How to Use Feedback Effectively

A guide for students

What is this guide for?

Feedback is essential for your development as a learner, but it's not always obvious how to use it! Research points to four key reasons why students struggle to use their feedback:

1. The language can be difficult to understand. Your tutors typically use specific marking schemes to ensure that their marking is consistent and transparent. Unfortunately, these marking schemes aren't always clear or easily understandable for students. This guide will help you to clarify some of the terms commonly used in assessment feedback.

2. It can be difficult to know what practical steps you could take. Even if you understand the feedback, it's often the case that you think "Well, what can I DO with this?" This guide contains some ideas of concrete strategies for putting your feedback into action.

3. It can feel like using feedback is pointless. It may sometimes feel like putting feedback into action doesn't pay off, perhaps because you have different assignments for different modules, or because you feel like your weaknesses are impossible to change. This guide will show why using feedback is never futile!

4. It can be difficult to feel motivated. On top of everything else, you may feel quite demotivated by feedback. It can feel like a lot of effort to use feedback, and may seem like it's somebody else's responsibility to help you improve. This guide will show you the importance of taking responsibility for using feedback, and some ideas of how to track your progress.

General Advice

What is feedback? *Feedback is any kind of information that someone gives you about your performance, skills, and understanding, and can represent one of the best opportunities for improving. Feedback could be a grade on your essay, or comments or suggestions given to you verbally or in writing. It might come from your tutors, but might also come from friends, family, or even from yourself.*

- **Listen to your feedback!** *Many students don't even take any notice of their feedback! This can be for many reasons, but it's very difficult to improve "magically" without getting any input on what to do differently, and how. Ignoring your feedback makes it difficult to improve.*

- **What issues are the feedback highlighting?** *Your feedback will tell you where you have earned marks, and where you can improve.*

- **What solution does the feedback propose?** *Your feedback may also include advice on how to improve. It's important to try and find this direction, which can be invaluable. Sometimes you may need to read between the lines. For example, if you're told your essay structure was weak, this should make you think about how to improve your structuring in future, not just why it wasn't better last time.*

What if…?

I'm really happy with my grade! I don't need to read the feedback, do I?

Because you have done well, you presumably will want to ensure you do just as well next time – your feedback will help you to understand <u>why</u> you did so well, and this shows what you should do again in future. Also, maybe you could do even better next time - look out for ideas on how to improve.

The grade has made me feel really awful, I don't want to read the feedback!

This is understandable! A bad grade can knock your confidence and motivation. But it's important to remember that the feedback is about <u>your work</u>, not about <u>you as a person</u>. It may help to put your feedback aside for a few days before you look at it properly. When you come back to it, it's often easier to absorb and use.

Feedback can be instrumental in telling you WHY you have a disappointing mark. If you ignore it, you can't improve. If you need someone to guide you through feedback, the tutor who marked your work may be willing and able.

What if…?

I'm never going to do any other work like this, the feedback is useless!

A lot of students feel this way. But there's always something to gain from feedback, even when it's describing work you will never do again. For example, it may comment on issues that apply to all written assessments, like structure, grammar, or referencing. Or it may comment on other things that you can apply elsewhere, like the quality of your critique, or depth of further reading. If you really can't find anything helpful in your feedback, a meeting with your tutor may help you to find it.

The feedback I've been given is really unhelpful, I can't do anything with it!

Not all feedback is equally constructive and detailed. It may feel uninformative, or maybe you completely disagree with it. Don't dismiss it! Sometimes the most valuable part of feedback is your reflection upon it. For example, even if you disagree with a suggestion, thinking about <u>why</u> can help you clarify your understanding, or realise how you could better justify your arguments. You could also (politely) contact the marker and ask them to discuss it.

What if…?

There's a specific area I've been told I need to improve.

Some of the feedback comments that students receive come up time and again. Here are some of the common aspects that you may be asked to improve:

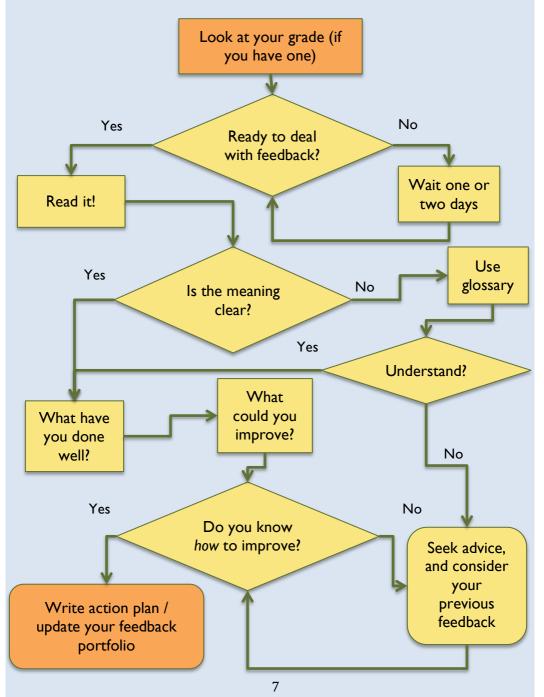|	
Being Critical	When describing studies or theories, ask whether what you've learned about them is necessarily true – are the conclusions questionable? If so, why? Does the evidence actually support the ideas it claims to support? Your university might offer workshops on critical thinking.
The best way to improve structure is to plan your work well before you start writing. What exactly do you want to say? What does the marker need to understand first, before they can understand the rest? How can you make each section of your work flow nicely into the rest, so that the marker won't get lost?	**Structure**
Referencing	Using references appropriately is often tricky, but it's also fairly easy to find out what to do. Check your feedback to see where you often go wrong. Sometimes it's an aspect of formatting that you didn't even know about. You can find referencing style guides online, or you can look in published papers for examples. Have these to hand while you work.
Sometimes students feel so confident in their understanding of a topic, that they forget to show evidence to support their claims. Make sure you back up everything you say with evidence! Also, it's always best to read your primary sources carefully, rather than just reading descriptions of those sources - do they actually say what you think they say?	**Use of evidence**
Writing Style	Your writing style can be hard to change, and the expectations are often much higher at university compared with school or college. When you read papers, don't just focus on what they say, but also on how they are written. If you find papers that are really clear and easy to understand, keep them as examples of the kinds of style you could emulate.

Feedback flowchart

Look at your grade (if you have one)

Ready to deal with feedback?

Yes → **Read it!**

No → **Wait one or two days**

Is the meaning clear?

Yes

No → **Use glossary**

Understand?

Yes

No

What have you done well?

What could you improve?

Do you know *how* to improve?

Yes → **Write action plan / update your feedback portfolio**

No

Seek advice, and consider your previous feedback

You are not alone...

Many students think they are the only one who struggles with feedback, and that all other students somehow just "get it". In fact, most students struggle with one or more aspects of feedback. We've collected some quotes here from undergraduate student, to show that you're not alone.

It's very subjective, depending on the lecturers you go to and the markers. So now it's, like, there's no point in even -- well, you should look at your grade, but just take it with a pinch of salt.

I always get feedback in my work that, like, 'Your arguments aren't clear.' But it's like, 'Okay, I understand that, like I've heard this -- this comment a million times, but tell me where and how.

Like, if you're someone who does actually sit down and look at it, and actually take it in, then you're gonna find it really useful. But I, personally, just put it in folder.

A seventies pair of trousers, isn't it? I just wouldn't know. I just -- I dunno what they mean by flair.

I can imagine the lecturers get quite annoyed if you don't use the feedback, because they've spent loads of time, like, going through it.

I think sometimes on reports, the language use is quite confusing, which seems a bit contradictory. Cos they often say that my language is confusing!

Well, what I know you *should* do when you get a piece of coursework back, is go back through it and see where you feel like you could have improved after, like, you know, having a fresh look at it.

Um, I think ideally, I should go through all my feedback and kind of find the points of commonalities. Erm, and make a list of those and just be aware of those consciously but, again, when you've got five hundred things to do…

...but there's lots you can do.

There are many things you can do to use your feedback. Here, we've collected some more quotes from undergraduate students, describing methods they use. Which of these might work for you?

I make an appointment with a learning advisor to improve on the areas which I have been told I need to improve on

Sometimes when completing a piece of work that is similar to a previous one, for example our statistics assignment, I used the previous feedback whilst writing up the latest one, to help me exclude the mistakes I made last time and include everything that I had gotten right beforehand

If I think the points are useful, positive or negative, I write them out on a cue card and keep it for future reference.

At first, I look at the overall mark. Usually I then go through each section of written feedback to see the positive and negative points of my work, referring back to each section as I go to remind myself of what I had written.

I highlight the bits I think will be most helpful, and write them on post it notes ready for further work. I focus on improvements which I can make, and try to see my downfalls and strengths.

I read through the feedback for each section and look for common themes that keep getting brought up on different assignment feedback sheets.

I read through all of the feedback initially. I first look at any positive comments, but spend most of the time on the criticisms. I then look at previous coursework and see if there are in patterns in what I am doing wrong.

Glossary

Sometimes, markers give you feedback and you have no idea what they mean! We asked students which terms can often be confusing when used in feedback, and we asked university teaching staff what they would mean when using these terms. We then summarised their responses.

Abstract
Being too vague about a point by not explaining it in specific language, or by failing to ground it in theory or to use examples (see also 'Concrete').

Address the question
Make sure you're answering the question that is being asked – students sometimes write about topics that miss the point. Make sure your arguments and material are relevant and clearly linked to the question, and you are not simply writing everything you know about the topic.

Assess the limitations of the study
Weigh up aspects of the study and consider weaknesses that might undermine the validity of the study, and/or suggest ways the research could be improved. The weaknesses could be methodological, but may also be with how the authors interpret and present their own findings.

Balanced argument
While it is often valuable to take a stance, be sure to present evidence for the other sides of the argument.

Clarity
Make sure the reader can easily understand what points you have made by writing clearly, and explaining why you have made these points. Sometimes it's just a case of writing straightforwardly, and not assuming the reader will automatically know what you were thinking.

Concise
In your work you need to explain ideas clearly but with fewer words – if you have a word limit, make effective use of it! The marker may think you are waffling. Be succinct and avoid needlessly complicated words and phrases.

Concrete
Make sure you're using clear and specific language to talk about a defined situation or a certain finding, not just vague ideas (see also 'Abstract').

Critically Evaluate/ Critically Analyse
Show that you have actively thought about and questioned the claims you are describing or making. Even if the claims are completely valid, show that you haven't just accepted them at face value.

Depth/Elaborate
Make sure you explain your arguments in detail, using examples where appropriate and working through your ideas rather than simply glossing over them.

Flair
Showing a sophisticated or elegant writing style, or presenting evidence in an original and insightful way.

Flow
Creating a coherent argument by connecting points in a logical order to ensure that the work is easy to follow.

Illustrate
Give examples to back up the points you make, ideally using evidence.

Originality
Demonstrating your own thinking, perhaps by drawing upon research beyond the ones you learned about in class, to make an argument that not every student would have thought of.

Proof-read
Reading work back carefully, or getting another person to read it, to check for spelling and grammar mistakes. You should also check that your arguments make sense, and that everything is phrased clearly.

Range of material
Try and use more than just the material provided by the lecturers, and avoid basing too much of your work on just one or two references.

Specific
Give a more precise and detailed account of what is being described, drawing on particular examples.

Structure
A way of presenting your work so the reader can follow the argument. Make sure your paragraphs are in a logical order, that you show the connections between different paragraphs, and that each section has good beginning and ending sentences.

Synthesis/Integration
Show how different sources and theories go together to make a good argument. A lack of synthesis could mean your essay reads more like a list of research than an argument.

Transparent
Making sure that the thought-process which underlies your argument is clearly expressed. Even if you have a good idea, it's not always easy for the marker to see your train of thought.

Unsubstantiated Claims
An unsubstantiated claim lacks evidence. Make sure you justify your argument by supporting each point with empirical evidence and references. This will create a more persuasive argument.

This feedback guide is adapted from a guide written by undergraduate students at the University of Surrey, in collaboration with Dr Naomi Winstone and Dr Robert Nash. The original guide emerged from a project funded by the Higher Education Academy, which aimed to improve students' ability to engage well with feedback.