Can I get a better mark?
No matter what mark you got for your last piece of work, you will want to do better next time. The bad news is that you are the only one who can improve your mark; it takes hard work to do well at university. But the good news is that there is lots of help available and this short guide will help you find it.

Step one: read your feedback

This sounds obvious, but a lot of students read their marks and either skim or ignore their feedback. If you’re one of them, you’re missing an important opportunity to improve your mark. Your tutor will have tried to identify the strengths of your work, so that you can see how much progress you are making, but will also highlight some of the weaker areas, so that you know what to work on to do better in future.

Step two: talk to your tutor

Written comments are helpful, but tutors can’t spend hours writing comments for every student. So, if you’re not completely sure what your tutor meant, or just want to check that you’ve understood, please talk to the tutor who wrote your feedback. Every tutor has office and feedback hours (posted on their office door and personal webpage). You don’t need to make an appointment – just drop in. (If you can’t come to the tutor’s regular office hours for any reason, just email them and they will be happy to make an appointment for you.) Bring a copy of your feedback with you and ask your tutor for any clarification you need. Your tutors will always be happy to support and assist you, but they can’t give you help if you don’t ask for it.

Next steps

After you’ve read your feedback and talked to your tutor, try to identify the most important area that you need to work on when preparing your next submission. Any weaknesses in a student’s work usually fall into one of three areas: the research, the writing or the argument.
Better research

You can almost always improve your work by reading a bit more; don’t just stick to the set readings for each seminar, or even the additional ones on the reading list – use your initiative to find extra material for yourself. You have much more chance of writing something fresh and original if you do.

When you make notes, re-phrase ideas in your own words – don’t just copy bits from what you’re reading. And don’t just write down key facts, names or dates – pay attention to the writer’s argument. Make sure you understand the question they are trying to answer. Ask yourself how they have chosen the facts that they’ve included, and why have they organised them in the way they have? It often helps to make a separate summary of the argument, perhaps after you’ve finished recording factual details.

You might also need to learn more about how to research, for example, to use electronic sources, journals, indexes, subject guides or databases more effectively. There is a whole section of Skills Hub that covers library and research skills [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/skillshub/research] which includes both online information and free face-to-face sessions that you can book.

Better writing

If you struggle a bit when trying to express your ideas, you might benefit from doing a writing workshop. (And there are special workshops if English isn’t your first language.) Once again, you will find these on Skills Hub [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/skillshub/writing] where you will also find lots of online material that will help you plan and organise your essay, or help you with proofreading or referencing.

It also helps to take full advantage of any formative (or practice) assessments that are included in your module. Some students think these are a waste of time, because you don’t get a formal grade for them, but they are an ideal chance to improve your academic skills – for example, by trying out new ways of writing or researching – and you will always get useful feedback that will help with your summative assessments (the ones the you get formal marks and credit for).
Better arguments

This is the hardest thing for most students, so if you’re having trouble coming up with your own arguments, don’t despair – you’re not alone! The first steps toward improving your arguments are to work on your research and writing; the more you’ve learned and the more clearly you can summarise and analyse, the easier it becomes to make an interesting argument.

A key reason for summarising other writers arguments instead of just quoting them, is that it encourages you to think critically about those arguments: do you agree or disagree with the writer? Ask yourself why? Compare arguments from different writers and try to decide what their strengths and weaknesses are. Is it the facts, the writing or the organisation that makes a piece of academic writing convincing? If you find it hard to answer these kinds of questions, why not form a study group with other students who are having similar problems and try working on them together? And don’t be afraid to try out your arguments in seminar discussions, or discuss them with your tutor in office hours.

Revision

Most students revise by re-reading their notes, but studies have shown that the most effective way to revise is to do something with the material. You can reorganise it, make summaries of key topics, periods or ideas. If the lectures from your module were recorded, try listening again and making fresh notes. Or you can try writing practice answers to questions from previous exam papers; it can help to work with others, perhaps reading and commenting on each other’s practice answers. But just sitting and staring at your notes is usually a waste of time.

Good luck!

We hope you found some of these ideas helpful; if you have any comments or suggestions, please let us know. The university’s staff are all here to help you achieve the best results you’re capable of; you’re the only one that can do the actual work, but we will give you as much assistance as we can.