



# Handling feedback

Feedback is an essential and useful tool to improve your academic skills and understand the areas you need to work on and improve. Feedback isn't simply a justification for your grade; nor is it a close examination of every element of your assignment (University of Sussex, 2016).

Good feedback is invaluable as it:

- Allows you to assess your own learning and understanding
- Stimulates a dialogue between you and your lecturers
- Allows you to become familiar with the elements of good, academic work
- Demonstrates and records your progression
- Provides lecturers with the experience in giving feedback and honing their skills

Typically, assignment feedback will be formative or summative. Formative feedback provides advice on how to improve your work in the future, whereas summative feedback quantifies or rates your achievement, for example, the assignment mark (University of Kent, 2019).

## Top Tip

**Always read your feedback, even when your mark is good!**



Feedback is valuable in any situation so avoid simply looking at the mark and ignoring the comments. The comments will provide you with direction for future assignments, especially in terms of presentation, structure and style. If you ignore feedback and continue to make similar errors in future assignments, the penalties might be heftier.

## Types of feedback

- **Written feedback**
  - Typically, on submitted assignments and included as annotations on the assignment itself, or in a designated feedback section.
- **Verbal feedback**
  - This will depend on the style of your course and also on the number of opportunities for this type of feedback to occur. Verbal feedback might be given in lectures or seminars.
- **Peer feedback**
  - Peer feedback might occur in conversations with other students on your course. This can be a useful part of study groups or group assignments.

## Exploiting feedback

- **Obtain informal feedback** - Feedback doesn't necessarily have to be provided by your lecturer for it to be useful. Try collecting 'preliminary feedback' from impartial people such as your family and friends; they may not be able to verify discipline specific knowledge, but they might be able to comment on structural or critical elements for improvement (McMillan & Weyers, 2013).
- **Regard all feedback as useful** – Whether critical, complimentary, from peers, lecturers or support staff, understand it's value; you will make more use of it this way (Race, 2007). Positive feedback and praise may seem more motivational, but critical feedback is intended for the same purpose; to help us improve and move forward.
- **Making feedback 'feed forward'** – Feedback doesn't just relate to work that has been completed and assessed. Useful feedback is 'a call to action'; it will allow you to reflect on the advice given, clarify any ambiguities and plan a way to integrate this advice into following essays (Day, 2018).
- **Actively seek feedback** – Be proactive in obtaining feedback at any available opportunity and thank people for their feedback when you receive it. Sometimes, it can be just as difficult giving critical feedback as it is receiving it!
- **Ask specific questions** – If you have the opportunity to get feedback on your assignment before the due date then make sure you ask specific questions rather than asking for general feedback. For example, focus on a particular section of your assignment such as the conclusion, or a particular paragraph; or a particular element you are finding difficult such as forming arguments, incorporating evidence or achieving structure.
- **Use a SNOB analysis** – University of Salford (2019) recommends using this tool to form the basis of feedback reflection and to underpin your action plan:
  - Strengths – what did I do well? What can I continue to do in future assessments?
  - Needs – What do I need to do before the next assignment to optimise my chances of better marks?
  - Opportunities – What things did I miss that could have gained extra marks?
  - Barriers – What will make it difficult to achieve these extra things for my next assessment?



## Action plan

You might find it useful to collect and collate the comments you receive through feedback so that you are able to refer to it at later points and ensure that they have been acted upon. Here is an example:

Action Plan			
Major issues		Minor errors	
2	<i>Paragraphs</i>	1	<i>Spelling</i>
3	<i>Referencing</i>	2	<i>Commas</i>
1	<i>Structure</i>		

(Taken from Cottrell, 2019, p. 316)

Your action plan should suit you and should serve the purpose of noting your progress and development over time. You might find it useful to track your marks for different assignments over time too and consult this in conjunction with your feedback. Having a visual representation of your progress can be a good motivational tool, provides you with an excellent opportunity to spot similarities and differences in grades and allows you to see whether acting upon feedback has improved your marks. For a blank grid, see Appendix A.

## Critical feedback

Critical feedback shouldn't be confused with negative feedback. Good critical feedback should achieve a balance of praise and criticism; particularly in areas that require improvement. Receiving critical feedback can be tricky, but it is an essential skill master for future education and employment. Here are some tips on handling critical feedback.

- **Be prepared** – Even if you feel the comments on your work are unfair, harsh or that you have been misunderstood, try to remain objective. Your lecturers want you to do well on your course so don't dismiss the comments. Instead, take what has been said as an expert point of view, and aim to make use of it in order to further your learning.
- **Think before you react**- As assignment feedback is often written, it is devoid of some of the essential cues we rely upon in speech to extract meaning, such as tone, facial expression, body language and the ability to ask for clarification! This means that you might have to do a bit of interpretation; why not compare your feedback to others on your course? This might help you make sense of the comments made on your own work as well as noting similarities and differences on others' work.
- **Face to face feedback** – Think carefully about how you currently receive face-to-face feedback. Try using this self-assessment to gage your current situation:



When receiving a compliment	I feel...	Very Like Me	Quite Like Me	Not Like Me
	Embarrassed			
	Dismissive			
	Overwhelmed			
	Positive			
	Thankful			
Grateful for the insight				
When receiving criticism	I feel...	Very Like Me	Quite Like Me	Not Like Me
	Defensive			
	Hurt			
	Demotivated			
	Overwhelmed			
	Grateful for the insight			
Personally attacked				

Adapted from Race, P. (2007). *How to get a good degree: Making the most of your time at university.* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

## Giving feedback

During your time at university it isn't uncommon to find yourself in position where you are the person giving feedback, for example, peer feedback in group discussions, providing feedback on a module or a programme, or simply replying to a lecturer. Some students find this particular aspect of study quite daunting, as they are concerned that their feedback may be perceived incorrectly. However, providing feedback to others is just as helpful as receiving it as it allows you to clarify your own thoughts and encourages you to express these thoughts in your own words. In doing this, our own understanding becomes informed and our writing can become improved (Day, 2018). Here are some things to bear in mind when offering feedback to someone:

- **Be specific** – Stick to the facts and be explicit. This leaves less room for comments to be misconstrued.
- **Focus on your perspective** – State how you feel rather than speaking for the person you are feeding back to. For example: *I thought this sentence was quite unclear* rather than *Your sentence was unclear*. This shifts the focus on to the task itself rather than the individual.
- **Provide specific suggestions** – If you are offering feedback then make sure you are able to offer some suggestions to improve.

(MindTools, 2019)

## References

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## Appendix A – Assignment Tracker

Achieved Marks	100											
	90											
	80											
	70											
	60											
	50											
	40											
	30											
	20											
	10											
	0											

Taken from Winstone, N.E. & Nash, R. A. (2016.) The Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/developing-engagement-feedback-toolkit-deft>