

# Tailoring Feedback

Effective feedback should be adjusted depending on the needs of the learner.

**BY SUSAN M. BROOKHART**

*From The Virginia Journal of Education*

Jacob was a student in Ms. Jones's 9th grade general science class. His favorite phrase was, "I can't do this—I don't understand." He would say this before he even knew what the assignment was. He already classified himself as a failure, resigned to the fact that he would always do poorly in school.

An assignment to write a scientific report on an experiment he had conducted in class was no exception. His work was dismal. But Jones's response was different this time. She decided the main issue with his first day's work was that there was just too much information for him all at once. So she gave his first draft feedback: "Let's write the introduction first. Answer these two questions . . ."

Jones told Jacob that once he had written the introduction to call her over and she would give him feedback on what he had done, and the next step. As she wrote in a reflection, "That was the last I heard of him for the rest of the days we were writing. He just needed a push in the right direction to help him see that he really did know what he was doing."

Jacob, like many struggling students, needed feedback different from Jones's usual responses to students' work. But not all that different: He still needed to know what he had done well and what he should work on next. He just needed the information in smaller bites than some other students.

## **Giving Effective Feedback**

Feedback is effective only if it helps students improve their work. Thus, the most important characteristic of feedback is that

---

*Susan M. Brookhart is an education consultant, a former professor and chair of the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at Duquesne University, and author of the book How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students. Condensed, with permission, from the Virginia Journal of Education, February 2010.*

students understand it and use it. Whether or not feedback is effective depends on what students need to hear, not what you need to say.

There are some general principles found in research and practice that contribute to student achievement and improvement. These principles spring from a truth about student learning: Learning is active. In order for students to improve and achieve, they have to “wrap their minds around” concepts so they truly “own” them. Effective feedback shows students something about their work that they might not have noticed themselves, but that they understand in terms of how it fits with what they are trying to learn and accomplish.

*Effective feedback is timely.* For recall tasks like learning math facts, immediate feedback is best. For more complex work, feedback should also be timely. For any student work, feedback needs to come while students still remember what the assignment was and why they were doing it.

*Effective feedback focuses on one or more strengths and at least one suggestion for a next step.* Why tell students what they already do well? Because some may not recognize their own strengths. Even if they do, it is another thing altogether to have the teacher notice and name their strengths related to the learning target. As

for the next step, sometimes that suggestion is something students need to deepen their understanding. For example, “think about why a character in a novel did something.” Sometimes it’s about what students need to do to improve the work product, such as adding a concluding paragraph.

*Effective feedback focuses on the student’s work and work process, not the student personally.* Jones talked about Jacob’s science report and various ways he could improve it. She didn’t say he was a poor student, or even a smart student. Feedback should only be about the work.

*Effective feedback is descriptive, not judgmental.* Effective feedback compares work with criteria. Students should know the criteria for good work before they begin an assignment. This helps them to see where they are now relative to where they intend to go. Sometimes effective feedback compares a student’s present performance with his or her past performance in order to describe improvement or reference past achievement. Effective feedback almost never compares a student’s work with the work of other students.

*Effective feedback is positive, clear, and specific.* “Clear” means clear to the student. If a student doesn’t understand what you mean, the feedback cannot be effective. The tone of feedback,

## Tailoring Feedback

whether written or oral, should convey your confidence in the student as a learner. It should not sound like giving orders. Feedback should imply that the student is an active learner who is willing consider the teacher's response to his or her work. In fact, some of the best feedback is in the form of conversations with students about their work.

### Adjusting Feedback

Different students have different needs. Here, we consider two categories of students: struggling and successful, and how to adjust feedback in each case. Of course, these are broad categories, so my suggestions are somewhat general. Be sure to think about the individual student and his or her specific needs and past experience with specific content and skills required for each assignment every time you give feedback.

### Helping Struggling Students

*Focus on the process.* One reason some students struggle is that they don't see the connection between how they go about their work and their results. Focusing descriptive comments, both about strengths and areas for improvement, on the process of doing the work is especially important for struggling learners. For example, when a beginning reader loses her place, a description of the work, "Here is where you skipped a line" is less helpful than a suggestion about

process: "I see you skipped this line. It might help to keep your place with your finger."

### *Use self-referenced feedback.*

Sometimes a description of a student's work against criteria or rubrics will result in a feeling of "not even close." While that might be an accurate appraisal, it won't help student growth and achievement. For particularly poor work, describe a student's work relative to previous work. For example, "Your last book report was shorter than this one and I couldn't tell what that book was about. Here I can tell that the book was about a cat who does tricks. So this is much better. You can be proud of that. Now, can you work on telling . . . by . . . ?"

This also works in reverse. If the current work is not as good as the previous work, describe the strengths of the previous work and show the student that you know he can do it. "Your last book report told me more about what you read than this one does. You wrote about the cat and some of his tricks. So let's try doing that for this report. Who was the main character? What were some of the main things that happened to her?"

*Few points, small steps.* Many struggling students need to focus on just a few things or even one thing at a time. Your feedback does not need to include everything required for the struggling student's

work to become exemplary work in one step. Select the very next thing the student should be working on and forget the rest for the time being. Make sure to focus on a "next step" in terms of the student's progress on a learning progression and don't skip or assume any steps in between. One small step done well is progress. A number of feedback points not taken means no progress.

*Use simple vocabulary.* Keep word choice simple and sentences short. If your feedback contains words a student can't read, use oral feedback. Comprehending feedback should not become yet another thing students struggle with.

*Check for understanding.* If a student doesn't grasp the main idea in your feedback, it won't support improvement. Don't just say, "Do you understand?" Instead, try probes such as, "What is the most important thing you see here?" or "What is the very next thing you're going to do on this paper?"

### **Helping Successful Students**

Sometimes successful students don't get much feedback because the teacher spends his or her time on needier students. Other times, successful students get feedback such as, "you're really smart" or "great job." Successful students need descriptive feedback naming strengths and suggesting next steps, too. Characterize the work a good

student has done, naming areas of particular strength. "This is a great paper. I especially appreciated the way you made a chart to summarize your information and then discussed it point by point. That made it really clear."

Suggest next steps that could be taken, even if they are for enrichment or expansion beyond the required learning target and assignment. "Your project about Roosevelt's New Deal shows you really understand the economic times between the stock market crash and World War II. You might be interested in reading about Eleanor Roosevelt, too. As first lady, she often went on speaking tours and did social and political work to support laborers and those in need." Without taking next steps, students will not grow.

### **Summary**

All students deserve effective feedback. General principles for effective feedback should be adjusted depending on the learner's needs. Feedback to struggling students should include focusing on the process, selecting only one or just a few points, giving self-referenced feedback to describe progress or capability, being very clear, and checking for understanding. Feedback to successful students should include describing, not merely praising, good-quality work and envisioning next steps for advancement or enrichment. ■

Copyright of Education Digest is the property of Prakken Publications and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.