Guidance and advice on giving formative feedback on student assignments

This is a brief overview of formative feedback and how to use it to develop your students’ capacity and confidence as academic writers.

Summative feedback vs formative feedback

Summative feedback comes at the end of a piece of work – where the marker assigns a mark and writes a general comment on the quality of the task. Examples: ‘Good – some weak areas but overall you answered the question’. OR ‘Unfocused in places, and some poor use of evidence which weakened overall argument. Not an adequate response to question’. The question we need to ask here is: how does this feedback help the student to understand what they are doing well, or where they are going wrong, and what they need to do to improve?

This is where formative feedback, and drafting and responding, becomes valuable to the process of developing critical and capable student writers. Formative feedback is given throughout the assignment and speaks very closely to the assessment criteria. It does not necessarily or only focus on surface errors like grammar, spelling and punctuation, but examines and comments rather on deeper issues, like the quality of the argument, and the way in which the written work responds to the assignment questions asked. When grammar and sometimes spelling is noted, it should usually be done because the error relates to (mis)communicating meaning, or because the error affects the style that has been asked for in the assignment. Thus, formative feedback would look something like this: ‘This is a clear paragraph because you have a clear idea of what the main point you are developing is, and the supporting evidence backs this point up. However, you need to try and show how this paragraph contributes to your overall argument more clearly – what is the link between this paragraph’s main idea and your overall argument or central claim?’ OR ‘This part of your essay is weaker than the first part because you are going off the question. You have put in several points that distract the reader from what the focus of your argument should be. Go back to the question – what is the main argument you need to make in order to answer the question fully? How do you need to refocus this section to build the main argument?’ The important thing to note here is that in responding to student writing you are not crossing out their own work or writing over it in a way that takes control of the writing. The ownership of the writing must stay with the student, which is why you guide and question – to offer support and possible directions that will allow the student to make informed choices about revising their own work. A semi-golden rule about feedback is that most (if not all) of the points you choose to comment on should lead in some way to the students’ development as a writer.

The importance of formative feedback and drafting

Drafting is important for all students, as it gives them an opportunity to make errors, and receive clear and constructive comments and feedback that will help them to understand what they need to do to write a better answer to the question. It gives them an opportunity to practise the new ways of writing and thinking that are expected of them at university, and in their particular discipline, in a safe space, where there aren’t any marks at stake yet, so they can make mistakes and have a chance to correct them and improve. It also gives tutors and lecturers an opportunity to look at what students are struggling with in terms of form and content and try to address these issues in tutorials and in class in order to give students further opportunities to correct
misunderstandings and look at new models of academic behaviour and thinking with the tutor/lecturer as a model or guide. However, not all courses allow for drafting time. In these cases the marked assignment can become a vehicle for future learning, so formative feedback can still be given to help students think about what to improve on in their next assignment.

Formative feedback is a very important part of this learning process because it starts a conversation with students about their writing, and tells them very clearly what they are doing well, and why; and where they need to work harder and why. So it not only helps them to do better on single assignments – it develops them as writers, and creates space for them to feel empowered about their own learning process.

Some thoughts and suggestions on how to give constructive feedback to students

The first thing to be aware of is that the writing journey is the students’, and not the tutors’. This means that the writing conversations you have with the students should aim to not be didactic, and should not be approached as if you are the expert and they are the novice and you are telling them what to do. This will not necessarily develop the students as writers, and could make them feel helpless and stupid because they won’t always be able to do what it is that you have told them to do on their own – not until after much practice. You need to remember that, as tutors, your role is to help students to fit into their new ‘tribe’ – you are a guide, or a model – not a finished product to which they must aspire. You are also still on your own journey as a student and a young academic. Your role is not that of the lecturer or teacher, but rather more that of a knowledgeable peer tutor or guide.

The second thing to be aware of is that, as it is their process or journey, the students need to be given space to work out for themselves what they need to do to improve their writing and thinking, with your guidance. Thus,

- Oral and written feedback needs to be approached as a two-way conversation with the student. Ask questions where you can that will lead the student to the appropriate way of thinking about their answer rather than telling them what to do.

- Avoid rewriting parts of their assignment for them, as they will learn very little from this. Don’t cross out and write over their work – rather highlight parts of their work that need to be revised and offer helpful advice and suggestions, and reasons why the revision is needed where these can be articulated.

- Avoid focusing on surface errors like weak spelling, punctuation and grammar for their own sake. It is quite rare that a student will need only this kind of assistance rather than ‘deeper’ assistance, like interpreting the task accurately, or writing a well-structured and coherent response. Once you help the student focus on the question or task, and help them clarify their thinking about the answer, a great deal of the unclear language will be resolved, and their writing will be easier to understand. Also remember that a grammatically perfect essay is not a good essay unless it also provides a coherent answer to the question that has been asked. You need to ask yourself what will make the task more coherent to you as the reader and then try to guide the students with your feedback accordingly.

- Try to avoid giving instructions, like: ‘move this paragraph and put it there and then add a paragraph about X.’ Try to phrase your guidance as questions or suggestions: ‘this paragraph doesn’t make sense
here. The main idea here links quite well with the main idea in para 2. Perhaps you could restructure the essay so that the ideas flow into one another more logically.’ This gives the student space to think about their own work, and make a choice about their writing, which will ultimately empower them and develop them as writers.

- Always start with the positive: look at what the student has done well, and comment on that. Remember to give reasons for praise as well as criticism. Remember too, that the wrong kinds of praise can harm rather than help students. If their work is not ‘brilliant’ or ‘excellent’ then don’t say that it is as this creates a false sense of where they are in relation to the standard that has been set for the task. Rather use realistic terms to encourage and praise what they have done well. Consider removing the words ‘perfect’ and ‘fail/ed’ from your vocabulary with students. There are no perfect assignments, or even papers written by professors. And telling students they have ‘failed’ to do something in their writing may well set up a negative and defensive stance that will close them to any encouragement or suggestions you are offering.

- Consider writing in pencil or a colour other than red – red pen can be very intimidating for novice writers and a lot of red comments can overwhelm them and close down the space for conversation and learning.

- Reflect on your own writing process that is ongoing: what did you struggle with in first year? What helped or hindered you in overcoming your challenges? Try to approach the students from a place of recognition and understanding – they will be far more receptive to your guidance if they feel that you understand their struggles – even if they are different to yours.

For more information or help: Sherran Clarence on sclarence@uwc.ac.za.

The Writing Centre
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Opp. Law buildings across the grass quad

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