

Have You Been Thanked for Your Work by a Reader?

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I really like your work!!

At a conference recently, I approached an eminent professor and thanked him for his work (he wrote an important book in my research area). He seemed flattered but also a little baffled. I realized that this kind of thing doesn't happen often.

How are we supposed to acknowledge how much we have enjoyed the work of other academicians? Sending an e-mail mash note seems awkward (and possibly over-keen, like we're greasing them for something: a letter of recommendation, a good word for a job).

In my articles I have footnoted with great gratitude the work that has helped me, but this will only appear years later, and perhaps never be read by the author I want to thank. (I've also e-mailed copies of articles to those whose work I have referenced, with a note).

I'd love to know how people are responding to my work, so I assume others would appreciate it too. The long years of research, the slow process of publication, the passing months as copies of the book limp into university libraries; after all this, it would be nice to know that someone, somewhere, has actually read it.

I have also occasionally received e-mails from students seeking copies of articles of mine, which is flattering. I've also received messages on Twitter from those who have liked what I've written (mostly non-academic writings, though).

I admit to searching Google Scholar occasionally to see when my work has been referenced. But lead times are long, and it's no indication of how many people have actually read (or liked) what I've published. Sometimes it would be nice to get a bit more of an immediate response.

Teaching gives immediate evaluation (good and bad – undergraduates can be a very tough crowd), but at least I see when my students are enjoying the class, or laughing at my jokes.

At conferences responses should be immediate, but they tend to be cloaked in the standard conference phrases, and drowned out by the "it's not so much a question as a comment" blowhards who want to stand up from the audience and give their own presentation.

Like most of us in my discipline, I got into this gig partly because I really enjoy reading about management. So I do feel like a fan of those whose work I really love. But I get the sense hardly anyone admits to this. Is it because we're meant to dispassionately analyze the work of others, not read their books in one sitting, genuinely involved, like it's the latest spy thriller?

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I recall once seeing the nametag of an elderly gentleman in the elevator during a family trip to Muscat, Oman and realizing that he wrote one of the key books I read as an undergraduate. I was stupidly excited, almost like I'd run into George Clooney. (Well, O.K. not that excited.)

But this, kind of brings me to my next point. If I go up to a male academic at a conference and offer to buy him a coffee, there's a distinct risk he'll interpret this as my making a pass at him (now THAT is awkward). Is there an opener that avoids that interpretation without being rude? "Hello, you don't know me, I don't find you remotely attractive, but I like your book: can I buy you a coffee?"

This risk of misunderstanding also shows why cross-gender mentoring in the academy (as in other fields) is particularly laden: I can go up to a female colleague and make the coffee offer without seeming forward or inappropriate.

But even without the gender awkwardness, approaching a total stranger can seem a bit odd. I'd love any suggestions as to how to thank people for their work in a way that is neither desperate nor creepy. Are there ways to thank those whose work helps us along in our research, writing and teaching? Have you been thanked for your work by a reader?