University of Worcester

Making feedback on assignments effective: style guide for tutors

PURPOSE

Providing feedback on assignments is one of the most time-consuming things tutors do. Extensive research shows that it can also be one of the most influential things tutors do to improve student learning. However, this relies on the students engaging with the feedback. Student survey outcomes are dependent on all students understanding the validity, reliability, and consistency of the approach. It is known that successful engagement leads to higher outcomes and better attainment for
students. This document aims to provide guidance so that time spent marking has an impact.

Feedback needs to be timely to have an impact and be seen to be fair and consistent.

The timeliness, quality, and efficiency of assessment and feedback is a key indicator of students' educational experience and of their relationship with the University. All lecturers (including new, part-time, and associate) may need to be reminded that the 'timeliness' of assessment feedback is a priority in the National Student Survey and related surveys and remains a vulnerable area for many courses. Even when tutors adhere to the 20-working day rule for turnaround, students have often 'moved on' by the time they receive their feedback. Ways to bridge the gap between submission and the publication of feedback might include:

- providing model answers immediately after assignments are submitted

- summarising good and bad points from the first few assignments read, and discussing these in the next lecture

- asking students to read and comment on each other's assignments

NB: Take special care not to give unfair advantage to students who are submitting late for some reason.

> Specific dates for the communication of grades and feedback to students should be published in module outlines and on Blackboard. It is essential that these commitments are honoured, and that every student is treated equally. If a marking team is running late for any unavoidable reason, students should be kept informed of the current situation.

Practices for return of grades and feedback may vary between marking teams for sound pedagogical reasons; but students have a right to expect consistency at modular level.

Too strong an emphasis on grades can reduce the value of feedback.

Effective feedback on student work will usually combine some detailed annotation with summative comments giving a clear overview of the general quality of the work and priorities for improvement. Too often students look at the grade and ignore the comments. Focused tutorial discussion following the release of grades can help to mitigate this tendency.

Sometimes course teams withhold or delay grades in order to influence students to engage more actively with their feedback. When such a method is used, it must be clearly explained at the start of the module.

Getting the balance right is critical.

Colleagues who are new to using Turnitin®, or to electronic marking in general, will find some useful guidance via the link https://lttu.uk/support/Turnitin/Guide/

Experienced users of Turnitin usually build a personal 'library' of generic annotations that they can use repeatedly; this can certainly help to speed up the marking process. It makes good sense to store and share widely applicable, frequently repeated notes – for example on construction of argument, handling of sources, aspects of technical writing skills, and referencing. It can be useful to share these comment banks with students in advance so that they use them to evaluate their own work before submission.

However, it can also send the wrong signal to students if the bulk of their feedback takes the form of generic 'off the peg' comments. There also needs to be some personally-directed annotation, which engages with the unique content of each student's assignment. A balanced combination of the two can give a good impression – organisation and rigour, plus considered attention to the individual.

Try to strike a similar balance between the strengths and limitations of the work. Tutors should fnd positive things to say first, even in weaker assignments, followed by constructive advice for improvement. The emotional tone of comments also needs to be a consideration.

Markers should avoid repeating the same critical annotation multiple times, as it will clutter up the assignment and lose its impact. If a mistake is made repeatedly in a given assignment, the tutor might want to state this openly – e.g. 'I won't mark up every instance of this error, but it is a major issue in your work, which we should discuss'. A lot of feedback concentrates on grammatical or technical errors rather than the content. Feedback should be primarily in relation to the validated Learning Outcomes; markers should bear this mind when commenting on grammatical accuracy and written style (see pp. 5-6 below).

It can be tempting to annotate very copiously, but if the page becomes crowded with highlighting, annotation, and text bubbles, this can become confusing or demoralising for the student. Consider when enough might be enough. This may be a conversation for module teams to have in advance of marking, to ensure consistency.

If it is the practice of a course team for second markers to add some further annotation, these notes should be colour-coded or marked with initials to identify the second marker. Alternatively, a course team may decide that second markers do not annotate the scripts, but instead write a summative comment.

Feedback should enable future improvement.

Feedback to students at the University of Worcester should always be supportive and focused on future improvement. This applies at all levels of ability and at every level of study. Feedback which refers only to subject matter that will not be studied again tends to be ignored, as students are too busy working on the next topic. For this reason, assessment that has been designed as a linked sequence, with aspects of one assignment contributing to the way students tackle the next, gives feedback greater impact.

The summative comments / overview section is where the marker should make an explicit connection with the Learning Outcomes being tested by the assignment, and also with the appropriate Grade Descriptors.

Marking teams may or may not choose to use a grading form or 'rubric' within Turnitin, in order to structure the summative feedback; the University has no rules on this (although Schools or Departments might).
However, all markers within a given module team must use the same approach, since discrepancies between markers' methods will undermine students' confidence in the process.

A clear structure is important to help students to derive beneft from feedback. If the course / module team uses a grading form or rubric, the structure is already provided, and general comments will all be associated with one of the Learning Outcomes or another specifc aspect of the work. If the team does not use a grading form or rubric, the tutor will have to provide the structure, using paragraphing and possibly sub-headings.

As with annotation on the script, the tone of the marker's overview is important. Aim for a reasonable balance between professional rigour and informality. The use of irony and humour are to be avoided; there are too many ways this can go wrong, despite good intentions. Sometimes new colleagues, especially those joining the University from another part of the HE sector, may need guidance on tone. Practices vary considerably, and some colleagues might be used to making quite sharp judgements in their feedback which students may well find demoralising or even hurtful. Support and mentoring for new colleagues, and the sampling of their feedback by a 'critical friend' will help to avoid this potential problem. New markers also need to see assignments of varying standards so that feedback and marks can be calibrated. Retaining a selection of assignments at varying grade boundaries can benefit both students and new markers.

Feedback on written assessments should include some reference to spelling, punctuation, and grammar, where appropriate.

It is important that poor spelling, punctuation, and grammar (SPG) does not impede understanding of the text. A text littered with spelling mistakes may not only detract from the subject matter and affect cohesion, but may also indicate a particular developmental need in this area.

Proficiency in spelling, punctuation and grammar should be part of discussion during initial and ongoing PAT tutorials, based on audits and early formative assessments such as the mandatory Level 4 formative assessment, and this can be recorded via University processes. Tutors are best placed to signpost students to relevant support and there are some resources listed below. If a tutor is unsure which form of support to recommend, referral to the Language Centre would be the first option.

The University has excellent support mechanisms and tools, including:
- One-to-one and group tutorial support from the Language Centre
- Writers in Residence (Royal Literary Fund fellows)
- Academic librarians
- Course-specific resources
- Personal and academic tutor support
- Dyslexia and Disability Service
- Audit tool for technical proficiency in English

Markers may also wish to consult external sources, such as the following

- Key Stage 2 - Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zhrrd2p
- GCSE – Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar   https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/levels/z98jmp3
- University of Kent – https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/academic-and-reflective-writing/grammar-spelling-punctuation
- The Open University – https://help.open.ac.uk/grammar-spelling-and-punctuation

Guidance for markers:
- There is no need to correct every single spelling or punctuation error; but this needs to be acknowledged in the feedback e.g. 'there are many instances of incorrect spelling/punctuation usage. Corrections have been made to some but not all errors. You may wish to discuss with your tutor or seek support from wider services'.

- 'Quick Marks' within Turnitin are an efficient way to identify errors and will often have further explanation for the student.
- You may wish to create a departmental bank within Turnitin to support colleagues with marking.
- If appropriate, add a comment in the feedback section which outlines the error and suggests possible support.
- Course teams should adopt a shared and consistent approach to feedback on spelling, punctuation, and grammar.
- Students can be directed to section 'Communication Skills' of the relevant Level of the Grade Descriptors for their course, which will clarify to what extent writing issues may have impacted on the grade awarded.

Good standards of spelling, punctuation and grammar are important in assessments; therefore the tutor should observe similar good practice in their feedback. Students are frequently told they need to proof-read their work more carefully; equally, markers need to proof-read their feedback too.

Students should be aware of academic standards, and be able to take ownership of their learning; this is not done by providing a brief set of criteria, but by learning to make judgements in a similar way to experienced markers.

The notion of collaboration and / or student co-construction needs careful consideration to improve engagement. This significantly shifts the balance of feedback / assessment power towards autonomy and self-responsibility among the student body. It can be achieved in a number of ways, such as:

- including course representatives in discussions about consistency and best practice
- asking students to self-assess the assignment before they submit it, with qualitative critical comments and an estimated grade
- peer assessment and feedback at formative assessment stages
- a sample marking exercise in a teaching session

Feedback needs to be engaging and accessible to all.

Assignments that involve two stages of assessment (sometimes called formative and summative) allow students to engage with their work and to make improvements. Both stages could employ innovative strategies for engaging the student in the feedback, including:

- recording oral commentaries and emailing the feedback to the student; this can be done easily using digital audio recorders, or alternatively use the embedded audio feedback tool in Turnitin
- word-processing feedback for all students and making the entire text accessible to the group
- requiring students to be specific about what aspects they would like feedback on, when they submit their work
- peer assessment

Finally, have a module / course agreement on what feedback looks like, to ensure consistency.

It is good practice for teams to review their principles and develop a team / module approach to assignment feedback. An annual standardisation meeting or workshop, to discuss a sample of recent marking, can be an effective way to set consistent standards in the team, and harmonise style and tone issues. Including course representatives may also help with the management of student expectations.

Related policies, procedures, advice or useful websites

- Assessment Policy **http://www.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/AssessmentPolicy.pdf**

- Busy Lecturer's Guide to Inclusive Practice
  https://rteworcester.wp.worc.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Busy-lecturers-guide-to-inclusive-practice-web-version-July-2021.pdf

- Grade Descriptors Levels 4 – 7 Undergraduate and Masters
  https://www2.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/GenericGradeDescriptors.pdf

- Grade Descriptors Level 8
  https://www2.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/GenericGradeDescriptorsLevel8PGR.pdf

- Inclusive Assessment guidance for staff
  https://www2.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/InclusiveAssessmentPolicy.pdf

- Policy and Procedures on Inclusive Assessment, making reasonable adjustments and providing for alternative assessment arrangements
  http://www.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/

- Principles for course design: Guide to writing learning outcomes and developing assessment criteria
  https://www.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/LearningOutcomesGuide-PrinciplesforCourseDesign.pdf

- Turnitin® **https://lttu.uk/support/Turnitin/Guide/**

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