

Asking the really hard questions about your writing

Just how good is the piece you've written? It's hard to be objective. But asking yourself some unbiased questions can allow you to take an impartial look at the effectiveness of your work and help you identify mistakes.

In his book *Writing with Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 252, Peter Elbow offers a series of questions which relate to four basic qualities — content, organization, language effectiveness and usage — to help you evaluate almost any kind of writing. Here is a sample of Elbow's criteria and the questions which relate to them:

a. What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?

1. Is the basic idea or insight a good one?
2. Is it supported by logical reasoning or valid argument?
3. Is it supported by evidence and examples?
4. Is it really saying something or is it just a collection of thoughts or observations (however unified and well written) sitting there limply? Did the writer communicate why this whole thing matters?
5. Is there too much abstraction or generalization? So few details, examples, and explanations that it ends up dull, empty, impossible to experience or perhaps even impossible to understand?
6. Is there too little abstraction and too much clutter of detail? Too little standing back for perspective? Too little forest per tree?
7. Does it do what it says or implies it is going to do? Does it satisfy the issues it raises?
8. Is there a point of view or is the writing just disembodied statements from nowhere? And is that point of view unified and consistent?
9. Is the piece fitted to its audience? Has the writer understood their needs and point of view?

b. How well is the writing organized?

10. Is the whole thing unified? Is there one central idea to which everything pertains? Or is it pulling in two or three directions or full of loose ends and digressions?
11. Are the parts arranged in a coherent or logical sequence?
12. Is there a beginning? That is, does it start off in a way that allows you to get comfortably started? (The safest and most common way of doing this is to give an introduction -- for example, a quick explanation of what's to come. But of course that's not the only way. Indeed plunging the reader into the middle of things without warning can function as a good beginning.)
13. Is there middle? A body, some girth or solidity, some sense of meat and potatoes, sufficiency? Or does it turn around and say good-bye almost as soon as it is finished saying hello?
14. Is there an ending? Does it give you a sense of closure or completion? (The safest and most common method of doing this is to end with a conclusion -- not just repeating what went before but figuring out what everything means or adds up to. But again, that's not the only good way to end a piece.)