
Top Ten Points Researchers Say Make Feedback Effective

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Revolutionizing
the Experience of
Writing to Learn

1.0 Introduction

Feedback, if done properly, can have a transformative effect on your students' writing. It can lead them to a greater sense of self-efficacy and engagement with writing, which lead to improved skills. Additionally, and most importantly, well-executed feedback can serve as an opportunity to help students learn how to assess their own work and how to become independent, critical thinkers. The converse can happen, however, if feedback is not done correctly: students can shut down and become actively disengaged from writing and learning.

To help teachers construct effective feedback, since it is so crucial to students' development, we went back to the academic literature to put together this Top Ten list on how to do feedback right.

2.0 Top Ten Points Researchers Say Make Feedback Effective

1. Set clear, concrete learning objectives for your students. Measure their progress through simple, direct criteria.

Research by Sadler (1989) confirmed that feedback should give students information they can act on to improve their current performance. Clearly define what improvement means, and make sure you both share this understanding. Using exemplars to help describe goals by demonstrating what each skill level should look like.

Goals should be achievable, but challenging, to increase engagement with the task. Making them too difficult will frustrate students, leading them to disengage. If goals are too simple, then students won't think they're worth the effort (Sadler, 1989).

Describe the criteria you are using to measure progress towards the learning objectives in clear, simple language. Rubrics are, in most cases, the best way to do this.

2. Feedback should always focus on the task at hand; not on the learner.

Avoid giving evaluative feedback that judges the learner personally, since this will distract students from the task at hand. Also, avoid giving grades simultaneously with feedback, because grades do not show students how to build their skills (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Shute, 2007; Brookhart, 2008).

3. Highlight what they did well, along with what they need to improve upon.

Informing your students of their successes will motivate them, contribute to their self-esteem, and will give them information they can use to improve (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Suggest to your students how they can apply what they did right to the areas that need work so they are encouraged to keep revising and practicing.

4. Feedback should be guiding and directional, not do their work for them.

Telling students exactly what to do takes away from them the opportunity to think about what they did, how far away they are from the learning goal, and what to do next to get there (Brookhart, 2008). Feedback needs to guide students so they continue to reflect and practice, not give them all the answers.

5. Increase self-efficacy by emphasizing your students' feelings of ownership.

Feedback offers a chance to get your students to think about the process of writing itself, and how they are in control of it (Brookhart, 2008). Encourage your students to focus on the goal of learning and mastering skills, rather than on that of getting good grades. Remind them that success happens only with dedicated effort and by not being afraid to make mistakes (Shute, 2007).

6. Tailor the feedback for each individual student as much as possible.

Differentiating your feedback is extremely important because all students need different information to enhance their skills. Personally crafted feedback lets a student know that she is valued. One time saving tip: discuss misconceptions that are common among your students with the class as a whole (Brookhart, 2008).

7. Prioritize.

Limit your feedback to only that information which promises the greatest improvement from your students. Focus on substantial, goal-relevant tasks and avoid pointing out superficial mistakes. Lunsford (1997) recommends providing only around three well-thought-out comments.

8. Be specific and clear.

Vague comments can frustrate students. Broad, general feedback does not provide actionable information and takes much more processing power to decipher (Shute, 2007).

9. Timing is everything.

Deliver your comments as often as is practically possible. Students need feedback when their learning goals are still present in mind and when they have an opportunity to act upon it (Brookhart, 2008).

10. Feedback should teach students how to give feedback to themselves.

Ultimately, feedback should help students develop their own skills of self-assessment and critique. In fact, some researchers believe that teachers should instruct their students very directly on how to give feedback to themselves (Black and William, 2001; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Encourage your students to think of feedback as an iterative process; as part of the broader dialogue you have with them about their writing (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

As their experience with self-reflection deepens, they'll do it more often. They'll learn how to constantly assess their work according to learning criteria and goals, which will lead to increased revision (Andrade and Du, 2007). As students become more capable of giving feedback to themselves, they will have a more successful and fulfilling learning experience.

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