

Section 11

Giving and Receiving Feedback

Introduction

This section is about describing what is meant by feedback and will focus on situations where you will be given, and where you will give, feedback. It will also explain how you can 'use' the feedback you have been given for future purposes. This section will focus on the feedback which you will receive on essays and through presentations, as these are the two areas where you are most like sources of feedback in this stage of your academic career.

Definitions of Feedback

Feedback is not disapproval, criticism or a personal attack, but it is given so that you can improve your work to ensure you aim for better marks in future. Furthermore, when feedback is constructive and consistent and is given by someone in an informed position it is very useful.

Feedback is a way to let people know how effective they are in what they are trying to accomplish: it provides a way for people to learn how they affect the world around them, and it helps us to become more effective. In relation to written work, feedback can help us see where we can improve our essays, and in relation to presentations, feedback can inform us about how other people perceive us, and we can use this information to improve our communication and interaction skills.

Although receiving fair and valid feedback that is presented in a constructive manner can be very instructive and helpful, most of us find critical feedback difficult to receive. It is hard to keep a non-defensive and open attitude, as the implication is that we are flawed or wrong. However, a defensive reaction to feedback may reflect a feeling that it may be partially accurate; otherwise we would simply dismiss it. But this is not to say that we should always have to accept feedback or the manner in which it is sometimes given. We all have the right to refuse feedback, and we can expect feedback to be given in a respectful and supportive manner.

This section will firstly focus on feedback in relation to presentations and secondly will concentrate on feedback in relation to written work such as essays.

Giving and Receiving Feedback on Oral Presentations

When you give a seminar presentation it may be helpful for you to ask your teacher or colleagues to give you feedback. However, when you are giving feedback to someone else you should be aware of the ten points in the box below.

Giving Feedback

1. The more immediate the feedback, the more helpful it will be.
2. Be descriptive rather than judgemental: accurate, simple, clear, vivid and specific.
3. Direct praise or criticism towards performance in behavioural terms, i.e. to what the person did rather than who they are.
4. Be supportive, not authoritarian or dogmatic - encourage participants to contribute their views.
5. Be fair and reasonable, supporting judgements with evidence from observations.
6. Be positive as well as negative.
7. Offer constructive criticism only for actions which can be changed, and are related to the assessment criteria.
8. Don't compare the person's behaviour with that of others.
9. Restrict feedback to what can be absorbed and understood at one time.
10. Do not apologise for your criticism when it is made in good faith and supported by evidence.

The box below contains information about how to receive feedback.

Receiving Feedback

1. Attend to the speaker and listen to the message.
2. Try not to react by becoming defensive or launching a counter-attack.
3. Avoid flippancy or attempts to change the subject.
4. Do not caricature the criticism by over-reacting.
5. Do not infer that the critic has some ulterior, hostile motive.
6. Convey to the other person that you understand the point of the criticism, and indicate a willingness to work together towards a solution or improvement.
7. Accept praise graciously - don't deny it.

Using Questions When Giving Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback will be more effective in a situation characterised by rapport between the parties which encourages the expression of genuine views. Establishing such rapport is dependent upon the relationship which has been developed between the people, but it can be assisted by skill in selecting and phrasing appropriate statements and questions. So, using the right kind of questions is vitally important. Successful questioning necessitates the person being questioned to think and to talk openly without feeling under pressure. The most appropriate type of question for this purpose is open questions. Some examples are given in the box below.

Open Questions

1. To what extent does this?
2. Explain to me how?
3. Tell me about?
4. Describe to me how?
5. Can you tell me why?
6. To what do you attribute?
7. What importance does this have in relation to?

Ways of Giving and Receiving Feedback

The information contained in the following boxes covers four main areas: negative and positive ways to give feedback and negative and positive ways to receive feedback.

Negative Delivery of Feedback

- **Attacking:** Hard hitting and aggressive, focusing on the weaknesses of the other person.
- **Indirect:** Feedback is vague and issues hinted at rather than addressed directly.
- **Insensitive:** Little concern for the needs of the other person.
- **Disrespectful:** Feedback is demeaning, bordering on insulting.
- **Judgmental:** Feedback is evaluative, judging personality rather than behaviour.
- **General:** Aimed at broad issues which cannot be easily defined.
- **Poor timing:** Given long after the prompting event, or at the worst possible time.
- **Impulsive:** Given thoughtlessly, with little regard for the consequences.
- **Selfish:** Feedback meets the giver's needs, rather than the needs of the other person.

Positive Delivery of Feedback

- Supportive: Delivered in a non-threatening and encouraging manner.
- Direct: The focus of the feedback is clearly stated.
- Sensitive: Delivered with sensitivity to the needs of the other person.
- Considerate: Feedback is intended not to insult or demean.
- Descriptive: Focuses on behaviour that can be changed, rather than personality.
- Specific: Feedback is focused on specific behaviours or events.
- Good timing: Given as close to the prompting event as possible and at an opportune time.
- Thoughtful: Well considered rather than impulsive.
- Helpful: Feedback is intended to be of value to the other person.

Negative Ways of Receiving Feedback

- Defensive: Defends personal actions, frequently objects to feedback given.
- Attacking: Verbally attacks the feedback giver, and turns the table.
- Denies: Refutes the accuracy or fairness of the feedback.
- Disrespectful: Devalues the speaker, what the speaker is saying, or the speaker's right to give feedback.
- Closed: Ignores the feedback, listening blankly without interest.
- Inactive listening: Makes no attempt to 'hear' or understand the meaning of the feedback.
- Rationalizing: Finds explanations for the feedback that dissolve any personal responsibility.
- Patronizing: Listens, but shows little interest.
- Superficial: Listens and agrees, but gives the impression that the feedback will have little effect.

Positive Ways of Receiving Feedback

- **Open:** Listens without frequent interruption or objections.
- **Responsive:** Willing to hear what's being said without turning the table.
- **Accepting:** Accepts the feedback, without denial.
- **Respectful:** Recognizes the value of what is being said and the speaker's right to say it.
- **Engaged:** Interacts appropriately with the speaker, asking for clarification when needed.
- **Active listening:** Listens carefully and tries to understand the meaning of the feedback.
- **Thoughtful:** Tries to understand the personal behaviour that has led to the feedback.
- **Interested:** Is genuinely interested in getting feedback.
- **Sincere:** Genuinely wants to make personal changes if appropriate.

Summary

The information in the box below is a summary of advice in relation to giving and receiving feedback on presentations.

Basic Guidelines for Giving and Receiving Feedback

1. Offer feedback on observed behaviour, not on perceived attitudes
2. Give information, not opinion.
3. Offer descriptions of what you saw and how you felt, rather than judgements.
4. Focus on behaviour than can be changed.
5. Choose the aspects which are most important, and limit yourself to these.
6. Keep the messages simple.
7. Ask questions rather than make statements.
8. Allow the receiver to reach his/her own conclusions.
9. Set the ground rules in advance.
10. Comment on things that an individual did well, as well as areas where they might improve.
11. The receiver must be empowered by the process.
12. Feelings of inadequacy or incompetence can lead to humiliation.
13. Be specific - give concrete examples.
14. Observe everyone's personal limits.
15. Too much feedback can overload people.
16. Before starting, consider the potential value to the receiver - If there isn't any then it may be best to reconsider giving it.
17. Clarity - be clear about what you want to say.
18. Be descriptive rather than evaluative.

Feedback on Written Essays

This section will now address feedback in relation to written work, and specifically, essays.

You are most likely to get feedback on the following areas of your essays: the structure; grammar; referencing; factually incorrect information; your arguments and presentation. All these issues are addressed in the boxes below. However, some of the issues are also covered in different sections of this manual.

Structure

- There is no identifiable structure
- The structure does not make sense
- There is no proper theme
- The points are not in any logical sequence
- The arguments or points are not linked

Grammar

- No proper sentence structure
- Improper use of, or lack of, grammar
- Incorrect use of English
- Typo's

Referencing

- No systematic referencing
- Improper use of Harvard system
- Where they have got references from
 - o the references are out of date - use more recent or current references.
 - o too many references taken from the web rather than books or journals.

Factually Incorrect Information

- Incorrect dates.
- Misinformation.
- Incorrect statistics.
- Incorrect or improper use of theory.
- Spelling people's names incorrectly.

Arguments

- The argument built is incorrect through wrong application of theory or data.
- Need to back up argument with data.
- No argument, just a presentation of data.
- The argument is based on opinion and not fact.
- The arguments is unbalanced – i.e. only the 'for' arguments and no counter argument (the conclusion is where you can argue for one side or the other).
- The essay is descriptive rather than analytical.

Presentation

- Follow the set guidelines for presentations and formatting.

When you have received your feedback you should read it and use it in future essays.

How to Use Feedback

1. Read it.
2. Summarise the key points made and create a list of all feedback from your essays. You will then be able to see the key areas where you have received the most feedback. You can then identify if there are key issues which you repeatedly get feedback on. In the next essay refer back to this list and change the areas where you are likely to get feedback. Such as referencing etc.
3. If the feedback is on grammatical errors then identify the areas where you can get additional help, such as other classes like Study Skills etc.
4. Discuss the feedback with friends and colleagues and identify what is specific to you and then find ways of ensuring that you don't make the same errors again.
5. Feedback should not ever be personalised.
6. If you think the feedback is unfair then go to your personal tutor who will advise you if they think you have a valid case.
7. Always use your candidate number and not your name to ensure that feedback is on the essay and content of the essay rather than have anything to do with you as an individual.

Feedback Should Be:

1. Positive
2. Helpful
3. Should identify any weak areas so that you can work on them and improve the issue/problem.

Evaluation Forms

Another way that you can give feedback is through your class or course evaluation forms. Always complete them as this is your chance to voice your opinions of the course or class. Evaluation forms are treated very seriously by your lecturers for the following reasons:

1. The University has a Quality Assurance Obligation whereby at the end of the year the course directors have to write up the remarks and comments made in the evaluation forms and then develop a response. Thus they must actively seek to address the issues that are raised by you on the forms.
2. It is important that you write comments in them otherwise your grievance could go undetected. (Remember - you may get the same lecturer for three years so it extremely worthwhile to write comments).

Think about evaluation forms, especially the end of semester ones, and think about what you could write in them to make the lectures or teaching more effective.