



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.

Citation

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