Providing Effective Feedback—Ten Tips and Techniques

1. **Design assignments that focus on specific learning goals and keep your feedback on the assignment directly focused on those goals** (see Frus, 1999; Konold et al., 2004; Stern & Soloman, 2006; Straub, 2002; White 1994). This “selective marking” both helps keep faculty focused on the goals they have set for an assignment and helps save time.

2. **Offer instruction rather than just evaluation or information.** Many studies suggest that while students do read and pay attention to faculty comments, they often do not understand the marks or comments, and may not understand how to correct the issue that is the focus of the mark or comment (Frus, 1999; Glover & Brown, 2006; Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002; Stern & Solomon, 2006; VanHorn, 2010). Offering instruction and then requiring students to do the revisions to fix the problems can help overcome this difficulty.

3. **Provide a mix of positive and negative feedback.** It is tempting to focus only on the problems of a speech or essay, but this principle is perhaps the most universally accepted in feedback literature. Straub (1997) suggests that faculty “should move beyond the conventional roles of examiner, critic, and judge, and should take on the roles of reader, coach, mentor, fellow inquirer, and guide” (p. 92). Students who receive such feedback are more likely to be motivated to do more writing/speaking and to like writing/speaking more than those who receive only negative feedback (also see VanHorn, 2010).

4. **Avoid focusing your feedback on micro-level errors in the assignment** (don’t mark every comma splice, or comment on a speaker’s every “uh” and “um”). Instead of marking or correcting such errors, provide comments that identify patterns of weaknesses, errors and strengths. Editing, proofreading, and other surface corrections have been conclusively shown to have no positive effect on student writing, knowledge of grammar, or speaking confidence, and they can overwhelm and disempower students. (Frus, 2004; Konold et al., 2004; Stern & Soloman, 2006). It is not that such surface errors are unimportant; it is a matter of not spending time on a strategy that has almost no hope of correcting such problems.

5. **When possible and reasonable for an assignment provide face to face feedback with students in individual meetings.** Research shows that when students have opportunities to talk about their assignments, their writing often becomes clearer and more confident and the students’ anxiety about public speaking is reduced.

6. **Consider using carefully crafted rubrics to help focus assignment feedback.** Rubrics are versatile tools that can be designed to provide detailed, informative feedback for a range of assignment types. In addition, rubrics can be co-designed with students in a course to facilitate greater student understanding and
accountability, and rubrics can be used to help facilitate useful feedback in a wide range of settings (peer review, self-assessment, faculty assessment).

7. **Try to provide formative feedback (feedback that positions your comments as part of an ongoing process of learning) rather than summative feedback (which primarily explains the grade/score on a particular assignment).** Many of us spend most of our creative energy on designing and assessing a final project (and then move on to the next). There is strong evidence that the best learning happens during the process of completing a formal paper or speech—try to provide opportunities for feedback (from you or from peers or from the writers/speakers themselves) throughout the development process.

8. **Keep a consistent focus in your feedback and help the student maintain such a focus as well.** If you comment on drafts of a paper or speech, focus your final comments on the same issues you identified in the draft so that students can see where and how they are progressing or failing to progress. (Frus, 2004; VanHorn, 2010). Connect final feedback to future assignments and work when possible (think of it as what Glover & Brown (2006) call “feedforward”).

9. **Limit feedback that relies on a student’s knowledge of academic discursive conventions.** If your comments do relate to the conventions of academic discourse (either generally or in your topic area) be aware that even strong students often do not grasp such conventions (Glover & Brown, 2006) which can inhibit the possibility of feedback being used in a formative manner.

10. **Identify issues that are common across many students’ speaking or writing and then target class time for these issues.** Rather than comment extensively on the same writing or speaking issue for each student’s work, provide group instruction and feedback to the entire class when you identify patterns in a stack of essays or block of speeches. “Mini-lessons” about particular writing or speaking issues are great ways to maximize your effort and the attention of your students. (Frus, 2004).
Bibliography


