

Engaging students with feedback they can use

Providing feedback to students on their assessed work can be challenging. This guide provides suggestions for making your feedback more engaging and effective.

A. What is the purpose of your feedback?

Effective feedback can take a lot of time and effort to produce so you want it to have the desired effect on its recipient. To answer this question consider:

- Is the purpose of it to help a student **develop a draft assignment** so that they can learn by applying your feedback directly to that piece of work for final summative assessment? Is part of your goal to motivate them to sustain (or increase) effort on this task? e.g. “I can see that you have put a lot of effort into reading for this project. I hope that my suggestions are useful to you in developing your draft for the final submission. If you have any questions, please let me know. I look forward to reading the finalised version.”
- Or is the idea that they should **feed this advice forward** to the next similar assessment? e.g. “Next time you do an oral presentation, avoid putting so much detail on your slides. Crowded text is difficult for the audience to read. Also, it seemed to lead you to reading directly from the slides, rather than making eye contact to engage with the audience.”
- Is it **general feedback about ways of learning**, studying, thinking, writing or problem-solving in your discipline? e.g. “In Physics it is better to attempt a calculation even if you’re not sure it’s the correct approach. Don’t worry about making mistakes – that’s how we learn. It enables your teachers to see where they can help you and other students.” “Don’t spend hours trying to get a perfect answer. It’s more important to attempt the whole problem sheet within the suggested timeframe.”
- Is your feedback explaining **why the assessment work got this mark/grade**, with reference to the assessment criteria and marking scheme?

B. Components of useful feedback

1. **Prioritise several key aspects** – feedback that focuses on approximately **three key aspects** is likely to be useful to students, without being overwhelming and off-putting. These should be explicitly linked to the assessment criteria. e.g. application of concepts, critical analysis, synthesis of material.
2. **Reinforcement** – what did the student do well and should keep doing? If you never point this out they may not think it’s important and stop putting effort into it.

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3. **Constructive criticism** – comment on specific aspects for improvement and how to go about this. It's helpful if you can highlight specific examples in their work that are strong and weaker. The aim is to help the student to close the gap between their current level and the expected standard.

4. **Questions** – particularly on draft / formative work, include questions that engage students and get them to reflect and self-assess, instead of giving them the answers. You don't need to do all of the work. e.g. "You have given a strong rationale for your design. Now consider, what are the limitations of this approach?"

C. Clear and supportive use of language

Our students come with diverse backgrounds and life experiences, including cultural and linguistic differences, so the way we express feedback is important. Here are some suggestions:

- Comment on the **work not the person**. This will help the student understand that it is the assignment that is being judged, not them. e.g. "This assignment does not yet include enough evidence. You need to integrate more references to support your points." Rather than "You have not read enough" (which we can't know).
- Focus on the **learning process, not just the assessment outcome**. This might include helping students know when they have spent long enough on an aspect of work. e.g. "You've spent long enough on X, now you need to move on to Y..."
- Do not make your feedback **overly personal**. While students tend to appreciate personalised feedback (i.e. specific to their assignment), phrases such as "I'm disappointed that..." can be taken as being too personal or even unprofessional and trigger unproductive emotional reactions.

- **Separate the praise and the criticism**. Using both praise and critique in the same statement can be problematic. Let's look at this example: "You did a good job choosing the right method for data analysis, however, the analysis itself does not go into necessary depth."

The sentence contains two important pieces of information – that the student chose the methods well and that the analysis lacks depth. This is what you want them to understand from this feedback. However, research (Zohar & Smith, 2009) shows that the receiver might dismiss one piece of information and focus on the other – some students will focus on the positive and ignore the negative, some students will focus on the negative and ignore the positive. Therefore, it is best to separate strengths and areas for development when delivering your feedback: "The methods were chosen well and were appropriate to the research question. What you need to improve is the analysis as it currently lacks a level of depth. You can do this through..."

- Make sure there is a **common understanding of the key skills you are assessing**. The way we interpret key skills such as 'critique' or 'analysis' is likely to differ across different disciplines. These are often linked to learning outcomes and marking criteria. Help students to understand what your expectations around those are by providing more information about what you expect in your feedback and/or by pointing to the marking criteria/ assessment brief.
- Make it clear **what was missed and how improvement can be made**. We can tend to avoid critical feedback or wrap it in praise to manage students' emotional responses – a method known as the feedback sandwich. This means that praise is sometimes used in an artificial way that students can find insincere. Critique is an important part of development and not something we should be shielding our students from. Rather we should help them process it and apply it to their future work/practice.

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D. Engaging students with feedback (developed from Carless and Boud, 2018)

1. Helping students to appreciate feedback

Are your students familiar with the concept of feedback? Do you have a common understanding of what this means in the context of your discipline? Do your students know what the purpose of feedback at university is?

While most students will be familiar with the term 'feedback', their experiences of how this translates into practice might differ. Some of them may have only received feedback in the form of the grade, or have a pre-conceived notion that feedback is written on a piece of paper by the teacher. It is important to establish a common understanding of what feedback means in your classroom/ discipline.

This can be done through:

- Explicit discussion of feedback practices to manage expectations, done at the start of the year/ module or at the stage of assessment briefing.
- Including guidance on how to use your feedback as part of your feedback. e.g. "Please use my feedback as a checklist when you produce your next lab report so that you can learn from and not repeat previous mistakes."

Consider challenging students' pre-conceptions by discussing the following points:

- Feedback can come from peers and can be generated through reflection and comparison of work.
- Feedback comes in written and spoken form. Having discussions in the classroom that help you develop skills and thinking are also feedback.
- Feedback is important for future development - its primary role is not to tell you why you lost marks.

- Focusing on using feedback to improve your learning is more important than focusing on the grade.

2. Helping students to process emotional impact

Feedback will almost always have an emotional impact on the recipient. Consider the last time you got feedback – did it make you feel relieved, proud, upset or frustrated? Emotion is a necessary feature of learning and is especially relevant to accepting feedback and finding the motivation to make use of it. Students need to learn to manage their inevitable emotional reaction. To help them with this you could:

- Anticipate the emotional reaction and address how to make sense of it – e.g. "Feedback, especially on areas for improvement, can initially make you feel pretty negative. Try to see it not as a judgement about your capability but as advice on how to learn what you came to university to learn."
- Suggest they talk to other students about how feedback makes them feel and strategies they use to bounce back. This is likely to lead to relief when they realise they are not the only one affected in this way.
- Share your experience of receiving and responding to critical feedback. Students may be surprised that you have found aspects of learning difficult.

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3. Facilitating students' ability to make judgments and take action

In order for students to take action on feedback they need to make appropriate judgments about what the feedback is saying and about the current standard of their work. You can facilitate this in the following ways:

- Ensure that the language of feedback is clear and it conveys the actions that you expect a student to take. You can facilitate this by asking students to reflect on feedback and articulate an action plan in relation to your recommendations.
- Make sure that students understand marking criteria and the standard of work required for a pass, middle and top grade boundaries. You can do that through discussing exemplars.
- Design assessment so that it allows students to use feedback from one assignment to inform the next one.

Finalising feedback:

A useful checking mechanism is to ask yourself "What do I expect the student to feel, think and do in response to this feedback comment?"

Also remember, yours is not the only feedback they will get, it is one of many sources that they need to integrate and act on to become a more effective student and future professional.

References

- Carless, D., and Boud, D. (2018). The Development of Student Feedback Literacy: Enabling Uptake of Feedback. **Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education** 43 (8): 1315–1325. doi:10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354.
- Zsohar, H., & Smith, J. A. (2009). The power of and and but in constructive feedback on clinical performance. **Nurse educator**, 34(6), 241-243.

Also see Imperial College's [Teaching Toolkit](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/staff/educational-development/teaching-toolkit/): <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/staff/educational-development/teaching-toolkit/>