**Tips for Offering Feedback**

**Effective Feedback**

The most helpful feedback for writers (students) offers observations on what the student has done in the assignment and explains how the student’s choices affected their reader(s). Asking questions and offering advice for creating the desired effect(s) will help the student improve their written communication, while helping to avoid an emotional reaction.

The most effective writing feedback isn’t evaluative – it doesn’t focus on whether the work was “good” or “bad”, or let the student know whether you liked or didn’t like their work. These types of comments can cause students to become defensive or react emotionally in other ways, which is more likely to prevent them from processing comments productively.

**For example (less effective):**

“I liked the first paragraph, but your definition of behavioural ecology wasn’t as good as it could have been. You can make it better by providing more detail.”

**Compared to (more effective):**

“In your first paragraph, you offered the context that a layperson/casual reader would need in order to understand behavioural ecology. The actual definition of the concept you offered reads like a dictionary definition and doesn’t explain the jargon used. If your intended audience is the layperson, this could be confusing to them and could make them assume that they need some specialist knowledge to understand the rest of the paper. How have you seen other popular science writers address this in their work? Which strategies can you employ?”

**Specific Direction**

When choosing what to comment on, think about the goals you have for your students and for their writing. Do you primarily want them to be able to demonstrate their understanding of material, or to communicate clearly? Focusing your feedback on the main goal will unify your comments, while keeping students on track to deliver according to your expectations in future assignments.

Whether or not you use a rubric guide your feedback (See our resource on ‘Rubrics’), focusing on helping students to achieve one clear goal per assignment will help them improve their writing in a meaningful, achievable way.

**Do’s and Don’ts for Offering Feedback**

* Include at least one genuinely positive piece of feedback, if possible. Although you are not commenting on what you like or don’t like, letting a student know what they do well is just as important as letting them know where to improve. Offering a strategy for students to use this strength in other types of writing is also a good idea.
* Include a referral to any of the support services that would be useful for students, even if they don’t need remediation – support services on campus are designed to work with students at all levels and it is important that students know help is available.
* Encourage students to set a writing goal for their next project that takes into account the feedback you offered this time around.
* Ensure that your feedback is easy for students to understand and relates to something they can take direct action on. For example, instead of explaining the uses of commas and semicolons, let students know that they can have more of an impact on their readers by varying sentence length and structure.
* Give your students a set of questions for self-evaluation of their future drafts based on what they did well and didn’t do well in their current assignment. This can be prepared ahead of time and used with all students.
* Don’t mark up a student’s entire paper. This is overwhelming and can cause students to shut down and stop reading; it is also counter-productive, as it doesn’t make them look critically and carefully at their own writing and errors/patterns of error.
  + Instead, mark a paragraph or two in which both the content and mechanics/grammar/syntax/etc. could be improved, and focus your comments on the content, clarity, and other higher order concerns throughout the paper.
  + Make the bulk of your comments in the end notes, focusing your in-text comments on things that illustrate the points you make in these end notes.
* Don’t focus on grammar. Point errors out in a couple of places and ask the student to find/correct the rest.
  + Instead of focusing on grammar rules, focus on clarity and understanding in your comments (even if a student’s grammar impedes their meaning). When offering a referral to a support service, remember that a student’s applied grammar often differs from their understanding of the rules. It is rarely useful for a student who struggles with grammar-related clarity to review rules and do worksheets.
  + Instead, pointing them to resources that will help them contextualize their learned/internalized grammar rules will help. Keeping the focus on clarity helps students avoid frustration and keep their audience, not the rules of grammar, in mind. This is especially helpful for students who speak different forms of English (UK etc.), where the grammatical structures differ from Standard American English.
  + If a student’s grammar impedes their meaning, it is still a good idea to focus on the importance of clarity in communication rather than on grammar itself. Do offer the student a referral to the appropriate service (writing centre, English language support program, learning commons, etc.).

**Managing Your Time When Offering Feedback**

To save time when offering feedback, you can employ strategies such as using a rubric, creating scripts, and holding back the temptation to comment on everything in a student’s paper. Focusing on one goal and including no more than 2-3 categories of comments (organization, focus, grammar/mechanics, etc.) will save you time and keep your students from getting overwhelmed. Remember, more feedback/comments isn’t necessarily better for students’ learning. Keeping a list of campus resources to refer students to will make the process faster, as well.