

Communicating with students about feedback

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How to use your assignment feedback

Engaging with feedback is essential for your development as a maturing student, but research shows that most students don't use feedback to improve their learning. Reasons for this include:

- You may feel feedback is pointless because you will never be doing an exercise like this again.
- You may feel angry and upset about not doing as well as you would have liked. Feedback can feel demotivating.
- If you have done well, it may seem like there is no reason to engage with feedback because you've 'got it right'.

A factor that gets in the way of dealing responsibly with feedback is anxiety around grades. This is usually totally misplaced. The difference between getting a 2.2 and a 2.1 for your assignment is almost certainly numerically irrelevant: it won't make any difference to your degree. For example, say you scored 55% and you'd hoped for 65%. The difference is 10% for an assignment that counts 20% of your mark for this course. That's 2%. This course counts 38% towards your final BSc mark. So the difference between getting a 2.2 and a 2.1 on this assignment is 0.76%. It's SO not worth getting stressed about.

One thing is certain: ignoring feedback won't help you to improve.

As a marker, there are two main aims when writing feedback.

1. **To give clear indications on how you could do better.** Quite a lot of your feedback will be about transferable skills (e.g. aligning your assignment with the brief, improving writing style, enhancing study skills like careful proofreading). They aren't particular to this assignment so they should help you identify weakness that you can improve for all your future assignments. However, the feature article is also an example of an assignment that you CAN use by improving it and submitting it for publication. Therefore, the feedback may be overly detailed because we are trying to show what you need to do to enhance your chances of successful publication. This is independent of the mark you received, and totally dependent on how much effort you are prepared to put in.
2. **To justify the grade.** We have a responsibility to explain where marks have been lost and gained. We are assessing the assignment against the brief and Imperial College's

grading criteria to decide whether it is adequate (3rd), good (2.2), very good (2.1) or excellent (1st). If your feedback seems negative it is because we are explaining why you have lost marks. Comments will usually point out what you *could have or should have* done, so these should be seen as opportunities for how to improve rather than just a list of things you did wrong.

How should you use your feedback?

1. Approach your feedback unemotionally. If you feel upset at first, put it aside for a few hours or days, and come back to it when you are ready to use it to enhance your learning. Remind yourself that it is your assignment that is being critiqued, not you as a person.
2. Make a list of those factors that had an effect on your process of writing the assignment. These are nothing to do with the assignment itself and everything to do with the conditions that may have affected performance. If you did well, these might include that you allowed sufficient time to write the assignment and came back to it to polish it, or you had found a particularly good place to sit and work on your assignment that encouraged you to focus. If you didn't do so well, write down what stopped you from submitting an assignment that was not to the best of your abilities. Were there other things on your mind? Did you leave it a bit late to get started? Did you get tired of your assignment before you had a chance to go over it properly? Which of these areas can you address to help you do better next time?
3. Go through your feedback and make a list of those things that went well and areas in which you could improve. Take especial note of those that will be useful for future assignments so that you don't repeat mistakes. Do you need to pay better attention to referencing? Do you need to articulate arguments more clearly?
4. Is there anything in your feedback you don't understand? Ask for clarification.

Things it may help you to know

This is a difficult assignment. The profile of marks is not atypical this year. Most people do better on the project and this pulls marks up. The overall profile of marks on the course compared to other BScs shows that you are not disadvantaged by taking the course. With a few exceptions, most people's grades turn out to be consistent with performance across other areas of their degree(s).

The grading is scrutinised by the external examiner. If you feel your work has been marked unfairly, I will refer it to the external at the end of the course who will look at it unbiasedly and make a judgement about whether your grade should be changed.

As educationalists, we are aware that we can improve the way we give feedback. If you have suggestions on how assignment feedback can be improved, please do let me know so that I too can learn from your feedback on my feedback!

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