

Teaching Tip Tuesday

Improving Effectiveness of Feedback

Instructors provide written feedback on student work with the goal of helping them to improve, scaffolding their progress toward specific learning outcomes. However, utility of the feedback is limited by several factors. The following tips will help you to improve the effectiveness of your feedback on student work.

- 1. Make it understandable.** Take into account the level of the student. Use plain language and avoid too much discipline-specific jargon that was not covered in class.
- 2. Be specific.** Attach your comments to specific passages in the paper, so that students can understand how they apply. Be sure to spell out exactly what your issue is with the select passage. Although comments like “vague” or “lacks critical thinking” may make sense to you, consider whether the student will be able to decode these comments to improve future work. What about the passage is vague? What does it lack? What about the passage shows a lack of critical thinking?
- 3. Place comments in context.** Comments should focus on material and skills that is substantive to learning outcomes. If you place your comments in the context of the desired learning outcome, you focus student attention on the overall goal of the activity, pointing them toward the learning goal they are trying to reach.
- 4. Be selective.** It’s easy to nitpick a paper to death, but doing this leaves students feeling inept and defeated. Choose a few key elements that the student can improve upon. The goal shouldn’t be to guide students from horrible to perfect, but to guide them toward improvement.
- 5. Be forward-looking.** Comments should not just be about what students have done already, but about what they can and should do in the future. Try to frame comments in terms of subsequent assignments and how students can improve upon the current work.
- 6. Be timely.** For students to benefit from your comments, they must receive them *before* they complete their next assignment. Keep up with your grading and be sure to give students feedback regularly.
- 7. Be non-judgmental and balanced.** When time is tight, it is easy to focus on the problems that need to be fixed. However, focusing only on problems can lead students to feel defensive and can reduce their sense of self-efficacy. Make your criticisms descriptive not evaluative and be sure to include praise for what the student is doing well.
- 8. Engage students in dialog about feedback.** Short reflections on what they found useful or not useful about feedback help to give them agency and provide opportunity for metacognition.

Nicol, D. 2014. Good design for written feedback to students. Chapter 9 in *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, pp. 109-124.