

Wondering How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students? 5 Tips on Where to Start

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- 1. Teach Growth Mindset:** At the beginning of the semester, emphasize that the goal of your course is to move students along the learning curve. While you expect their best efforts, acknowledge that they will make mistakes during the semester. Encourage them to focus on continually improving rather than perfectly performing. By framing the goals of your course this way, students become more receptive and responsive to feedback. If you give mid-semester reviews to students, revisit these points ahead of the reviews. Include in your grading criteria the amount of effort and improvement a student has shown over the course of the semester.
- 2. Talk... Less. Question More:** Make reflection a key part of the feedback process by asking the students how their experience felt to them, what they thought worked, and what they thought could have worked better. You can use that self-assessment as a lever to encourage students to iterate and improve. Ask the students why they did what they did and why they did it the way they did it – as non-judgmentally as you can. Be genuinely curious.
- 3. Use Multiple Strategies for Providing Feedback on Written Work:** When commenting on written student work, consider multiple strategies. One option is to provide handwritten comments that the students need to incorporate into their drafts. Another option is to use comment bubbles that also force students to make the changes themselves. A third option is to make comments in track-changes, especially if time is tight. Whenever possible, review comments with students in person, and ask questions that help them think through their drafting choices.
- 4. Avoid the “Feedback Sandwich:”** It’s natural to want to sandwich criticism in between two compliments. The idea is that by praising the person at the start and end, you’ll make it easier for them to accept the criticism. The problem with this technique is that your students see it for what it is, and will de-value the praise because they know (consciously or not) that it serves a technical purpose. Try to give constructive feedback positively and matter-of-factly — as if this is just like any other conversation – and use specific instances, and the results and impact of the performance to guide your advice.
- 5. Encourage Two-Way Feedback:** Managing up is as important a skill as managing down. Whether during a mid-semester review or at another time, ask students for their feedback on the course and on your supervision. Encourage them to be forthcoming with ways that you might be more helpful in coaching them, or ways of structuring their supervision meetings that would help them address their weaknesses. For example, a student team that struggles with clarity on who’s taking the lead on certain matters might benefit from reserving time at the end of every supervision meeting to sort that out.

Further Reading:

- Marcus Buckingham, Ashley Goodall, The Feedback Fallacy, Harvard Business Review, March/April 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/03/the-feedback-fallacy>.
- Craig Chappelow, Cindy McCauley, What Good Feedback Really Looks Like, Harvard Business Review, May 13, 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/05/what-good-feedback-really-looks-like>.
- Terri L. Enns, Students Critiquing Novice Writing: Building Hope by Building Bridges, 48 Duquesne. Law Review 403 (2010), <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/duqu48&div=13&id=&page=>.
- Stacey R. Finkelstein and Ayelet Fishbach, Tell Me What I Did Wrong: Experts Seek and Respond to Negative Feedback, Journal of Consumer Research, Vol. 39, No. 1 (June 2012), pp. 22-38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/661934>.
- Alison Green, How to Give Constructive Criticism Without Making It Awkward, The Cut, Aug 6, 2019, <https://www.thecut.com/article/how-to-give-constructive-criticism-at-work.html>.
- Jennifer Porter, How Leaders Can Get Honest, Productive Feedback, Harvard Business Review, Jan 8, 2019: <https://hbr.org/2019/01/how-leaders-can-get-honest-productive-feedback>.
- Sheila Rodriguez, Using Feedback Theory to Help Novice Legal Writers Develop Expertise, University of Detroit Mercy Law Review, Vol. 86, No. 2, 2009, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1370084.
- Sue Shellenbarger, How to Take Criticism Well, The Wall Street Journal, June 18, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-take-criticism-well-1403046866>.
- Jay Sullivan, The Art of Communication: Conveying Effective Feedback, New York Law Journal, April 4, 2008, <https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/almID/900005507801/Art-of-Communication/?sreturn=20190905135346>.