

Quick tips for improving student feedback

Jim Endersby

I have been asking students about feedback for the last couple of years, getting them to share the good, the bad (and the ugly), but mostly asking them what's useful and what isn't. (Many thanks to all the students who've shared their experiences with me.) Based on this entirely un-rigorous and un-systematic survey, I've put together a few tips that I hope will be useful.

If the feedback begins on a negative note (e.g. listing mistakes), your students often won't read the rest. This is particularly true on Turnitin because only the first few lines are visible; students have to click to read on. So, even when you're commenting on a really disastrous piece of work, try to start with something that will make them want to read what you have written (e.g. "There were some good things about this essay, but a few that weren't completely successful. However, there are lots of things you could easily do better next time...")

Students realise that they need to be told when they make mistakes, but what they value most is clear advice on how to improve. Generic comments such as "could try harder", or "do more reading" are *really* not useful. The more personal and specific the feedback, the more useful they find it. For example, when students get a mark that's near the top of a mark-band (the dreaded 68 or 69, for example), what they most want to know is how to get their grade up the next band; I made a video about this, [Moving on Up](#), which you are welcome to share. The more precise the advice, the more grateful they will be.

So, I suggest thinking about feedback as a sandwich:

- Start with a thick layer of praise: point out their achievements and specify the work's strengths.
- Then add a very thin layer of criticism: major mistakes need to be highlighted, and students know that, but sometimes a list of every factual error, or grammatical lapse is just dispiriting. It's better to say "one thing you need to work on is your writing (there were rather a lot of mistakes, such as...)" but only give one example. Then follow up with some practical tips (e.g. links to Skills Hub).
- Finally, the thickest layer needs to be guidance for the future. This can be the most time-consuming to write, so it is best to encourage them to talk to you about how they can improve, e.g. "you have lots of good ideas, but you seem to find it tricky to organise them into a clear argument. I have some suggestions about how you could work on that, so please come and talk to me" (in office hours/feedback week/on Zoom, etc.)

One last thing. Try re-read your feedback and imagine how it might read to your student. Especially at the moment, students are feeling very stressed, and many are lonely and anxious. The last thing they need is sarcastic or discourteous feedback. You might feel that they just aren't trying, and feel insulted by the quality of work they've submitted, but don't forget that they might be going through some really tough personal problems (a grandparent sick with Covid-19, perhaps?). Try to write the kind of feedback that you would have wanted when you were a student, but also take into account the fact that many of our students are facing much tougher situations than most of us faced at their age.