

## **Strategies for students to get more out of feedback.**

*Debates about feedback usually focus on the deficiencies of tutor feedback, and student dissatisfaction with vague and uninformative feedback. However, problematic as tutor feedback may be, a more worrying statistic is Weaver's finding that 50% of students at university had not received guidance on what to do with tutor feedback. This instructional article is based around the Using Feedback Effectively strategy which takes students through a range of activities with the aim of 'getting more out of the feedback' they receive from tutors on their essays. This form/ process can be integrated into a course or stand alone as a resource for students. This article situates the strategy within relevant published research, and draws upon comments from student users of the form. In addition the form has been the focus for internal staff development sessions, and two international conference workshops. Comments from participants in these sessions will highlight issues from a tutor perspective.*

153

### **Introduction**

Staff in higher education often express frustration at student failure to pay heed to written feedback on essays, in some cases not even picking up essays to access feedback. Written feedback has been identified by many sources as one of the main ingredients in effective student learning, the 'passport to better marks' (Cottrell 2003), and 69% of our new students in 2006 stated that feedback had helped their learning in the past.

However, researchers have identified feedback as the one aspect of the assessment process that is often overlooked and under-valued. Students look at grades and ignore negative tutor comments (Chanock 2000), perhaps because comments can be difficult to decipher and understand (Weaver 2006). Falchikov noted that 'students often do not read their teachers' feedback, and when they do so, often misunderstand it. Even when the feedback comments are read and understood, they are rarely acted upon' (1995, 159).

Failure to engage with feedback is not a recent phenomena, Brannon and Knoblauch noted in 1981 that there is 'scarcely a shred of empirical evidence to show that students typically even comprehend our responses to their writing, let alone use them purposefully to modify their practice.' (1981, 1)

Let us pause to consider these two elements of student engagement with feedback, to understand tutor comments, and then to act on the advice. How can this important link between tutor feedback and student learning be strengthened, so that feedback becomes a central learning resource for students? The *Using Feedback Effectively* form (Appendix 1.) was developed from a cross-university workshop at Wolverhampton, UK. The form presents a strategy to support students in their interaction with tutor feedback. Initial feedback from

students has been positive, one commented: “This exercise was interesting and helpful to complete. I had misunderstood some feedback I received and if I had not completed this exercise I would have continued doing what I was doing wrong,, which would have had a negative impact on my work.”

The three stages of the strategy link to MacLellan’s research which found that ‘most students did not view feedback on their learning as either routinely helpful in itself or as a catalyst for discussion.’ (MacLellan, 2001, 316)

Table 1. Modal values

Item	Students	Staff
36. Feedback is helpful in detail	sometimes (73%)	frequently (43%)
37. Feedback prompts discussion with tutor	never (50%)	frequently (63%)
39. Feedback improves learning	sometimes (72%)	frequently (49%)

(MacLellan, 2001, 310)

Stage one of the strategy explores issues concerning the detail of feedback, stage two explores how to promote discussion between student and tutor, and stage three focuses on how to encourage students to take action on feedback so that they learn from the feedback.

### 1. Working on feedback:

<i>Read the feedback on your assignment carefully, then re-read the piece of work to see the areas that the feedback refers to. You might use a highlighter pen to cross-reference the feedback to your work, or to draw attention to corrections and suggestions.</i>	
<b>What has your tutor written</b>	<b>What do you understand this to mean?</b>

Students are likely to write fewer assignments at University than they did in their previous study, so it is important that they glean all they can from the feedback they receive. At school or college, teachers were able to provide regular personalised feedback to assist individual development. Anonymous marking schemes and the anonymity of studying in large groups at university, often place students in a new position in relation to the feedback they receive. Thus, it is essential that students work carefully through feedback to see how far they have achieved the learning outcomes, and to access advice from tutors on how to develop.

Participants in workshops recognised that feedback requires interpretation, due to tutor use of ‘coded’ language and often idiosyncratic use of terms. Which mean it is not easy for the student to interpret comments and work out what the feedback means. This is best achieved

by working through the feedback line by line, linking tutor comments to specific sections of their essay and to marking criteria.

**Breaking feedback into positives and negatives:**

Often feedback can seem totally negative to students: pointing out spelling or grammatical mistakes, factual errors, questioning interpretations and the need to reference correctly. Taking negative points on board is very difficult, and students may be inclined not to read the feedback. However, it is important they read through the feedback carefully and make a note of all comments, to accrue the benefits identified by this student: 'I feel it is important to be aware that you are good at certain things. I used to have a tendency to look at the negative points made and therefore have a negative view of my abilities. I now realize the criticism I receive is for me to use to my advantage.' Initial reading of feedback which includes some negatives may mean that students miss positive points. It is just as important that students note their successes, as these are the things they need to continue to do in the future. This recording of positives is important so as to counteract the tendency to dwell on negatives, one workshop participant noted: 'I concentrated on positives, only because we were *told* to, my instinct was to look for negatives.' Such a systematic overview enables the student to take a balanced account of their achievements, in order to counter Race's observation that students 'often are quite blind to valuable feedback.' (1997, 64)

This activity will help students take a balanced view of feedback, recording both the things they have done well and the areas for improvement.

<b>Break the feedback down into</b>	
<b>Good points (note them so you can do them again)</b>	<b>Areas for Improvement (draw out main areas from feedback)</b>

This first stage may enable students to get what they need out of feedback. They can use this summary of the feedback as a record for their personal development planning. Encourage students to maintain their own learning portfolio, so that they can look at the feedback provided in different modules. Are all the tutors saying the same thing? Are there things they have done well in one module that could be applied to other areas?

However, the complexity of the issues raised by tutor feedback may mean that many students will benefit from discussion with their tutor. Higgins et al drew attention to feedback as a

‘unique form of communication,’ with academic terms reflecting ‘a much more complex academic discourse, which in turn may only be partially understood by students.’ (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001, 272)

Feedback can also raise more questions for students than it answers, as students needed to become ‘code breakers’ to understand what tutors meant by key terms such as argument, structure, or explicitness (Lillis 2001, Sommers, 1982). In addition 85% of students felt that tutors did not provide enough feedback (Weaver 2006). Such deficiencies can be overcome if tutors can go beyond their comments and provide more detail.

**Stage 2. Preparation for a tutorial:**

MacLellan’s findings on the gap between staff and student perceptions of feedback revealed the greatest discrepancy in response to the question ‘how far feedback prompted discussion between tutor and student’. Tutors responded that feedback ‘frequently’ prompts discussion, but who they had discussion with is questionable as 50% of students stated feedback ‘never’ prompted discussion!

This section of the *Using Feedback Effectively* form responds to these findings by providing support for student discussion with tutors. The process of students asking questions about what a tutor meant by a comment can be problematic if students are thought to be challenging tutor perceptions. Yet for any learning to take place students need to understand tutor comments and think about how to act on them. Thinking about the question in advance and writing out the questions may help students ask questions in a manner that tutors do not find challenging, and thus enable students to take this important step in finding out what the tutor meant. Also use of a form provided by tutors legitimizes the questioning of feedback by students.

<i>Use these prompts to prepare for a tutorial with your module tutor.</i>	
<i>Make an appointment with your tutor, take this form and your assignment to the tutorial.</i>	
<b>Feedback that you understand</b>	<b>Fill in the actions you intend to take on these points and discuss with your tutor</b>
<i>You should make more use of the quotations you include.</i>	<i>I understand this to mean that when I include a quote I should draw out the implications that the quote has for my essay. The quote might back up the point I am making, or it might offer a different perspective so I can use it as a jumping off point for the next part of my essay. In either case I need to make</i>

	<i>explicit reference to my reason for including the quote.</i>
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The form recommends that students start with comments they think they understand, and use the opportunity to check that their interpretations of tutor comments is correct. This provides a safe foundation for students, as they can start from a position of security. In addition this aspect of the discussion enables the student to show the tutor they have taken feedback seriously.

The move to feedback comments students do not understand takes place when the student has gained some confidence from discussing straightforward comments. This provides an opportunity for students to ask their tutor what was meant by a particular term, or to ask how the comments link to parts of the essay.

<b>Feedback you do not understand</b>	<b>Fill this column in during the tutorial</b>
'more critical reflection needed'	My tutor said in the tutorial that I tend to write descriptively and do not draw out the impact of the information.

This process of going through the questions arising from tutor feedback can help students to overcome the psychological barrier of facing criticism by placing them in control of the situation. Instead of being the passive recipient of feedback, students can ask the questions that interest them from the feedback. This asking of questions enables the student to engage in dialogue with the tutor, and empowers the student to take control of the revision process. This opportunity to discuss how far they were successful in communicating their intentions is a vital step. Brannon & Knoblauch noted "Writers know what they *intended* to communicate. Readers know what a text has *actually* said to them' (1982, 162). Thus, the tutor can fulfil the role of a 'sounding board' enabling the student to see where their communication was successful and where it needs revision.

Students may find it easier to put feedback sheets, which are regarded as negative, out of sight and out of mind. If having an essay tutorial is a matter of choice it can be easy for students to opt out of facing up to perceived failings by not having a tutorial (Orrell 2006). However, when a tutorial is required, students have to face up to the feedback, and through this process can gain a balanced overview of their achievements to direct future learning. One student identified the benefits gained from a feedback tutorial: "It was a good opportunity to discuss strengths and weaknesses, which we do not always have the opportunity to do because once the work is marked I'm thinking ahead to the next essay and don't act on the feedback."

In addition students have an opportunity to explore contradictions in written feedback. An example of this was used in the workshop where the overall comment to a student noted ‘you have a strong personal voice,’ while ‘you need to be more objective’ was written on the text of the essay.

### **Stage 3. Learner Action Plan**

The third stage of the *Using Feedback Effectively* form focuses on the development of a learner action plan. Requiring students to develop a Learner Action Plan recognises that the developments in light of feedback will not happen unless specific and directed action is taken. A student user of the form noted: “I realise that in order to develop my study skills I have to make an effort. I need to research these topics in the same way I do other aspects of my work.”

Stephani noted that staff assume that students know how to complete the tasks they are set, and ‘rarely guide students through or model the process of structuring an essay’ (1998, 348). Tutors need to offer strategies for development so that students are not left playing a guessing game when it comes to act on advice (Sommers 1982).

This starts by requiring the student to identify the major and minor points for them to consider from feedback. This opportunity to break feedback down into major and minor points is important, as they may be mixed up in tutor feedback, as illustrated by Sommers: “Check your commas and semi-colons and think more about what you are thinking about” (1982, 151). Only by working out major and minor concerns will students be in a position to work out how long they should spend on follow up tasks.

<b>Action Plan: Stage 1.</b>	
<i>Divide the main feedback between:</i>	
<b>Major issues</b>	<b>Minor errors</b>
<i>e.g. Referencing</i>	<i>e.g. Punctuation</i>
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

Then students chart the process of development by identifying key resources in terms of people, books and online resources to assist their development in identified areas. This final stage aims to ensure that engaging with feedback becomes a learning experience for students, benefiting from the advice provided by tutors.

## Stage 2.

Issue	Tutor Advice	Action to be taken
<i>e.g. Referencing</i>	<i>To provide for citations, quotes and in bibliography</i>	<i><a href="http://asp.wlv.ac.uk/Level5.asp?UserType=6&amp;Level5=500">http://asp.wlv.ac.uk/Level5.asp?UserType=6&amp;Level5=500</a> Try out the advice for references in the essay. Book session with Study Skills Advisor to check if you have got it right.</i>

The *Using Feedback Effectively* form contains information about Study Skills resources (people, book and electronic) which students could use in their action plan. This reminding of support at the point students need to access makes it more likely that students will follow up advice. In addition the *Study Skills Feedback and Recommended Readings* form (Appendix 2) provides a range of web resources which specify the nature of the grammar requirement, for example for the use of an apostrophe, and provide examples for the student to check their understanding. For example, if students have not referenced appropriately and do not take steps to learn how to reference they will not be able to fulfil this aspect of academic work in future assignments. This form can be used as part of the feedback process to identify areas for the student to work on, together with details of a follow up website or book.

It is important for all students to work out what they need to do to take their work to the next level (this is as important for students who want to move from B to A grades as for those who want to move from fail to pass grades). Often good students are frustrated by feedback which recognises good achievement but does not offer advice for further development. They may need to cross reference the feedback they receive to the marking criteria and examine the characteristics of the higher grade.

## Conclusion

Getting more out of feedback can enhance the development of all students. Each assessment opportunity can become an opportunity for growth if students develop their own capacity to interpret and act on tutor feedback. The following comment reveals a student's changed attitude to feedback: 'Next time I complete an assignment, I am certain I will be more conscientious not to make the same mistakes but more importantly, remember my strengths too.'

This approach guides students through a process to understand and use feedback, so that feedback becomes central to their learning (Weaver 2006, Orrell 2006). It responds to research noting that whilst students may make a mental note of comments, most fail to follow the intention through (Orrell, 2006).

The process addresses difficulties students may face in acting on feedback. It provides an opportunity to discuss seeming contradictions in feedback, and through discussion to overcome the tendency tutors to make bland comments which do not recognise the level of challenges facing the students. Clarity can be achieved through a tutorial, enabling the student and tutor to discuss the meaning of each comment, the overall import of comments, and ways to address the comments. This form encourages students to draw on a wide range of resources to aid their development, and provides links to people, books and electronic for support.

Finally, the approach is based on the Aristotelian notion of developing good habits through action. By using the form students will learn how to get more out of feedback, and may thus, draw on aspects of the process to assist their future development. This addresses MacLellan's recommendation that students need to be actively involved for learning to take place: 'The implication of this is that if students are not actually monitoring and regulating the quality of their own learning, feedback of itself, regardless of its degree of detail, will not cause improvement in learning' (2001, 316).

The encouraging statistic that 69% of students enter higher education with the perception that feedback had helped their learning in the past means that students start with largely positive views of feedback. This strategy facilitates student understanding of feedback and supports their actions in relation to feedback. Please take the form and adapt it to your own situation so students can get more out of the feedback they receive.

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Race, P. (1997). 'Why Assess Innovatively?' In S. Brown, & A. Glasner, A (Eds.), *Assessment Matters in Higher Education*, (pp.57- 70). Buckingham: SHRE & Open University Press.

Sommers, N. 'Responding to Student Writing' *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 33, No. 2., 1982, 148 – 156.

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## Appendix 1: Using Feedback Effectively form

### Using Feedback effectively

*The feedback you receive on work is a good guide on how your work is progressing. The comments provide information on how far you have achieved the learning outcomes for the assignment, and comments on the text provide suggestions for improving aspects of your academic writing. Use this form to develop your skills in this area.*

#### 1. Working on feedback:

*Read the feedback on your assignment carefully, then re-read the piece of work to see the areas that the feedback refers to. You might use a highlighter pen to cross-reference the feedback to your work, or to draw attention to corrections and suggestions.*

What has your tutor written	What do you understand this to mean?
<b>Break the feedback down into</b>	
<b>Good points</b> (note these down so you can do them again)	<b>Areas for Improvement</b> (draw out the two main areas from feedback)

#### 2. Preparing for a tutorial:

*Use these prompts to prepare for a tutorial with your module tutor. Make an appointment with your tutor, take this form and your assignment to the tutorial.*

Feedback that you understand	Fill in the actions you intend to take on these points and discuss with your tutor

Feedback you do not understand	Fill this column in during the tutorial
<b>Action Plan: Stage 1.</b> Divide the main feedback into:	
Major issues	Minor errors
<i>e.g. Referencing</i> 1.  2.  3.	<i>e.g. Punctuation</i> 1.  2.  3.

**Stage 2.**

Issue	Tutor Advice	Action to be taken
<i>e.g. Referencing</i>	<i>To provide for citations, quotes and in bibliography</i>	<a href="http://www.wlv.ac.uk/help">www.wlv.ac.uk/help</a> <i>Book session with Study Skills Advisor</i>

Area to develop:	Where to go for help:
<b>Study Skills:</b> <i>if the advice is that you need to brush up on study or writing skills you might find a section listed below will help.</i>	Cottrell, S. (2003), <i>The Study Skills Handbook</i> , Basingstoke: Palgrave. Northedge, A. (2005), <i>The Good Study Guide</i> , Milton Keynes: Open University.
<b>Academic writing:</b> <i>planning, developing an argument, grammar (sentence construction, punctuation, use of apostrophe), referencing.</i>	<b>Study Skills Advisors:</b> (HLC, book appointment on ext.2301). Use on-line tip sheets on study skills.
<b>Extend your reading base:</b> <i>to find appropriate sources for your work: OPAC (books and journals), electronic data-bases, internet.</i>	<b>Academic librarians:</b> Harrison Learning Centre, First floor Help-desk
<b>Coping with stress:</b> <i>not able to focus on</i>	<b>Counselling and Guidance:</b> make an

<i>your work, worrying about failure, how to develop your confidence.</i>	appointment at the Student Gateway in MB block. <b>Student Union:</b>
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**Recommended Study Skills Books:**

**Cottrell, S. (2003), *The Study Skills Handbook*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.**

*Good sections on: planning and time management*

**Northedge, A. (1990), *The Good Study Guide*, Milton Keynes: Open University.**

*Good sections on: planning essays, developing an argument.*

**Websites:**

**Sharpen Up Your Skills:** <http://asp.wlv.ac.uk/Level2.asp?UserType=4&Subsection=547>

**Study Guides and Strategies:**

<http://www.studygs.net/index.net>

*This is a very comprehensive site maintained by Joe Landsberger, who visited our University in 2006 to run workshops for staff.*

**Writing Home:**<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lonline/writing/index.xml>

*This is a very useful website which provides examples of annotated essays, which lets you see what other students essays look like. The links also help you to go beyond the shorthand that tutors use to see why a tutor has made a comment, e.g. 'good introduction' – see the explanation on Meg's essay:*

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lonline/writing/arts/history/3.2.3.xml>

*It also provides tutorials on the following topics that may help you follow up feedback advice:*

**Writing**

**introductions:**

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lonline/writing/education/perspectives-learning/2.1.xml>



Appendix 2: Study Skills Feedback and Recommended Readings			
Aspect	Needs work	Online support	Books
Apostrophe		<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/punctuate.html#Apostrophes">http://www.powa.org/edit/punctuate.html#Apostrophes</a>	<b>Good for Grammar:</b> Bailey, S. (2005) <i>Academic Writing</i> . Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes. Field, M. (2003) <i>How To Improve Your Written English</i> . Oxford: How To Books. Jackson, H. (2005) <i>Good Grammar For Students</i> . London: Sage. Johnson, M. & Goodwin, V. (1999) <i>The Effective Use of English: Student Toolkit 1</i> . Milton Keynes: Open University. Johnson, R. (1995) <i>Improve Your Writing Skills</i> . Manchester: Clifton Press. Lewis, M & Reinders, H. (2003) <i>Study Skills for Speakers of English as a Second Language</i> . Basingstoke: Palgrave. Lewis, R. (1999) <i>How To Write Essays</i> . Cambridge: National Extension College. Oshima, A. & Hogue, A. (1999) <i>Writing Academic English</i> . London: Longman
Arguments		<a href="http://www.powa.org/argument/index.html">http://www.powa.org/argument/index.html</a>	
Capitalisation		<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/capitalization.html">http://www.powa.org/edit/capitalization.html</a>	
Editing		<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/index.html">http://www.powa.org/edit/index.html</a>	
Essay-examples		<a href="http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/index.xml">http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/index.xml</a>	
Grammar		<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/grammar.html">http://www.powa.org/edit/grammar.html</a>	
Harvard		<a href="http://asp.wlv.ac.uk/Level6.asp?UserType=4&amp;Level6=80">http://asp.wlv.ac.uk/Level6.asp?UserType=4&amp;Level6=80</a>	
Modifiers		<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Misrelated%20Modifier">http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Misrelated%20Modifier</a>	
Mother tongue		<a href="http://www.studygs.net/index.htm">http://www.studygs.net/index.htm</a>	
Paragraphs		<a href="http://my.powa.org/modules.php?name=Content&amp;pa=showpage&amp;pid=24">http://my.powa.org/modules.php?name=Content&amp;pa=showpage&amp;pid=24</a>	
Person shifts		<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Shift%20in%20Person">http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Shift%20in%20Person</a>	
Planning		<a href="http://www.palgrave.com/skills4study/html/essays/essayplanning.htm">http://www.palgrave.com/skills4study/html/essays/essayplanning.htm</a>	

<b>Pronouns</b>	<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Pronoun%20Reference">http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Pronoun%20Reference</a>	<p>Peck, J. &amp; Coyle, M. (2005) <i>The Student's Guide To Writing</i> London: Palgrave Macmillan.</p> <p>Van Emden, J &amp; Becker, L. (2003) <i>Effective Communication for Arts &amp; Humanities Students</i>. Basingstoke: Palgrave.</p> <p><b>Good for Essay structure:</b></p> <p>Barrass, R. (2005) <i>Students Must Write</i>. London: Routledge.</p> <p>Cottrell, S. (2003) <i>The Study Skills Handbook</i> Basingstoke: Palgrave.</p> <p>Cottrell, S. (2005) <i>Critical Thinking Skills</i>. Basingstoke: Palgrave.</p> <p>Hennessy, B. (2002) <i>Writing An Essay</i>. Oxford: Howtobooks.</p> <p>Manning, E &amp; Houston, M.(1999) <i>Essay and Report Writing Skills: Student Toolkit 5</i> . Milton Keynes: Open University.</p> <p>Northedge, A (2005) <i>The Good Study Guide</i> Milton Keynes: Open University (Ch 10. Writing the way 'they' want, Ch 11. Managing the Writing Process)</p>
<b>Punctuation</b>	<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/punctuate.html">http://www.powa.org/edit/punctuate.html</a>	
<b>Quotation</b>	<a href="http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/QPA_quoting.html">http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/QPA_quoting.html</a>	
<b>Sentence</b>	<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/concepts.html">http://www.powa.org/edit/concepts.html</a>	
<b>Spelling</b>	<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/spelling.html">http://www.powa.org/edit/spelling.html</a>	
<b>Subject/ verb</b>	<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Subject/Verb%20Agreement">http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Subject/Verb%20Agreement</a>	
<b>Tense</b>	<a href="http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Shift%20in%20Tense">http://www.powa.org/edit/problem.html#Shift%20in%20Tense</a>	