

Giving Effective Feedback

Research on writing development repeatedly shows that feedback is one of the most effective means for helping students learn (to write), but certain practices are more effective than others.

Two foundational types of feedback

While feedback can take many shapes, it is important to recognize two foundational forms: summative and formative. Both forms of feedback play important roles in teaching, but formative feedback is more effective in supporting student learning.

Summative feedback is feedback given at the end of a task, often provided to accompany, and sometimes justify, a grade. While students can learn from summative feedback, the goal of summative feedback is to assess mastery as represented in the assignment.

Example: “Overall, I thought this draft did ___ well, but it could have developed ___ more. As you begin to work on the next project, spend some time working on [how you signal main ideas in paragraphs].”

Formative feedback is feedback given during the process of working on a task, provided on a work-in-progress or on some smaller component or stage of the assignment. Unlike summative feedback, formative feedback is intentionally interventional, provided in a timely manner so that students can use the feedback to learn and improve their performances. Formative feedback is one of our most effective tools for teaching.

Example: “I had a little trouble identifying the main idea in this paragraph. I thought it was going to talk about ___, but then it discussed ___ too. How do they fit together? How can you more clearly signal your intentions to better organize these ideas? Remember that for this assignment, we are trying to ___. As you revise, I want you to spend time on this paragraph, which might become two+. One possibility might be ___. Also, a lot of writers find reverse outlines useful for revising essay structure; here is a link to the writing center’s handout on them.”

Some characteristics of effective formative feedback (Wiggins, 2012)

- **Goal-referenced:** students and faculty alike should have clear learning goals, and those goals need to be referenced in feedback.
- **Timely:** feedback should be provided while students are still thinking about their projects.
- **Consistent:** feedback should be consistent with instruction, course goals, and systems of evaluation.
- **Actionable:** students should have (a) specific tasks that they can act upon.
- **User-friendly:** the tasks need to be feasible and help students prioritize their next steps; feedback should also not overwhelm students with too much information or too many tasks. Best practices suggest 2-3 global comments and 1-2 local comments.
- **Clear:** feedback needs to be written in a way that students will understand what they are being told. Comments like “awkward!” rarely help students learn and improve.
- **Ongoing:** students should have multiple opportunities to receive feedback and revise.

Two models for integrating ongoing feedback (Eli Review)

Most faculty adopt a writing process approach when teaching (with) writing, and this enables them to offer feedback before students submit a final draft. Below are two models for structuring ongoing feedback during the writing process. The second is considered a more effective model.

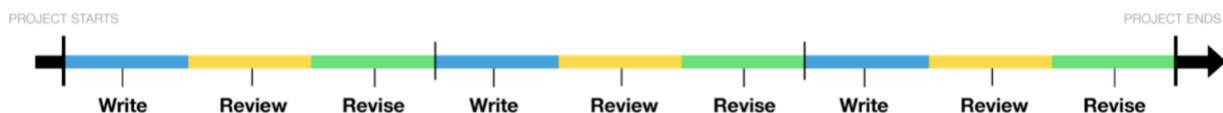
Traditional model

In the traditional model, students receive written feedback on drafts toward the end of the process. Faculty give less frequent feedback in this model, but it tends to be comprehensive and time-intensive. While students make adjustments, the revisions tend to be less significant in quality and quantity because of the limited amount of time students have to make them.



Dialogic model

In the dialogic model, students tend to make more significant adjustments because they receive feedback throughout the process. Faculty give more frequent feedback, but they use a similar amount of time because the feedback is more targeted. This feedback can also be delivered in a variety of ways, including peer review, whole class summaries or announcements, individual or group conferences, and individual comments on a draft or through a rubric. Students benefit from this variety.



Further reading

Eli Review. (2020). Feedback and revision. <https://elireview.com/content/td/feedback/>

University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing. (2020). Giving feedback on student writing. <https://lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/instructors/teaching-resources/giving-feedback-on-student-writing.html>

Wiggins, G. (2012). 7 keys to effective feedback. *Educational Leadership*, 70(1). <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept12/vol70/num01/Seven-Keys-to-Effective-Feedback.aspx>