

HOW TO GIVE **Effective Feedback** TO YOUR STUDENTS

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Types of Feedback and Their Purposes

Chapter 1 identified the types of feedback strategies and content choices that research has found to be important for student achievement. This chapter illustrates these types of feedback with classroom examples. It is important to know what your choices are—what tools are in the box. Knowing what tools are available is the first step in choosing the right one for a specific student or learning target. Examples of both good and bad practices are given for each, with the exception of clarity, specificity, and tone. These “word choice” options are addressed in Chapter 3, which is specifically about the language you choose for feedback.

Choosing Feedback Strategies

As noted in Chapter 1, feedback strategies can vary in several dimensions: timing, amount, mode, and audience. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

Timing

The purpose of giving immediate or only slightly delayed feedback is to help students hear it and use it. Feedback needs to come while students are still mindful of the topic, assignment, or performance in question. It needs to come

while they still think of the learning goal as a learning goal—that is, something they are still striving for, not something they already did. It *especially* needs to come while they still have some reason to work on the learning target. Feedback about a topic they won't have to deal with again all year will strike students as pointless. A general principle for gauging the timing of feedback is to put yourself in the students' place. When would students want to hear your feedback? When they are still thinking about the work, of course. And when they can still do something about it. Figure 2.1 summarizes some examples of good and bad timing of feedback, and the following paragraphs elaborate on one example.

Good timing: Returning tests and assignments promptly. A teacher gave a multiple-choice test, scored it later that day, and returned the test to students the next day. After she handed back the scored tests, she spent class time going over the answers. In educational psychology terms, this is “knowledge of results.” Even this simple feedback about the outcome is good—and is good to do promptly.

You may want to provide prompt feedback but feel too busy or overwhelmed to do so. A tip that works for some teachers is to make a special effort to catch up with feedback responsibilities. You can't be prompt with today's work if you still have last week's on your desk. But once you are caught up, you may find the pace is the same except that you are dealing with more recent work.

Figure 2.1 Feedback Timing

Purpose:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For students to get feedback while they are still mindful of the learning target • For students to get feedback while there is still time for them to act on it 	
Examples of Good Feedback Timing	Examples of Bad Feedback Timing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning a test or assignment the next day • Giving immediate oral responses to questions of fact • Giving immediate oral responses to student misconceptions • Providing flash cards (which give immediate right/wrong feedback) for studying facts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning a test or assignment two weeks after it is completed • Ignoring errors or misconceptions (thereby implying acceptance) • Going over a test or assignment when the unit is over and there is no opportunity to show improvement

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How to Give Effective Written Feedback

Written feedback is a genre all its own. Word choice matters. Tone matters. For example, consider these two comments written in the margin of a student essay: “You aren’t clear here” and “I don’t see what you mean here.” Both intend to convey the same thing, but the first sounds more judgmental and the second, more descriptive. This chapter gives tips and strategies for clearly communicating the intended messages. It also discusses deciding on the method to use for giving written feedback—for example, writing comments directly on student work or making notes on a rubric or an assignment cover sheet.

Writing good feedback requires an understanding that language does more than describe our world; it helps us construct our world. Consider the worldview implicit in this comment: “What did you think about when you chose that topic? What were you trying to accomplish?” It implies the student is someone who thinks and that the choice the student made had purpose. It invites the student to discuss the choice and presumably go on to discuss whether the paper can accomplish what was intended. It positions the student as the chooser and as someone who can have a conversation with the teacher.

Now consider the worldview implicit in this comment: “You won’t find much about carrier pigeons. That’s too narrow a topic. Pick something else.” This comment positions the student as passive (a taker of orders from the

teacher) and the teacher as the “boss” of the student’s learning. Of course, the teacher *is* responsible for students’ learning; I’m not arguing otherwise. However, this comment effectively shuts off learning. The student will merely follow orders. Strategic behavior, like the student learning to choose a topic that he or she can follow through with to produce an effective paper or project, is shut down.

This chapter is about choosing words and phrases to present your feedback in such a way that the student hears what you intend. It is about choosing words and phrases that show that you value the student as a person who learns. It is about choosing words and phrases to support students in seeing themselves with a scholar’s identity (self-efficacy for learning) and as active and strategic in managing that learning (self-regulation). And it is about giving feedback that, when possible, helps students decide for themselves what to do next.

Clarity

Clarity is important; students need to understand the feedback information as you intend it. Students have different vocabularies and different backgrounds and experiences. The criterion for clarity is whether the writing or speech would be clear to the individual student. Figure 3.1 shows examples of good and bad choices about feedback clarity.

Figure 3.1 Feedback Clarity

Purpose: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To maximize the chances that students will understand feedback 	
Examples of Good Feedback Clarity	Examples of Bad Feedback Clarity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using simple vocabulary and sentence structure Writing or speaking on the student’s developmental level Checking that the student understands the feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using big words and complicated sentences Writing to show what <i>you</i> know, not what the <i>student</i> needs Assuming the student understands the feedback