

How To Give

FEEDBACK

To Students

The Advanced Guide

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WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

If you want to help your students do even better at school, then this guide is for you.

For teachers who are new to giving feedback, it shows you what to do from the ground up. Yet, it also includes advanced tips and tricks.

It doesn't matter what grade or subject that you teach, feedback can *help you* to *help your students* reach their full potential.

If you care about your kids, then this guide is something you simply must read.



FEEDBACK 101

What does giving feedback to students really mean? How and when should you give feedback? Why should you care? You will discover the answer to these questions (and more) in the section of the eBook I call—Feedback 101.

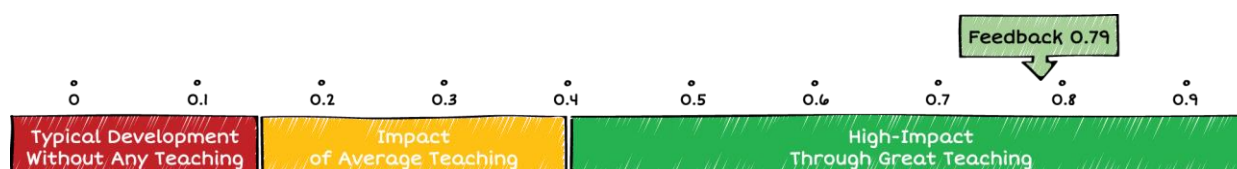
Why You Should Learn How to Give Feedback Effectively

We know that **feedback works**. Research shows that giving feedback has more impact on student achievement than most of the things that teachers do.

“Feedback is among the most powerful influences on achievement.

John Hattie

In fact, **it is the single most potent teaching strategy that teachers can use** with all ages and across all subjects—leading to an average academic gain of 29 percentile points.



Many teachers claim that they give regular feedback to their students, yet the truth is that most students get very little feedback each day.

Furthermore, **some forms of feedback are far more powerful than others**. In fact, **when teachers give feedback the wrong way**, it can even **impede their success**.

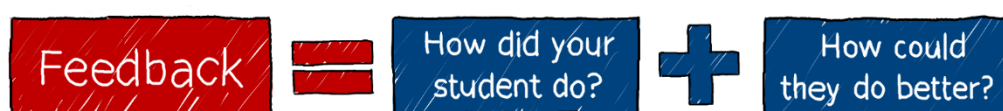
Therefore, it is vital that you **learn how to give feedback in ways that work**. This guide will teach you how to give feedback to your students in the right way.



What Do We Mean By Feedback?

Feedback is information that you give to a student after noting how they are *doing* at something—information that **helps them to improve** their performance.

The aim of feedback is to close the gap between *where students are at* and *where you want them to be*. Feedback closes this gap by letting your students know *how they are going* while also telling them *how they can improve*.



Feedback moves students forward from what they currently understand to what they are meant to understand, and it pushes them from what they can currently do towards what they should be able to do.

You give feedback about what your students have already done, but you then use that as a springboard into a conversation about what else they could do.



If you were to say, *Chloe, your paragraph isn't complete—you need to include a topic sentence*, your comment would be considered feedback.



However, if you were to say, *Bianca, you got 8/10 on your spelling test*, that wouldn't be considered feedback¹ as it gives Bianca no insight into how to improve.

¹ Some authors and researchers do count this as feedback, but classify it as ineffective feedback.

What Feedback Isn't

Feedback should never include a judgement about the student themselves.

It must not tell students that they are inherently:

- ✓ smart or dumb
- ✓ conscientious or lazy
- ✓ good or bad

Rather, feedback focuses on students' performance and what they did (or didn't do) to achieve that level of performance.

It is not hard to understand why calling students *dumb*, *lazy* and *bad*, is not likely to help them learn. However, personal praise can be just as dangerous.

This is why generalised **praise is not considered to be feedback**. Well-intentioned comments such as *good girl*, *well done*, and *you're really good at this*, focus on the student. This leads students to attribute your praise to personal qualities (e.g. how smart they are) rather than to specific things they have done.

If students see their *success* being based on *who they are* (smart, sporty, dramatic, etc.), they are likely to see *failure* in the same way (dumb, uncoordinated, shy). When things don't go well, they believe it is because *they are not good enough*, which is something they cannot do anything about. With this belief stuck in their minds, they see no point in taking corrective action.

While not denying students' natural talents and tendencies, you need to focus your feedback on the link between:

- ✓ what they did and the result that they achieved
- ✓ what they need to do to achieve the result they desire



The Four Fundamentals of Feedback

Later in this guide, you will find some specific ways that you can give feedback to your students. However, before we go any further, you need to understand the four fundamentals of feedback.



Be Focused: Feedback works best when it is focused on helping students to achieve a specific goal. The goal may relate to a single lesson, a task that spans several lessons or to an individual student. You compare the students' actual performance to what they must achieve to reach the goal, then give them insight into how they can close this gap.



Be Selective: Give your students feedback about a small number of important points. If you give them feedback about too many different things at once, they can easily become mentally overwhelmed. This leads to what psychologists call cognitive overload, which in turn prevents learning.



Be Constructive: The aim of feedback is to help students improve. It is helpful to remember this essential point when you are deciding what to say in any piece of feedback. You need to give them honest feedback on how they went; however, you also need to let them know that you believe they can improve and to give them the help to do so.



Be Willing To Discuss It: Feedback only works if students understand and accept what you have told them. By giving your students a chance to discuss the feedback you gave them, you enable them to clarify anything they don't understand. It also shows respect and encourages them to buy in to your ideas for improvement.

You can see some of these points in action in the video clip [Austin's Butterfly](#).



When to Give Feedback

When should you give your students feedback?

Feedback is powerful because it lets students know how they are doing while there is still time to adjust and perfect their efforts.

This means you need to **provide feedback to your students before, rather than after their formal assessment tasks**. This gives them the opportunity to learn and improve before being assessed.

“ *Provide students with feedback as soon after the event as possible and throughout a unit of instruction—not just at the end of a unit.*

from **Classroom Instruction That Works**

If students don't receive feedback in time to use it, the feedback will not help them to improve their results.

While all feedback must be timely, you still have a choice to make. You can *give feedback immediately*, or you can *delay giving feedback* for a period of time.

- ✓ **Immediate feedback** helps students to understand the material and is more effective when the work is new to the students, or if a student is struggling with the work.
- ✓ **Delayed feedback** helps students to transfer your advice to similar problems and tasks. It works best when students are more knowledgeable about the topic and proficient in the task at hand.

When you delay feedback, you still need to make sure that students have time to act on it.



TYPES OF FEEDBACK

There are three different types of feedback:

- ✓ **Basic** feedback
- ✓ **Instructional** feedback
- ✓ **Coaching** feedback

They all tell students how they are going and give them insight into how they can do better. However, they do so in very different ways.

Basic Feedback

Basic feedback tells students if they were right or **wrong**, while also providing the correct answer.

Instructional Feedback

Instructional feedback tells students what specific things they need to do in order to get it right or to improve their performance in some way.

Coaching Feedback

Coaching feedback prompts students to think **of** ways to improve their work without explicitly telling them what to do.

If used in the right situations, all three types of feedback can help your students to achieve better results.

Therefore, you need to learn how to use each one.



Basic Feedback

Basic feedback starts with letting the student know if their answer was right or wrong. Then, if a student did get it wrong, you also give them the correct answer.

Research shows that the simple act of providing the correct answer has **far more impact than just telling them their result** (e.g. right, wrong, the total score, the percentage).

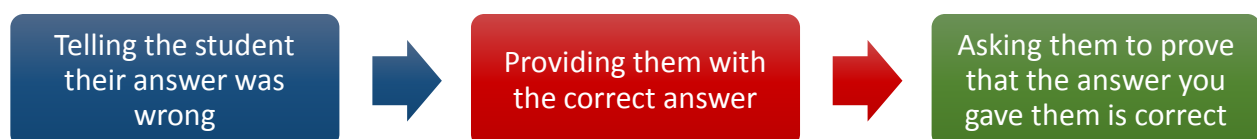
We call this *basic feedback* because you're giving students very basic information. However, your feedback must still include the two essential elements—information about:

- ✓ Their current work (right or wrong)
- ✓ The correct answer (which prompts them to think about where they went wrong)

However, for students to be able to do this, they must have already developed some degree of mastery over the material. Therefore, you should **only use basic feedback with *advanced and intermediate learners***.

You could use basic feedback as part of the many *simple tasks* you get students to do each day. However, it is also possible to **use basic feedback with more *complex work***, such as problem-solving in maths.

For more complex problems, it involves three steps:



This works far better than simply telling them that their answer was wrong and asking them to redo the task until they get it correct.

Instructional Feedback

When giving **instructional feedback**, you move from telling students about their work, to telling them how it could be fixed or improved.

Rather than relying on the student to work out where they went wrong, instructional feedback offers concrete and specific information about what they need to do before having another go at a similar task. This explicit instruction **is particularly helpful to struggling and novice learners**.

If necessary, your instruction may involve re-teaching the entire concept, process or material. However, in most cases it involves focusing on the particular things the students need to do differently next time. You then elaborate on this information with details about the *what, how, when* and *why*.

After providing students some explicit instruction, it is a good idea to give them a:

- ✓ *Worked example* to follow
- ✓ *Practice problem* that you help them do

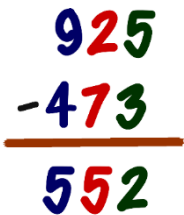
Example of Instructional Feedback

I once worked with a Year 6 student who was producing a video on the effects of earthquakes. She placed several household items on a table and filmed a series of clips of the table shaking. With each clip, she made the table shake more to show that the effects of earthquakes depended on their intensity. However, she did not explicitly mention or explain *intensity* during the clips.

My feedback to her was that, ❶ *the link between earthquakes' intensities and their effects was not clear*, ❷ *she needed an introduction explaining how intensity is measured using the Richter Scale*, and ❸ *she needed to tell the audience how intense each simulation was meant to be*.

Instructional Feedback Can Correct Faulty Understandings

Instructional feedback is particularly powerful when it corrects *faulty understandings* that students have formed. With this in mind, it is worth knowing common misconceptions associated with the content you are teaching.

 Some *faulty understandings* involve processes, such as in this maths problem. It seems this child believes that *you always take the smaller number from the larger number*. When giving him feedback, you need to let him know that this isn't the case. Rather, you tell him that—*you always take the bottom number from the top number*, you explain why this is the case and you revise trading before moving on.

Other faulty interpretations are conceptual (misconceptions). Here are five examples:

- ✓ Light things float and heavy things sink
- ✓ Multiplication always makes numbers bigger
- ✓ Seasons are caused by the earth's distance from the sun
- ✓ Poems have to rhyme
- ✓ There is no possibility of neutrino mass

Instructional Feedback Can Go Beyond the Immediate Task

As students become more proficient in a particular area, you **shift the focus of your advice from what they need to do in this specific task, to strategies that they can apply across similar tasks in the future**. One example of strategy-focused feedback would be to show a student how to use *estimation* to self-check the reasonableness of an answer. The key is to link a generalised strategy with a desired outcome in a particular type of task. For example:

- ✓ Test scores and *time spent studying*
- ✓ The quality of a debate and the *persuasive devices* used
- ✓ Assignment grades and *proofreading*
- ✓ Understanding a story and *self-correcting* when meaning is lost
- ✓ A wrong answer to a maths problem and the *creating an organised list* strategy.



Coaching Feedback

Coaching is the art of **using hints and questions to help students help themselves**.

It is a potentially powerful approach to feedback. When students learn to monitor, critique and improve their own performance (key meta-cognitive skills), they are likely to achieve better results.

Sadly, research shows that **teachers hardly use coaching at all**. For many teachers, learning how to coach their students would help them to help their students excel.

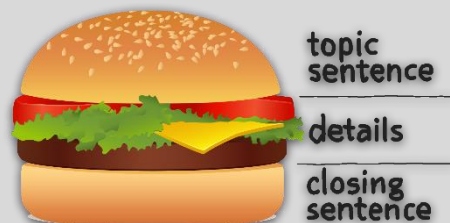
Yet, while coaching is a potentially potent technique, you should **only use it with students who are proficient in the area they are learning** because it only offers vague and generalised guidance.

Quite often, you start by giving students *instructional feedback* and then switch to *coaching* after the students get more adept. That is exactly what happened in this example.

Starting With Instructional Feedback

Some time ago, my Year 7 students had been working on how to structure their paragraphs using the hamburger model.

Initially, I would give *instructional feedback*, such as, *this paragraph is all about why the Roman Empire collapsed—you need to start it with a topic sentence that tells me that.*



Yet, as the weeks went on, we started exploring other aspects of writing. The students knew how to structure paragraphs; however, as their focus was elsewhere, they often forgot to do so in their writing. This was the perfect opportunity to use coaching.

An Example of Coaching Feedback

When conferencing with a child who had not structured a paragraph properly, I would ask them:

- ✔ What is the structure of a paragraph?
- ✔ What aspects of this structure have you used in this paragraph? Which one/s have you forgotten?
- ✔ What do you need to do to improve your work?

This encouraged the students to take ownership of the whole process by highlighting that they were capable of:

- ✔ Evaluating their own work
- ✔ Using their insights to improve it

These are the two central aspects of feedback, but you are helping your students to give feedback to themselves.



A Situational Approach to Feedback

A **situational approach feedback** highlights the fact that **you should use *different types of feedback with different types of students***.

“Learners need different types of feedback depending on their current skill level.

Gregory Yates

The most significant difference between students is their level of proficiency within the area you are currently teaching them.

Novice Learners	Need <i>instructional feedback</i> focused on the concept and task they are working on, and they need this feedback <i>immediately</i> .
Intermediate Learners	Can benefit from <i>basic feedback</i> , especially when working autonomously. Need <i>instructional feedback</i> focused on strategies that can deepen their learning and help them to apply it in other situations.
Proficient Students	Can benefit from <i>basic feedback</i> , especially when working autonomously. Need <i>coaching</i> to develop the meta-cognitive skills that help them to help themselves, and can benefit from you delaying their feedback.

There is an important exception to the above guidelines. If a student believes that their success and failure depend upon their *innate ability* rather than their *own actions* (a fixed mindset), it is always better to use instructional feedback—regardless of their proficiency level.

GETTING YOUR FEEDBACK HEARD

According to George Bernard Shaw, the single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred. The same holds true for feedback.

“ *The single biggest problem with feedback is the illusion that it has taken place.*

Adapted from **George Bernard Shaw**

Research shows that while many teachers believe they give plenty of helpful feedback already, students disagree. This is crucial, because the potential power of feedback depends upon what students do with it. Therefore, **it is what your students think your feedback means that really counts.**

Knowing how and when to use the different types of feedback helps, as does allowing students to discuss your feedback with you. However, in addition to these task-related aspects of feedback, **it is equally important to deal with the emotional side of feedback.**

Your **feedback can be quite threatening to your students.** Receiving feedback can be an emotionally laden event. It can erode students' self-esteem, their sense of fairness and their perceived standing among their peers.

As a result, **students will often deflect negative feedback.** They may dismiss it as unfair, inaccurate or as a confirmation that their teacher doesn't like them.

Deflected feedback will fail to have a positive impact on students' subsequent performance—making the whole exercise a waste of time. Furthermore, when students perceive feedback this way, it often leads to anger, hurt and other emotions, which destroy teacher-student relationships. This then has a negative effect on students' achievement in school.



This doesn't mean that you should avoid giving critical feedback.

“ *If children are protected from it, they won't learn well ...
Withholding constructive criticism does not help children's
confidence; it harms their future.*

Carol Dweck, Psychologist

It does mean you need to communicate that you are giving the student feedback *because you care* enough about them to help them push themselves and improve.

This message is more likely to be heard when you have already established *trusting teacher-student relationships* and when you have established *a climate where mistakes are welcomed as a natural part of learning*.

Trusting Teacher-Student Relationships

One way to reduce the threat posed by feedback, and therefore the likelihood that students will deflect your feedback, is to **build trusting relationships with your students**. If students trust you, they are more likely to accept that:

- ✓ Your feedback is an honest appraisal of their performance
- ✓ You are giving them feedback to help them improve even further

You need to show your students that you care about them both as people and as learners. You can show that you care about them as people by being warm, accepting and interested in their lives. You can show that you care about them as learners by communicating that you believe they do well, and then pressing them to do so.

To read more about this combination of **warmth** and **press** check out our online article [High-Performance Teacher-Student Relationships](#).



The Encouragement of Error

For feedback to work, your students need to understand that **making mistakes is an essential part of learning**. Anyone who is pushing themselves beyond what they have already mastered is going to make mistakes. Those errors, if harnessed correctly, help us move closer to subsequent success.

John Hattie describes error as the difference between *what we already know and can do*, and *what we aim to know and do*. As you read earlier, feedback helps students to see this gap, while providing them with ways of making it smaller and smaller.

“ *We need classes that develop the courage to err.*
John Hattie

Feedback works best when students make mistakes and are willing to learn from them. This holds true for high achievers, students who struggle and everyone in between.

If you are going to expect students to stretch themselves beyond what they have already mastered, then they are going to make mistakes. You must accept this as normal—and so must they.



GOALS & FEEDBACK

In order to have the most impact it can, **feedback should compare how each student is doing against some standard of performance.**

However, **you should not use how well other students have done as this standard.**

When your feedback focuses on how well a student has done in comparison to other students, those who are behind their peers often react by calling themselves dumb, stupid or just not academically inclined.

Rather, you should **make use of goals.** Goals help feedback to be more effective in two ways. They:

- ✓ Help you to *focus your feedback* on things that will help the student succeed
- ✓ *Motivate the student* to close the gap between their current level of performance and the standard of performance expressed in a concrete goal.

Lesson Goals

This form of goal spells out what you want your students to know and be able to do by the end of the lesson.

Setting lesson goals should be part of your daily routine. It is a simple action that boosts student performance on its own. When coupled with goal-focused feedback, it lifts performance even further.

For more information about how and why to set lesson goals, check out our [article on explicit teaching](#).



Task Goals

Task goals describe what students must know and be able to do over a longer period of time, such as by the end of the week, the end of an assignment or the end of a unit.

With more to learn than in-lesson goals, task goals often include a main goal and a series of sub-goals.

Some people call these sub-goals *success criteria*, which is a suitable name as their purpose is to outline what students must show in order to succeed in the task. Success criteria describe what you (as the teacher) will be looking for when you assess the students' completed task.

“ *When students understand their goals and what success at those goals looks like, then the feedback is more powerful.*

John Hattie

If you want to push your students to their potential, **you should set task goals and associated success criteria that are both challenging and clear.**

Personal Goals

You can also give students feedback on their progress towards *personal goals*.

Setting personal goals involves knowing where a student is at, and then specifying where you would like them to be by a set point in time. The focus is on personal growth, yet students are also motivated to compete with themselves by achieving personal bests.

Giving students feedback about their progress helps to keep them motivated, while enabling them to take corrective action if needed.



THE 10 DOS & DON'TS OF FEEDBACK

Dos	Don'ts
Be clear about what you want your students to achieve, know and do	Interrupt a student who is trying to work something out on their own
Focus your feedback on what each student knew, did and achieved	Focus your feedback on the student themselves
Only comment on a few things	Overwhelm students with too much feedback at once
Compare students work to a set standard that shows progress (or lack thereof)	Compare students to peers
Tell students how they went <u>and</u> give them insight into how they could improve	Tell students what was wrong with their performance without telling them how to improve
Communicate your belief that the student can do better	Communicate that poor or mediocre performance is all that you expect from certain students
Give feedback while students still have time to improve	Only give feedback after formal assessments
Change the way you give feedback to suit the experience level of the student	Limit feedback to grades and summative comments such as <i>good</i> , <i>great</i> and <i>disappointing</i>
Learn from students' reactions to your feedback	Discount students' reactions to feedback as <i>their problem</i>
Discuss your feedback with students	Give feedback without allowing students to clarify it

FROM STUDENT TO TEACHER

Typically, most of us think of feedback as something that teachers give to students. However, **feedback can also flow from student to teacher.**

I'm not talking about surveys that show how much you are liked or disliked. Nor am I talking about labels such as good, great or poor.

Rather, I am talking about what your assessment of students' performance tells you about the effectiveness of what you are doing.

If students are achieving what you wanted them to achieve, you can keep on going as you were. However, if even just one student isn't succeeding, you need to refine what you are doing until they do.

“ *To keep doing the same thing while expecting a different result is the definition of insanity.*

Albert Einstein

You may be wondering if I am implying that you:

- ✓ *Are to blame for their failure? **I'm not**, it's not about blame.*
- ✓ *Will always find a way that works? **No**, but you should never stop trying.*

This was one of the key messages that emerged from John Hattie's review of over 800,000 research studies on student achievement. **You need to use your assessment of how students are going as feedback on how successful your teaching has been.**



Armed with this insight, you can then make informed decisions about what to do next.

- ✓ Perhaps some concepts need to be revised
- ✓ You may need to provide further opportunities for practice
- ✓ There may be some benefit in peer tutoring
- ✓ You may need to reteach something a different way
- ✓ Or, it may be time to deepen their understanding beyond surface learning

The options for what to do next are wide and varied, yet in all cases they are based on what the students have already mastered, and what would help them move closer to overarching success in the area.

“When teachers seek, or at least are open to, feedback from students as to what students know, what they understand, where they make errors, when they have misconceptions, when they are not engaged—then teaching and learning can be synchronized and powerful.

John Hattie

When you assess your students, you not only get valuable insight into *where they are at*, you also gain an understanding of *the impact you have had*.

In Closing

Feedback can be a potent way to help your students do even better at school. Give them feedback that reflects where they are at, and helps them to move forward +1 from there. And, don't forget to seek out feedback about your own impact on your kids. Good luck!



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