

# **5 Tips for Giving Great Feedback**

**On Content Area Writing**

**FEW PRACTICES PROMOTE** student learning as efficiently as well-formed writing assignments paired with personal, constructive feedback. Of course, giving useful feedback can be very time consuming and has limited value if students don't read or act on it. It's easy for teachers to get frustrated correcting the same errors over and over again, without seeing much change in student performance. Students can get discouraged by feedback that is vague, critical or overwhelming.

By following some simple feedback “best practices,” instructors can mitigate these communication challenges. The goal of this handout is to present feedback tips in a clear, practical format that you can quickly absorb and apply to your classroom.

While an instructor can (and should) give feedback on a variety of student behaviors through various channels, the guidelines collected here focus on providing written feedback on a student's written work for a content-area class.

Let's get started!

# 1 ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

It's difficult for students to understand feedback when it's not linked to explicit assessment criteria. Avoid adding or deducting points without directly connecting each value with a specific learning objective.

Make sure students understand the goals and criteria for assignments *before, during and after* the assignment is completed.

Students need a precise sense of how close they are to achieving a goal, and what they need to do to get there.

## Tips:

- Develop a detailed grading rubric that accompanies each assignment.
- If a team of assistants grade student papers, make sure they each have a copy of the grading criteria.
- Always link grades and points deducted with a specific element in the grading rubric.
- Avoid vaguely circling or underlining parts of the paper without explanation.

## 2 SCHEDULE/TIMING

Feedback should be *timely* so that students can use it for subsequent learning and work to be submitted. Too often, feedback occurs when a subject/topic is over and there is little that can be done to remedy misunderstanding. Feedback should be *prompt* so that students can recall what they did and thought at the time of the submission.

Students need to be given the opportunity to take the advice they're provided. This means encouraging an *iterative writing process*, where students can improve their performance through multiple revisions.

### Tips:

- Avoid allowing just one chance for feedback and a grade.
- Always provide feedback as quickly as possible.
- Give feedback on a paper in time for students to apply your assessment to other areas of the unit.
- Allow students to practice and take risks with their ideas by allowing multiple revisions.

## 3 FOCUS

It's most effective to separate your *error correction* critique from comments about *content and ideas*.

Error correction (proof-reading) isn't always the best use of an instructor's time. Instead, you should encourage students to self-critique/proof-read, or get help from peers.

In content area writing, we're most concerned with evaluating the ideas presented in a submission. Instead of simply pointing out strengths and weaknesses in the development of the content, it's most useful to explain your experience as a reader, and offer corrective advice.

### Tips:

- Don't spend time marking every mechanical error you find.
- Focus on offering constructive advice about the writing process, as well as content.
- Consider providing comments without assigning a grade on early drafts (some studies show this is more effective).

## 4 STRUCTURE

It's best to offer both *marginal* comments (immediate notes about a specific point), and *holistic* comments that address general concerns at the end of the paper. Marginal feedback is often easier, but students usually prefer a more comprehensive assessment. Stick with both!

Try to start with higher-order concerns (on topic, organized) and move to lower-order concerns (style problems, conventions).

Structure your feedback so that it is assistive, but not exhaustive. Usually called *indirect feedback*, this means telling them they made an error, but not giving away the answer.

### Tips:

- It's good to make marks in the margins, but make sure they are clear and meaningful. Students can get confused when instructors circle and underline works without explanation.
- Prioritize your feedback to 3-4 main points.
- Providing assistive feedback encourages student learning, as they revisit their course material and search for specifics.

## 5 TONE

Rather than correcting, editing and judging the assignment, act as a coach and guide. Describe your experience as a reader, then share a vision about how their paper could be better.

Critical or dismissive comments can erode a student's self-esteem and discourage learning. The purpose of feedback is to empower and motivate students, by enabling better learning.

Start with a positive comment, then balance positive comments with negative ones. Students will perform better when they are confident about their abilities.

More than anything, offer guidance. Students should have a clear idea of how to improve their performance.

### **Tips:**

- Always begin and end with a positive comment.
- Keep positive and negative feedback on the same level of specificity.
- Avoid personal comments.

*5 Tips for Giving Great Feedback on Content Area Writing*  
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