers (no ambiguity intended!), or colleagues offering informal support. What kinds of comments did you find most helpful for your redrafting and what, if anything, reduced your confidence to proceed?
- 2 Ask a candidate on whose writing you have been commenting for over a year to allow you to review your feedback over this time. Consider the following:
  - a Are your educating and/or editing goals evident for each draft, and did they change as the candidature developed?
  - b Is it always clear what you intended the candidate to *do* as a result of your comments?
  - c What relationship is suggested by the tone and address of your remarks and are they compatible with your other conversations with the candidate?
  - d Would you express your advice any differently now?
- 3 How would you describe your current approach to providing feedback on writing to a new candidate at an early supervisory meeting? What modifications could you suggest to your present practice, and how appropriate might it be to canvass this topic before accepting a candidate for supervision?

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