

How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students by Susan M. Brookhart

Feedback: An Overview

“Feedback says to the student, ‘Somebody cared enough about my work to read it and think about it!’ It is just-in-time, just-for-me information delivered when and where it can do the most good.” p. 1

“Giving good feedback is one of the skills teachers need to master as part of good **formative assessment**. Other formative assessment skills include having clear learning targets, crafting clear lessons and assignments that communicate those targets to students, and – usually after giving good feedback – helping students learn how to formulate new goals for themselves and action plans that will lead to achievement of those goals.” p. 2

“If the classroom culture values finding and using suggestions for improvement, students will be able to use feedback, plan and execute steps for improvement, and in the long run reach further than they could if they were stuck with assignments on which they could already get an A without any new learning. **It is not fair to students to present them with feedback and no opportunities to use it. It is not fair to students to present them with what seems like constructive criticism and then use it against them in a grade or final evaluation.**” p. 2

“The message sent is filtered through the student’s perception (influenced by prior knowledge, experiences, and motivation) as it becomes the message received.” p. 3

“Teachers can’t ‘make’ students focus on or learn something. Teacher feedback is input that, together with students’ own integral input, will help the students decide where they are in regard to the learning goals they need or want to meet and what they will tackle next.” p. 3

“Kluger and DeNisi (1996) did a meta-analysis (a quantitative summary of results) of studies of feedback. Their overall finding was that the average effect of feedback intervention on performance was .41. However, more than 38 percent of the effect sizes from the various studies what went into this .41 average were negative – that is, showed that control groups outperformed feedback groups. **The effects of feedback depend on the nature of the feedback.**” p. 4

“Feedback can be the information that drives the process, or it can be a stumbling block that derails the process.” p. 4

“Hattie and Timperley (2007) propose a **model of feedback that distinguishes four levels**: (1) feedback about the task (such as feedback about whether answers were right or wrong or directions to get more information), (2) feedback about the processing of the task (such as feedback about strategies used or strategies that could be used), (3) feedback about self-regulation (such as feedback about student self-evaluation or self-confidence), and (4) feedback about the student as a person (such as pronouncements that a student is ‘good’ or ‘smart’).” p. 4

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“The level at which the feedback is focused influences its effectiveness. **Feedback about the qualities of the work and feedback about the process or strategies used to do the work are the most helpful.**” p. 4

“Page found that student achievement was higher for a group receiving prespecified comments instead of letter grades and higher still for students receiving free comments (written by the teacher). **Writing comments was more effective for learning than giving grades.**” p. 7

Types of Feedback and Their Purposes

“Feedback strategies can vary in several dimensions: timing, amount, mode, and audience.” p. 10

“Feedback needs to come while students are still mindful of the topic, assignment, or performance in question. It needs to come while they still think of the learning goal as a learning goal – that is, something they are still striving for, not something they already did.” p. 11

“A tip that works for some teachers is to make a special effort to catch up with feedback responsibilities. **You can’t be prompt with today’s work if you still have last week’s on your desk.**” p. 11

“Judging the right amount of feedback to give – how much, on how many points – requires deep knowledge and consideration of the following:

- The topic in general and your learning target or targets in particular
- Typical developmental learning progressions for those topics or targets
- Your individual students” p. 12

“Your **feedback should give students a clear understanding of what to do next on a point or points that they can see they need to work on.** This requires you to know your students; for some students, simply getting clarity on improvement on one point would be sufficient, whereas others can handle more” p. 12

Questions from p. 12

- “On which aspects of the learning target has the students done acceptable work?”
- “Which aspects of the learning target would the student benefit from improving upon next?”
- “Are any particular assignments coming up that would make it wiser to emphasize one point over another?”
- “Is there any particular point that you and the student have a history about?”

“**Feedback can be delivered in many modalities.** Some kinds of assignments lend themselves better to **written** feedback (for example, observing and commenting as students do math problems as seatwork); and some, to **demonstrations** (for example, helping a kindergarten student

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hold a pencil correctly). Some of the best feedback can result from **conversations with the student**. For example, rather than telling the student all the things you notice about his or her work, you might start by asking questions such as these: ‘What are you noticing about this?’ ‘Does anything surprise you?’” p. 15

“Choosing the content of your feedback involves choices about focus, comparison, function, and valence.” p. 19

Focus:

“**Feedback about the task includes information about errors** – whether something is correct or incorrect. Feedback about the task also includes information about the **depth or quality of the work, often against criteria** that are either explicit (for example, criteria from a coring rubric) or implicit in the assignment (for example, a written assignment should be well written). Feedback about the task may include **a need for more information** (for example, ‘You should include more information about the First Continental Congress in this report’). Feedback about the task can also include **information about neatness or format**.” p. 20

“Feedback about the task has been found to be more powerful when it corrects misconceptions than when it alerts students to lack of information (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). If a student doesn’t know something, further instruction is more powerful than feedback.” p. 20

“**Feedback about process gives students information about how they approached the task, information about the relationship between what they did and the quality of their performance, and information about possible alternative strategies that would also be useful**.” p. 20

“**Effective learners** create internal routines that include figuring out when they need more information, or an assessment or suggestions, and strategies for getting this feedback. **Less effective learners** depend more on external factors, such as whether the teacher decides to give any feedback on this or that assignment, for their information.” p. 21

“Feedback about self-regulation is effective to the degree that it enhances self-efficacy.” p. 21

“Feedback about the person can contribute to students believing that **intelligence is fixed**. This implies that achievement is something beyond the student’s control. The belief that intelligence is fixed removes the connection between student effort and achievement (**Dweck, 2007**).” p. 21

“Feedback about the processes students use to do their work fosters the belief that **achievement is related to specific strategies, specific kinds of effort that are under the student’s control, and not to innate ability**.” p. 21

“Trying to classify what kinds of facts or concepts were particularly problematic can help students ‘study smarter, not harder’ by focusing on the trouble spots.” p. 21

Comparison:

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“Comparing student work to a learning target is **criteria-referencing**, and it is the primary kind of comparison to use for good feedback. This feedback helps the student decide what the next goal should be.” p. 23

“Self-referenced feedback is helpful for describing the processes or methods students use.” p. 23

“**Norm-referenced** feedback creates winners and losers and plays into that fatalistic mind-set that says student ability, not strategic work, is what’s important.” p. 23

“Norm-referencing is so dangerous to the **motivation of unsuccessful learners** – or those who feel that way, whether they are or not – that I don’t recommend it.” p. 23

Function:

“**Students are less likely to pay attention to descriptive feedback if it is accompanied by judgements, such as a grade or an evaluative comment.**” p. 24

Things to do to maximize chance that students will interpret feedback as descriptive. p. 24

1. “Give students lots of opportunities to practice and receive feedback without a grade being involved.”
2. “Make your feedback observational. Describe what you see. How close is it to the learning target? What do you think would help?”

Valence:

“Feedback should be positive. Being positive means describing how the strengths in a student’s work match the criteria for good work and how those strengths show what the student is learning. Being positive means pointing out where improvement is needed and suggesting things the student could do about it.” p. 26

“**Tunstall and Gipps** talk about descriptive feedback as being composed of ‘achievement feedback’ and ‘improvement feedback.’ Achievement feedback describes or affirms for a student what was done well and why. Improvement feedback describes for a student what more might be done and what strategies might lead to improvement of the work.” p. 26

“Feedback is good if it gets the following results:

- Your students do learn – their work does improve.
- Your students become more motivated – they believe they can learn, they want to learn, and they make more control over their own learning.
- Your classroom becomes a place where feedback, including constructive criticism, is valued and viewed as productive.” p. 30

How to Give Effective Written Feedback

Michele McCurdy

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“Word choice matters. Tone matters. ‘You aren’t clear here’ and ‘I don’t see what you mean here.’ Both intend to convey the same thing, but the first sounds more judgmental and the second, more descriptive.” p. 31

“Writing good feedback requires an understanding that language does more than describe our world; it helps us construct our world.” p. 31

- “‘What did you think about when you chose that topic? What were you trying to accomplish?’ It implies the student is someone who thinks and that the choice the student made had purpose.” p. 31
- “‘You won’t find much about carrier pigeons. That’s too narrow a topic. Pick something else.’ This comment positions the student as passive (a taker of orders from the teacher) and the teacher as the ‘boss’ of the student’s learning.” p. 31

Choose “words and phrases to present your feedback in such a way that the student hears what you intend.” p. 32

Clarity:

“Clarity is important; students need to understand the feedback information as you intend it. The criterion for clarity is whether the writing or speech would be clear to the individual student.” p. 32

Specificity:

“Go for conceptual feedback.” p. 33

If feedback is too broad, “students with good intentions who want to act on your feedback may end up doing counterproductive things.” p. 33

Tone:

“Tone refers to the expressive quality of the feedback message, and it affects how the message will be ‘heard.’ The tone of the message is conveyed by word choice and style.” p. 33

“Tone can inspire or discourage. It’s important to choose words that imply that students are agents, active learners.” p. 34

“When you do give students information that they can use to improve, and they see and understand that they can do it, research suggests that many – in some classes almost all – students will experience feelings of control over their learning that are so positive they’ll prefer constructive criticism to head patting and comments like ‘good job!’ This feeling of control over learning is true self-efficacy. It is the foundation of motivation for learning.” p. 35

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“Research provides evidence that teachers often do talk with good students as if they were active, self-regulated learners but often just tell poor students what to do. Elementary reading teachers do not interrupt good readers as often as poor readers, and the tone of their remarks to good students implies that they are agents of their own learning (Allington, 2002)” p. 35

“Most teachers would say, if asked, that all children can learn – maybe not learn the same things in the same way, but all children can learn. Not all teacher feedback, though, gets that message through to all children.” p. 36

Where to Write Feedback

“Written feedback can be delivered in several different ways:

- Comments directly on the work, usually close to the evidence
- Annotations on rubrics or assignment cover sheets
- A combination of both” p. 36

“Research does suggest students will be more interested in their grade than in the feedback, which is why practice work should not be graded. However on final projects some students will want to know the reason for their scores or grades, and offering feedback can serve to explain how the grade was determined. Annotating rubrics and using cover sheets are both useful for projects, term papers, and other length written assignments. Good feedback can inject some formative moments into otherwise summative assessments. It is especially useful if revising and resubmitting the work is a possibility or if a similar assignment is coming up.” p. 37

How to Give Effective Oral Feedback