

THE FORMULATION OF WRITTEN FEEDBACK COMMENTS

What are the features of good written teacher comments? The following is a set of recommendations for good practice. These are based on investigations of students' perceptions of what constitutes helpful feedback and on researchers' suggestions about how to translate these ideas into practice.

Research on feedback comments

Written feedback should be:

- **Understandable:** Expressed in a language that students will understand
- **Selective:** Commenting on two or three things that the student can do something about.
- **Specific:** Pointing to examples in the student's submission where the feedback applies
- **Timely:** Provided in time to inform the next piece of work
- **Contextualized:** Framed with reference to the learning outcomes and/or assessment criteria
- **Non-judgemental:** Descriptive rather than evaluative, focused on learning goals not just performance goals.
- **Balanced:** Pointing out the positive as well as areas in need of improvement.
- **Forward Looking:** Suggesting how students might improve subsequent assignments
- **Transferable:** Focused on processes, skills and self-regulatory abilities

Understandable, selective and specific

Overall, the research on feedback shows that students do value written comments on their work (e.g. Weaver, 2006). However, they also express concern when these comments are illegible, ambiguous (e.g. 'poor effort, could do better'), too abstract (e.g. 'lack of critical thinking'), too general or vague (e.g. 'you've got the important stuff') and too cryptic (e.g. 'why?'). Sometimes this is a question of language, at other times of detail. Much feedback uses a disciplinary discourse that is difficult for students, especially beginning students, to decode. The teacher can remedy this by trying to write comments in plain language and by providing an explanation where disciplinary or technical terms are used. It is also important to provide enough detail so that students understand what the guidance means. This has led to the suggestion that comments should be formulated as small lessons, and that these should be limited to two or three well-developed points for extended written assignments (Lunsford, 1997). It can help students if teachers also point to examples in the submission where the feedback applies rather than provide comments with no referent. For instance, highlight a positive feature, explain its merit, and suggest that the student do more of that (e.g. a good example of logical transitions or of a disciplinary argument).

Timely

Numerous studies show that students receive feedback too late to be helpful, due to their receiving it after the next assignment. Students are also quite vocal about this problem. At one level dealing with this issue is straightforward and might simply involve specifying turnaround times for grading and feedback on assignments: some institutions make a commitment to three week turnaround. However, the timeliness dimension is also related to opportunities to use feedback and the requirement that students get feedback when they experience difficulty rather than wait too long. Multi-stage assignments can address some of these problems. If the assignment allows drafting with feedback provided on the draft, students are more likely to see the feedback as timely and make good use of it. Alternatively, teachers might provide feedback on aspects of the work in progress (e.g. essay plans, introductions, a sample of the argument and supporting evidence) with the task sequenced with each stage building to a more complex final assignment. Providing feedback on drafts need not necessarily increase teacher time: teachers can limit the feedback that they provide when they grade the completed assignment or students might give each other feedback at intermediate stages. A further concern is that on a graded assignment it is important that the student actually does the work and that the teacher does not rewrite the assignment as part of the feedback. This requires careful consideration of the kinds of feedback comments teachers provide,

Contextualized

Research suggests that feedback is more effective when it is related to the instructional context, that is, to the learning outcomes and the assessment criteria. Sadler (1989) defines feedback as information about the gap between what the student did (actual performance) and what was expected (the assignment outcomes), information that is intended to help the student close that gap. Hence, alignment of feedback to the instructional context is essential for learning. It also increases the likelihood that students will actually understand the feedback. Many teachers use feedback forms with assessment rubrics wherein feedback is written under or alongside the stated objectives or assessment criteria. A related recommendation deriving from Sadler's definition is that students spend time at the beginning of an assignment actively unpacking what is required: for example, by translating criteria into their own words or by comparing samples of good and poor assignments submitted by classmates in earlier years so as to identify which is better and why. By enhancing their understanding of the requirements and criteria students are more likely to understand and use the feedback advice they receive. Glaser and Chi (1988) have also shown that the time experts spend constructing the initial representations of complex tasks partly accounts for their better performance when compared to novices.

Non-judgemental and balanced

Teachers need to consider the motivational as well as the cognitive aspects of feedback. Feedback comments can be discouraging, lead to defensiveness or reduce confidence (e.g. 'no, that's all wrong, you really have not understood the literature'). Kluger and DeNisi (1996) found that 30% of comments were of this type. Much motivational research has focused on whether feedback comments direct students' attention towards learning or performance goals, that is, towards the mindset that mistakes are part of learning and that effort can enhance achievement or to the mindset that achievement depends on ability, which is more fixed (Dweck, 1999; Dweck, 2006). Research in this area also suggests that teachers should try to ensure that students perceive comments as descriptive rather than evaluative or authoritarian. One approach is for the teacher to reflect back to the students the effects of the writing, in other words, how the teacher has

interpreted what is written (e.g. 'here's what I see as your main point....'). This helps students see the difference between their intention and the effects that are produced. Some experts argue that faculty should start and end commenting on positive aspects of what the student has done, with a middle section focusing on those aspects in need of improvement. However, a word of caution is needed here: if the student perceives that praise is gratuitous or that it does not align with the grade awarded then this can be confusing or have a negative effect on motivation. Feedback could also emphasise learning goals by acknowledging the role that mistakes and effort play in learning and by avoiding normative comparisons with other students. Some teachers have addressed such issues by providing encouragement in their comments (e.g. 'analysing a case is complex and can be very demanding but all students who put in the time and effort get there eventually'). This emphasises success and lets students know that they have the capacity to succeed. Acknowledging the role that mistakes play in learning when giving feedback is another useful tactic (e.g. 'this is a common misconception: when you identify the reason for this misconception you will have a good grasp of this topic').

Forward-looking and transferable

The most consistent request from students is that the feedback tells them about their strengths and weaknesses and specifically about what they need to do to make improvements in subsequent assignments. Knight (2006) calls the latter 'feedforward' rather than feedback. Examples might include suggesting goals to focus on in future assignments or specific strategies that might apply. Some feedback sheets include an 'action-point' box where the instructor can outline the specific actions that would lead to greatest improvement in the next assignment. Walker (2006) sees the focus as being on skills development rather than on specific content: developing the skills to solve problems or write essays in the discipline is more effective in the long run than solving a single problem or writing a specific essay. Another perspective is that comments should focus not on gaps in knowledge and understanding but on the students' representations of the knowledge in their discipline. Comments should help students find alternative ways of looking at the problem rather than simply highlight misunderstandings. The intention here is to promote new ways of thinking about concepts, their relationships and their applications. Hattie and Timperley (2007) identified four orientations to the provision of feedback comments: teachers could provide comments on the task, stating where the assignment is correct or incorrect or requires more input; they might be about the writing process (e.g. 'this assignment could be better if you planned out the structure and sequence of arguments'); they might focus comments on the student's ability to self-regulate, for example, feedback on students' own assessments of their work would fall into this category (see below); or the comments might be personal (e.g. 'that's a sophisticated response, well done'). Hattie and Timperley maintain that focusing comments on the process and on self-regulatory activities is most effective, if the goal is to help students transfer learning to new contexts.

I have discussed encouraging students to use feedback earlier in relation to multistage assignments. However, here is an additional example, based on a variation of a strategy used by a colleague. Students are required to write an essay, let's say on ethics. The instructor provides written feedback, usually a few paragraphs, on the subject content, the ideas, arguments and evidence. Specifically, the feedback points to new ways of looking at the issues and refers briefly to other theorists. The students are then allowed to produce a second assignment in the same content area but using a different format (e.g. a report to the government on this ethics issue). Those who choose this option are told that to get a good grade in the second assignment they must go well beyond the ideas in the first assignment and demonstrate good use of the feedback.

This is intended to encourage students to use the feedback, read more widely and to inter-relate and apply ideas from other sources in the report. Why is this design of interest? First, the students have a strong incentive to act on the feedback. Secondly, both the student and the teacher see the direct benefits of feedback in future action. Importantly, students do not repeat the same assignment so they will not perceive this as duplication nor will their teachers. This is a good example of the forward use of written comments.

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