



Effective Feedback Series

PART 1: The Importance of Feedback for Student Learning

Decades of research in higher education has proven that the most effective learning activities share some common characteristics, one of which is timely feedback focused on learning outcomes (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, Kuh, 2008, Ambrose et al., 2010). For example, feedback could take the form of a completed rubric grid, or written comments on a problem set or draft paper. A primary purpose of effective feedback is to help students learn, so it's important that students get feedback as part of an ongoing formative process in which they have the opportunity to implement changes (Shute, 2008). Ultimately, effective feedback can lead to more self-directed and autonomous learners, thinkers, and engaged members of society.

How can I write feedback more effectively and efficiently?

Research has shown that the most effective feedback is focused, forward-looking, and timely (e.g., Ambrose, et al. 2010; Fink, 2003; Hyland, 2013; Shute, 2007; Wiggins, 2012). Feedback should be formative, communicating how students are doing in relation to stated learning goals, and what specific steps they should take to improve (Sadler, 1989; Shute, 2008). They should then be expected to demonstrate how they incorporated the feedback into subsequent assignments. In order to do this, students should receive feedback both frequently and in a timely manner (Hyland, 2013; Wiggins, 2012), so that they can make the best use of it. Below are tips on how to make your feedback focused, formative, and timely.

Focused	
Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Incorporate rubrics into your feedback methods	Use rubrics which explicitly state the criteria against which students' work is to be evaluated, and make sure these criteria are linked to learning outcomes. Focused rubrics can clarify expectations for assessment among students and instructors. Nicol (2013) recommends explicitly positioning feedback through learning outcomes, as this will help illustrate the gap between a student's performance and the intended outcomes, and therefore help that student to understand the feedback. There are some great example rubrics here .
Prioritize information that would be most useful to students at the time it is received.	In most cases, 2-3 recommendations for improvement is appropriate. Too much feedback has been shown to overwhelm students, or prompt them to focus on easy-to-implement changes rather than structural elements (Lunsford, 1997; Lamburg, 1980; Davis, 2009). This strategy is more efficient <i>and</i> provides your students more effective feedback.
Tie comments to specific aspects of the assignment.	Relate comments to specific places in the assignment, such as a certain paragraph in a paper or step in a math problem. Include some examples of places the student did well, as students often can't recognize the progress they're making toward learning outcomes. Try to avoid broad evaluative comments like "This isn't clear," or "Awkward."
"Say back" what you thought the student was trying to say.	If it is appropriate to the assignment, "Say back" what you thought the student's main point was. This can help students see your feedback as descriptive and nonjudgmental, rather than authoritarian. It can also highlight the difference between their intention and the results of their work (Nicol, 2013).



Focus less on grammar and more on content and learning outcomes.	Don't award more than 20% credit for grammar and mechanics, and focus instead on aspects of the assignment that most directly relate to learning outcomes. This will make providing feedback more time effective for you, and more meaningful for your students (Haswell, 1983). Some students may exhibit "written accents" (i.e. missing articles, incorrect verb tenses, incorrect prepositions) and in the interest of aligning your feedback with learning outcomes, it's important not to devote too much attention to these features of the writing.
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Forward-Looking	
Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Practice "feed-forward" strategies.	Provide "feed-forward" (Knight, 2006) rather than "feed-back." Suggest goals or specific strategies that are applicable to future work the student will undertake. Structure assignments so subsequent work specifically asks students to incorporate feedback, and state how they incorporated it.
Address patterns you see in assignments, rather than line editing.	Line editing encourages students to passively copy your corrections, rather than making corrections on their own (Haswell, 1983). Commenting on patterns gives students a more holistic view of their performance and makes the feedback more transferrable to future work. And, it makes writing feedback more efficient.

Timely	
Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Consider when feedback will be most helpful for students.	Make sure feedback is provided in a timely manner and when it can be used by the student (Wiggins, 2012). This might simply mean providing it well in advance of the next assignment.
Provide general feedback in class	If timely return of all assignments is not possible, consider providing general feedback on the project in class. This will ensure your students receive the feedback when it's useful, and it's also a more efficient way for you to provide it.
Provide feedback frequently.	Make sure feedback is frequent (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). If you're able to design an assignment structure that features frequent feedback building to the next assignment, it will allow students to incorporate that feedback and practice the key skills of the course. Also, giving students the chance to learn a skill in an iterative process will have more lasting effects (Ambrose, 2010). While they should never replace instructor feedback entirely, peer- and self-feedback can increase the timeliness and frequency of feedback, making the process more efficient for an instructor.

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Effective Feedback Series
PART 2: Strategies for Facilitating Peer Feedback

While instructor feedback is important, peer feedback can sometimes be more helpful for students in that students can relate to each other’s perspectives and speak on each other’s level in a way instructors can’t (Cho & MacArthur, 2010). However, peer response is primarily recommended in conjunction with self and/or instructor feedback (Dochy et al., 1999). Peer feedback is most effective when there is a specific structure to it, when writers receive feedback from multiple peers (Cho & Schunn, 2007), and when they have adequate time to implement it (Ambrose et al., 2010). Research has also demonstrated that simply engaging in the process of providing feedback to peers can improve a student’s own writing, particularly for English Language Learners (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Provide a rubric that students can use to guide their feedback.	To prepare students to comment on one another’s work, provide a rubric or feedback sheet. Practice providing feedback together in class to ensure students know what constitutes constructive feedback. You can access a sample structure for peer feedback here.
Acknowledge that students may hold negative perspectives of peer review.	Research has demonstrated that students often feel negatively about engaging in peer review (Mulder, Pearce, & Baik, 2014; Kaufmann & Schunn, 2011; Brammer & Rees; 2007). To mitigate this, you can monitor students’ feedback to one another and award participation credit for it. This will encourage accountability.
Be cautious in awarding grades based on peer feedback.	Dancer & Dancer (1992) found that peers are prone to rate one another based on uniformity, race, and friendship if not properly trained. Students also tend to feel more negatively toward peer review when students are put in charge of each other’s grades (Kaufmann & Schunn, 2011; Kaufmann; Schunn, & Charney, 2006). In addition, agreement between peer and instructor feedback has varied a great deal among studies (Oldfield & Macalpine, 1995; Orsmond et al., 1996).

To review, formative feedback is critical to student learning and in order to be effective it should be focused on learning outcomes, forward looking to subsequent assignments, and provided when it’s most useful in a timely manner. Peer feedback can supplement instructor feedback, but should always be clearly structured and practiced in conjunction with instructor feedback. Finally, when students assess themselves they can build increased engagement with course material, transfer skills from one learning context to another, and develop the skills necessary to be self-directed, lifelong learners.

Sample Peer Response Activity (adapted from Ambrose et al., 2010)

Please read the paper through the first time without making any markings on it in order to familiarize yourself with the paper.

- I. During the second read, please do the following:
 - Underline the main argument of the paper.
 - Put a checkmark in the left column next to pieces of evidence that support the argument.
 - Circle the conclusion.
- II. Once you have done this, read the paper for the third and final time, and respond briefly to the following questions:
 - Does the first paragraph present the writer’s argument and the approach the writer is taking in presenting that argument? If not, which piece is missing, unclear, understated, and so forth?



- Does the argument progress clearly from one paragraph to the next (for example, is the sequencing/organization logical)? Does each paragraph add to the argument (that is, link the evidence to the main purpose of the paper)? If so, please provide an example to illustrate how they do so. If not, where does the structure break down, and/or which paragraph is problematic and why?
- Does the writer support the argument with evidence? Please indicate where there is a paragraph strong with evidence, weak on evidence, evidence not supporting the argument, and so on.
- Does the conclusion draw together the strands of the argument? If not, what is missing?
- What is the best part of the paper?
- Which area(s) of the paper needs most improvement (e.g., the argument, the organization, sentence structure or word choice, evidence)? Be specific so that the writer knows where to focus his or her energy.

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PART 3: Using Reflective Activities with Students as Self-Assessment

When students give themselves feedback, or assess their own work, their performance on tests improves (Hassmen et al., 1996), and when they reflect multiple times on their work, they become more aware of its quality in relation to learning outcomes (Gentle, 1994). The metacognitive task of self-reflection has also been shown to improve the likelihood of students transferring knowledge from one learning context to another (Wardle, 2007).

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Use an “exam wrapper” after graded exams.	An “exam wrapper” is an assignment distributed along with graded exams, that asks students to reflect on how they prepared for the exam, their performance, and how they might prepare for the next exam. When it’s time to start studying for the next exam, re-distribute students’ exam wrappers for their reference.
Assign a “cover letter” with major projects.	Assign a “cover letter” along with an assignment, in which students list the assignment’s main points, areas they felt were strong and weak, and specific questions they have for the instructor as a reader. In order to help students formulate appropriate and high-level questions, make sure learning outcomes are explicit and consider giving them time in groups to compose questions together.
Invite students to participate in creating class rubrics.	Invite students to participate in creating the rubric and standards for evaluation, to involve them in assessing their own learning (Adams & King, 1995, Inoue, 2004). Students can help formulate a rubric in class, or submit their suggestions through an online forum.

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