

A strategic approach to using feedback

What is feedback for?

Feedback has two main purposes:

1. Specific to the assignment

Feedback justifies the mark against the assessment criteria and corrects any errors in your understanding or methods. Feedback offered after an assignment has been submitted is often called 'summative' feedback as it sums up how you have done.

2. Generalised to your learning

Feedback offers insight into how well you're doing as a learner and where you might improve in future. Feedback which is given in the middle of the process is often called 'formative' feedback as it can still influence your current work. Feedback on a past assignment which offers general advice for future work is often known as 'feed-forward'.

You might find a mix of these elements in your assignment feedback. Each has their uses, but a focus on feed-forward will help you to improve, whereas if you aren't repeating an assignment, you won't get a chance to act directly on specific feedback again. An exception to this is when you're working on a draft, dissertation, project or thesis when your supervisor might offer formative feedback on work in progress.

A Strategic Approach

In order to use your feedback effectively to improve your learning and raise your marks, you might wish to take a strategic approach to it:

Step One: Read it!

Don't put off collecting and reading your feedback, or avoiding meetings with, for example, a supervisor, personal tutor or marker to discuss your work. If you're feeling underconfident in your performance, demotivated in your studies, or didn't have so much invested in that assignment, it can be tempting to avoid or ignore the feedback. It is an important part of your learning though, and each piece of feedback is valuable. And of course, lecturers do get demoralised when students don't read their feedback – they do want you to reach your best potential!

Step Two: Feel the feelings

It is very difficult not to have an emotional response of some kind or other to feedback, whether we're disappointed, proud, defensive, relieved or upset. You might have been dreading the feedback, it might come as a shock or it might also be a pleasant surprise. All of these emotions can

cloud our reception of the feedback, and you need to give yourself permission to experience these feelings and make time to process and acknowledge them before you can really address the feedback objectively and effectively. Otherwise, you might find that you avoid looking at the feedback altogether, only focus on the negative aspects out of proportion, or misread it. Creating some distance is key.

Feedback might be phrased in personal terms, but remember it is commenting on your work, not you as a person. You might try reframing it to make it more neutral, perhaps by asking a friend to 'translate' it for you, or by turning 'I' statements into 'my' statements, about your work rather than you (instead of 'I can't use evidence well' try 'my assignment didn't make good use of evidence', or instead of 'I can't plan properly' try 'my writing process is making it harder for me to plan properly').

Step Three: Analyse and categorise the feedback.

- Use the marking criteria to see which areas most of the feedback relates to, and decide if it is aimed more at 'surface' features such as presentation or language, or more at deeper issues such as criticality or understanding. Direct your effort at those elements which will most impact on your marks first.
- Identify which aspects of the feedback are specific to that assignment (corrections or suggestions about the subject matter itself) and which are more general matters which might apply to other assignments. Note if there are any general lessons to learn from the specific comments (need to leave more time, fact-check or proofread more next time) but focus on comments that are more generalised or transferable.
- Reflect on any patterns that occur in the feedback within this assignment and across previous work that you've done. Are you getting the same kind of comments repeatedly about the same issues (one thing to fix), or do they reflect a wider range of different issues (several things to prioritise and address)? Are you seeing similar things but phrased in different ways, and what is the common underlying issue they point to? Are any comments 'outliers' or one-off issues which might just be to do with the circumstances you were working in, or a particular lecturer's preferences and which may to some extent be discounted?
- Don't discount good feedback – it's helpful to know what worked, and what to deliberately keep doing!

Use the insights you gain from this analysis to prioritise how you will act on the feedback.

Step Four: Reflect on the process of working on the assignment.

Is there a mismatch between how you felt the experience went, and the feedback, or is it confirming your own suspicions about your working process? Is there anything you experimented with or weren't sure of which you are now in a position to evaluate in the light of feedback? A lecturer's feedback can only relate to the product – the final written assignment, as they can't see the process you used to create the work, only the end result. Don't always take feedback literally – note that it means that *something* needs acting on, but look more broadly to see if you can shed any light on

exactly what that is. For example, feedback that suggests your writing is descriptive or needs to be more focussed can actually lead back to an issue with how you went about reading for the assignment, rather than the writing itself.

Step Five: Re-read your assignment with the benefit of distance.

It will probably be some time since you wrote the assignment, and as you're no longer so close to it, it might be easier to see for yourself how the marker has responded in their feedback, and why. Seeing your own work afresh through the reader's eyes can help suggest areas where you need to be more explicit in making your learning visible, especially if you thought you had done something, but the feedback says you didn't - can you see now where you might not have explained it clearly on the page?

Step Six: Seek out further feedback to enhance or confirm your feedback.

Written feedback on your assignments isn't the only feedback you can use to improve your learning. You can proactively seek out other kinds, in order to gain more insight and 'triangulate' against the feedback on a particular assignment to see how widespread an issue it might be.

Individual verbal feedback

This is usually in addition to the written feedback you've been given. It's not always possible, but if you want to discuss the feedback, you could contact your module leader or marker. You can also talk to a Writing Development Centre tutor, Personal Tutor or peer mentor about what your feedback means and how to improve your study skills.

Generic written feedback

For most examinations and for some of your coursework you will receive general feedback relating to how all the students did overall in the assessment, highlighting common errors or omissions and what a good answer would have included. Generic feedback on examinations will usually be posted up on Canvas for students.

Generic verbal feedback

Some staff will take time out of a class to discuss an assessment, highlighting those points that made for either a good or not so good answer. This may also be provided electronically, for example, using Personal Capture video.

Formative feedback, given before you submit an assessment

For example, you can talk to your seminar or module leader or a Writing Development Tutor to ask for feedback on how you intend to approach your essay. Unfortunately, staff don't have time to read through whole essay drafts, but they could discuss your ideas, and might read and comment on a short plan or extract. They might even set this as a task as part of the module. It's also part of the supervision process for a dissertation or research project.

Feedback on your own exam scripts

University policy doesn't allow you to take the script away, but you can arrange with the module leader to read it, while he or she is there and see any written comments made by the marker. These are usually on a separate sheet, and tend to be minimal, because they are not intended as formal feedback, but they may still be helpful.

Peer feedback

This might be a formal part of the course, where students are given some training, and then comment on what was good and not so good about each other's work in a supportive way. It might also be informal, from coursemates, friends or peer mentors, but be careful this doesn't become collusion – it still has to be your own work, and be careful how you share it with others.

Reflection

You can also give yourself feedback! You might reflect on how the process is going, and compare this with the ultimate mark, re-read your own assignment and add your own notes-to-self at any stage, or if working on a project with peers or a supervisor, think about what kind of feedback you'd like to receive and request it.

Step Seven: Create an action plan

You might collect what you've learned from the above steps into a checklist of things to be aware of when working on future assignments. These might be learning points when planning how to approach it, things to stop and reflect on while working, or things to look for when editing it. You can also set yourself development goals, which might be new strategies to experiment with or new skills to learn, and identifying who to approach for this help (including the Writing Development Centre). If there are lots of things on your list, or very varied points to consider, you can use your reflections from the above steps to prioritise them so you're not taking on too much.