# Making the most of academic feedback

# Introduction

Throughout your academic career you will receive a considerable amount of feedback from your tutors and markers. The feedback you receive is one of the most important interactions you will have not only with your tutor, but also withyour learning.

This guide will help you understand what feedback is, it’s intended purpose and how to analyse your feedback to make it useful to you. It will also introduce you to strategies you can use to act on feedback as a means to improve your work and academic performance. Throughout the guide you will be asked to complete activities to reflect upon what you know and what you have learnt.

# What is feedback?

## Reflection

## Feedback can mean lost of different things to people. Take a moment to consider what you think feedback means to you and why you think it is useful.

## Podcast Transcript

“I think feedback is an essential part of education because it helps you maximize your potential at different stages of your learning. Everyone can benefit from feedback. Effective feedback where the positive or negative is very helpful because it provides valuable information that you can integrate into future work. It helps you understand, what went wrong and more importantly why. It can also help with understanding the areas you excelled in and why.

“In my experience so far, the most important aspect of my education is this: I develop my ability to learn. Learning how to learn is crucial to Higher Education. I improve this by constantly trying to understand and implement the constructive feedback that I received, so I can make better and more informed decisions in future.

“An example of the use of feedback would be during group work: I’ve realised that having the opportunity to both give and receive constructive feedback enables us to make better relationships within the group, thus, better understanding our strengths and weaknesses as a team. This allows us to achieve a better outcome as a team and make the most of each person’s experiences. Overall I think the continous feedback means continuous learning and this is the key to education and wider life.”

Feedback is more than just the grade you receive on a piece of work; it is the comments, advice and constructive criticisms that guide you to develop and improve your work further. Feedback for Learning defines feedback as:

“a process in which learners make sense of information about their performance and use it to enhance the quality of their work or learning strategies.”

This means that feedback is a process of continuous learning, rather than the culmination of learning.

As a university student, you are responsible for ensuring you actively participate and move through this process yourself to benefit as much as possible from the feedback you are given.

It is important to recognise that feedback is an active learning opportunity, in the same way as tutorials, lectures or any other interaction you have with your tutors. If you did not engage with discussions during a seminar, you would get less out of the experience.

Feedback works in the same way, for feedback to be effective, you have to actively use it.

# What makes feedback useful?

Feedback is often even more useful than other learning opportunities as it is tailored specifically to you. In the transcript below, Jain and Megan from the University of Manchester Library’s Student Team explain why they think feedback is useful.

## Why is feedback useful?

Jain: “So, I find that feedback is really useful for helping me to determine why I received the grade I’ve received. Often, it’s really good to determine how the marking criteria has been applied on my work and helping break down the things the markers were assessing me on, so that I know what to improve on next time. I find that positive feedback is really good at motivating me to continue what I am doing well, but then at the same time, I also find constructive feedback is really good at giving me a step-by-step guide to understand what steps I need to take to improve my work.”

Megan: “I find feedback really useful in using it to compliment the mark scheme, because I find it difficult to know why I’m losing marks just from the mark scheme alone. So comparing that with actual examples that the marker has pionted out where I’ve done things well or done things badly, you can then see exactly what you need to do next time. For example, on a lot of my pieces of work, rationale is a key marking criteria, but just the word ‘rationale’ alone doesn’t really tell me much. Whereas when I’ve got pieces of work where the marker has pointed out exactly where I’ve used good rationale or where I should have developed my rationale better, then I can really constructively see what I should do next time, and I can then compile all the feedback from all the different pieces of work because I think that’s a key thing that I didn’t realise to begin with, that the feedback is transferable and is really not specific to one piece of work. If you’re sturggling with a critical analysis in one piece you are probably going to be struggling in others, so looking at feedback before you start any piece of work is really useful because you can use all yoru previous stuff to help improve your new work. So, if you’re sturggling you then know exactly where you may fall down in the next piece of work, so you can be prepared and put the stuff in place to ensure you are then following that more closely than you would have if you hadn’t had the feedback.

# Feedback literacy

The ability to successfully engage with and benefit from your feedback is called ‘Feedback Literacy’. Feedback literacy has three aspects (Sutton, 2012):

* The ability to read feedback.
* The ability to interpret feedback.
* The ability to use feedback.

There are many different approaches to engaging with your feedback which help you achieve these three steps. One you might find particularly useful is this:

* Appreciating feedback
* Making judgements
* Managing the affect
* Taking action

Developing your feedback literacy will allow you to make effective use of the feedback you receive throughout your degree and beyond university! You should act on all feedback you receive on future assignments. This is sometimes referred to as feeding forward. Acting on your feedback will enable you to continually develop and enhance your work.

Read the transcript below to find out how feedback has changed Eddie’s approach to work.

## How has feedback changed your approach to work?

So, I study a science-base subject and a lot of the feedback I receive is which questions are correct and which are incorrect just because of the way it's laid out. So for example I could have ten questions and each question will get a mark out of ten. If I've got a higher mark I know I understand that concept on that question better, and if I have a lower one obviously I need to spend more time working on it.

Sometimes lecturers might include a bit of a sentence that says "oh, you need to spend more time working on this" and then obviously that's dead [very] clear what I need to do.

And then when I come to revise for my exams at the end of the semester I know which concepts and which topics I have to spend a lot more time working on and which ones I have to do more work on and answer more practice questions. And then I know which ones I can just quickly glance over the lecture notes and I know those already.

## Reflection

Based on what you have learned, has your understanding of feedback changed, and what will you change in your future use of feedback?

## What feedback can look like in a different environments

Feedback is given and received in many different environments and situations, not just education. Although the modes and methods of feedback may be slightly different, the aims of feedback remain largely the same.

We asked Jason Hui, a sports coach with the University of Manchester, about how he gives feedback when coaching badminton. Read the following trascripts to find out what Jason said.

### Define the process of feedback for the development of skills as a sports coach

Jason: “So, as a sports coach you go through various different amounts of feedback, so as a coach you are always assessing how you approach coaching. So depending on who you’re teaching and coaching, the students, they will have a different particular type of learning style, so learning from experimentation, and trying to look at how things go, explaining things to the students as well. And, obviously, asking them how they’re doing, constantly, so they’re giving you feedback while you’re giving them feedback at the same time.

### How do you provide feedback to individuals?

Jason: “So depending on the type of individual and what type of feedback they need, I’ll assess and give them a certain target, usually, and see if they can meet those targets. So in terms of badminton as a whole, maybe to provide certain shot quality, or maybe, do a certain exercise within a certain amount of time, and then trying to proceed with that. So with badminton, if they’re playing certain shots, I’ll try and get them to play the same shot consistently, 9 out of 10 times in a row, and then they can assess how reliable their shot-making is.

### What methods do you use to track progress?

Jason: “I’ll give them a target, so I’ll probably feed about 12 shuttles, maybe, make sure that they get 9 shuttles and hit them to certain regions of the court consistently. And if they don’t leave that here, then try and get them to build on the basics again and then try and improve them.”

### How do you analyse performance?

Jason: “So, depending on the student that I’m coaching, if they’re a competitive student, a competitive player, then they’ll be playing at a certain standard, play against certain level of players, and then see how well they do points-wise in games. They’ll probably reach a certain number of positions at a particular point. Or maybe one week they’ll have a very close match and then another subsequent week they’ll have the ability to beat the opponent. So that’s one way of assessing how they do and in trianing it will be generally trying to get them to hit certain targets.”

Now you are aware of feedback and how it can be useful we will now look at the different types of feedback that you can get.

# Feedback strategies

You will receive feedback at different times and in different forms throughout your time at university. It is important to seek out as many opportunities as possible to generate and gain feedback. In this section we will look at different strategies lecturers may use to give feedback on your work. But before you find out what they said, let’s reflect on the feedback you have received so far whilst in education.

## Feedback strategies used by lecturers

We asked lecturers at University of Manchester three questions about feedback. In this section, we will look at and comment on what they said.

### How do you give feedback?

“I give feedback constantly when teaching face-to-face or online. Students who put their hand up in class or write in the chat box with a question or an answer to a question will instantly get feedback on it. This might include if it is correct, how it can be expanded on or if it is relevant. I give feedback in lectures when I use polling — I can get an idea about what students need to focus on and give feedback on if they have chosen the right answer, as long as they take part!In all my discussions in workshops and even in the corridor, I give students feedback on what they need to improve on or where they need to focus their efforts. I use discussion boards to give feedback for students who ask questions on Blackboard and quizzes which give student’s instant feedback on their answers.”

Jennifer Rose (Lecturer, Alliance Manchester Business School)

“For large group teaching, I provide bespoke time in the lecture (at least 20 minutes) for students to attempt exercises and receive feedback on their work from myself and / or teaching assistants. The interactions I have with students are used to inform general feedback which can be given to the whole class, either as a plenary demonstration / address at the end of a workshop, or online as model answers.

For some units, I will also construct online quizzes with feedback for correct and incorrect answers. I also collate a feedback document (mostly consisting of ‘frequently asked questions’ from throughout the module) and make this available to the students. For small group teaching, I provide feedback on individual written work and in general during tutorials, also using the written work and common issues / problems to tailor the tutorial to the needs of the students.

For examined material, I provide general feedback on exam performance overall and feed forward on exam performance from the previous year to this year’s students. In addition, students are always welcome to receive feedback in person at my drop-in sessions, which I run every week during term time.”

Dr. Nick Weise (Lecturer, School of Chemistry)

“For taught units, I provide formative feedback via quizzes and test questions with pre-populated answers within the course materials. We use discussion boards to provide advice and feedback. We ask students to discuss and feed back on selected topics via student-led discussion groups. We provide summative feedback on written assignments.Feedback from the first assignment can be used formatively to help with the second assignment. As Unit Lead, I sometimes answer individual queries sent by email. For MSc dissertation supervision, we provide extensive one-to-one formative feedback on each chapter of the dissertation as it develops. This is sent to the students as comments on Blackboard and as edited Word documents using the Review tool.Sometimes we communicate with our students via email; we try to avoid this as it is easier to keep a full record of our feedback when communication is recorded in Blackboard. Even more occasionally, we will have telephone conversations with our students, if there is a particularly difficult issue to address or particular urgency to providing the feedback.”

Juliette Kendall (MSc Lecturer, School of Medical Sciences)

“For large units, I produce detailed written feedback to the cohort post-assessments. This is followed up with bespoke feedback to individual students who would like to discuss their work in more detail. During workshops and seminars, I provide verbal feedback on students’ work and this is instant feedback. In lectures, I often use quizzes to see if material has been understood — and if not, this provided an opportunity to review learning and signpost to additional resources.”

Harsha Parmar (MRPharmS, SFHEA, Senior Lecturer, School of Health Sciences)

### What kind of feedback do you provide?

“Verbal feedback is the most common, from discussion with students and from seeing their work in workshops. I prefer this way of giving feedback as it is a two-way dialogue.

Written feedback is given to individuals on assessed coursework and exams.

I also give written or video feedback to the whole cohort — this allows students to learn from others’ experience or work through the solution to an exercise.

Sometimes I give feedback on assessments (e.g. presentations) prior to the final assessed presentation. If this is the case, then I expect the feedback points to have been implemented and show improvement in the final assessment.”

Jennifer Rose (Lecturer, Alliance Manchester Business School)

“I provide a range of feedback including verbal (during lectures / workshops / tutorials), written (either specifically for tutorial work or generally provided online for workshops / examinations / quizzes) and visual (as demonstrations in lectures / workshops).”

Dr. Nick Weise (Lecturer, School of Chemistry)

“For the taught units, most of the feedback is in the form of model / correct answers. These can be supplemented with individual comments specifically addressing issues for individual students to consider. Discussion boards responses are generally answering specific questions and signposting to additional resources. Sometimes tutors can provide prompts / questions within online discussions in order to encourage deeper thinking and further discussion.

For Dissertation students, supervisors will provide feedback which points out issues with current drafts, suggests improvements that might be made and provide positive and encouraging feedback to support their continued engagement with their project. We also send through additional articles or point to online resources that are suitable for individual student projects, to supplement our course learning materials.”

Juliette Kendall (MSc Lecturer, School of Medical Sciences)

“To clarify formative and summative in language they understand, I provide written and verbal feedback for both draft work (formative work) and also summative work. Whilst it is useful to gather feedback before submitting an assessment, it’s really important to reflect on the feedback that is given so you can draw out what you need to develop and what you do well so you can keep on doing that too.”

Harsha Parmar (MRPharmS, SFHEA, Senior Lecturer, School of Health Sciences)

### What other sources of feedback exist for students to make use of?

“Students should try to get feedback from peers, for example, just getting another student to read an essay can help both the reader and the writer improve their writing skills. By reviewing peers’ work, skills such as assessment literacy and critical thinking can be developed and ultimately, the student can learn to improve their studying by self-assessing their own work. I remind students that feedback needs to be:-

**Forward**-looking statements which enable something to happen differently next time. Evidence based on what you actually experienced

**Expressive** — describe how things made you feel and what the outcome was for you. Descriptive rather than judgmental, rather than something being ‘good’ or ‘bad’, explain what worked or didn’t work for you

**Behaviour**-based rather than based on the person, try to use adverbs which describe action, rather than adjectives which describe qualities Actionable provides guidance about the action which should be taken either now or for next time

**Constructive** — giving helpful guidance, not mindless dismissal

**Kind**— consider how the person giving feedback might feel or react when reading the statement”

Jennifer Rose (Lecturer, Alliance Manchester Business School)

“Other students are a valuable and abundant source of feedback, for example, during workshops, they should discuss ideas with those around them and they should also attend Peer-Assisted Study / Peer Mentoring sessions (the latter for non-assessed work).”

Dr. Nick Weise (Lecturer, School of Chemistry)

“Via discussion boards, our students have access to Library staff and e-Learning staff. Our administrative team provide support to our students and will forward questions and queries to academic staff as appropriate. Within the Division of Dentistry, our dissertation students have access to a substantial number of specialist academics who sometimes provide guidance on particular topics where specialist knowledge is required.

As far as I am aware, our students use social media to communicate in groups (across programmes or units and in sub-groups) as well as individually, to support and provide feedback to each other.”

Juliette Kendall (MSc Lecturer, School of Medical Sciences)

“Written comments in practical books are helpful as well as asking for feedback on individual performance perhaps in a role play or teach-back activity.”

Harsha Parmar (MRPharmS, SFHEA, Senior Lecturer, School of Health Sciences)

## Reflecting on what you have learned

It is important to recognise that you will receive feedback in many different forms throughout university. Feedback is more than just written feedback given on assessments!

Have you received any of types of feedback described by the lecturers above, and if so, how useful did you find them?

Having heard about the different types of feedback and how lecturers present that, you might now consider looking for how feedback is shared on your course.

# Marking criteria

Marking criteria are often used by lecturers and tutors when marking work. They help to keep marking as consistent, fair and rigorous as possible by clearly defining expectations. They show what you need to do to achieve a 2:2, 2:1 or 1st, and the feedback you receive will be based on how closely you have met the expectations outlined in your marking criteria in your work.

However, marking criteria are not just useful for your tutors, they also let you know what is expected of you in an assignment. Reading through and taking the time to understand your marking criteria is really useful when planning assignments, and for understanding the feedback you are given.

In this section, we’re going to look at what marking criteria are and the different types of marking criteria used. We will also investigate the ways in which we can make use of marking criteria to better understand your feedback and the make informed judgements of where you need to develop your work.

## Different types of marking criteria

There isn’t a standard ‘one size fits all’ marking criteria across the whole University. Your tutors’ choice of marking criteria will depend on the subject being taught and the type of work being assessed.

The three types of marking criteria you may encounter are unstructured, structured and combined.

* Unstructured marking criteria use free comment and are often used with essays and reflective work. If the marking criteria aren’t clearly stated, it can lead to imprecise, impressionistic marking.
* Structured marking criteria allocate a proportion of the total marks available to each of the marking criteria.
* Combined marking criteria allow for a mix of structured and unstructured marks and comments.

## Making use of marking criteria

How do you currently make use of marking criteria?

We highlighted earlier how your lecturers and tutors make use of marking criteria. However, they are not just useful for your tutors — **they also let you know what is expected of you in an assignment.** Reading through and taking the time to understand your marking criteria is really useful when planning assignments, and for understanding the feedback you are given.

"Rubrics can teach as well as evaluate students’ work". (Carless & Boud, 2018)

You can make use of marking criteria in a number of ways:

* To understand tutor expectations for an upcoming assignment.
* To help plan your assignment.
* To understand the feedback you receive.
* To action feedback by identifying areas for development in future assignments.
* To self-assess your own work before submitting.

If you are unsure where to find the marking criteria for your next assessment, ask your lecturer or tutor!

### Top Tips

Always consult the marking criteria when;

1. Planning and writing your assignment.
2. Reading the feedback you have received on an assignment.

# Understanding and using a marking criteria

## Understanding your own marking criteria

The terminology used in the marking criteria can often be confusing. However, taking the time to understand what the terms might mean will allow you to better understand your lecturer’s expectations and the feedback they give you.

There are different strategies you can use to develop your understanding of the language used in marking criteria. For example, you could discuss the words and terminology with your tutor.

How you will make use of marking criteria going forward?

Add your thoughts in the box below. The text is saved automatically on this device and browser only. (No one else can see what you type).

## Using the marking criteria to understand your feedback

Once you understand the marking criteria, it can become a really useful tool to better understand the feedback you receive on your assessments. By analysing and comparing the marking criteria with your feedback, you can begin to see where you are at the moment, how that compares with tutor expectations and where to focus your development for the next assignment.

In this section, we will look at how the marking criteria for an assignment relates to feedback received.

### Different stages of using a marking criteria.

* Start of Assignment = Translate to the marking criteria
* Prior to submission = Self-assess assignment
* After receiving feedback = Understanding and interpreting feedback

### Example

Feedback received

“The introduction is clear in terms of definitions and setting out the structure to follow. The role of unions is defined well with reference to some key source material on their function, and the theoretical framework that follows works well to frame the rest of the essay and set out the context. The country level material is set out well and in considerable detail and the comparative analysis that follows makes some good points, including on issues of revitalisation. The conclusion is concise and could have been more developed but in general this is a detailed piece of work that engages well with the literature, draws on a lot of descriptive detail and makes some insightful points by way of comparative analysis.”

Marking Criteria

* strong argument;
* clear introduction with definitions and theoretical/ analytical framework;
* integration of a broad range of academic literature and robust data sources from across the course;
* analysis rather than an overemphasis on description; clearly expressed;
* referencing and bibliography;
* conclusion that builds on the argument rather than merely summarising;
* clear, logical structure

Essay structure and developing an argument

* The introduction should address the question and its meaning
* The introduction should use definitions from the academic literature
* A theoretical/ analytical framework should be introduced early on
* The question should be broken down and themes identified
* Comparative analysis should be organised thematically rather than country-by-country
* The conclusion should build on the preceding analysis, explicitly address the question and develop the argument further
* There should be close engagement with the academic literature as recommended through the course outline reading list
* Referencing needs to be comprehensive and consistent

Has this activity made you feel differently about how and why tutors provide feedback in the way they do?

## Making a judgement

Using the marking criteria will help you to use and apply your feedback more effectively in your next assignment.

Once you have identified where there might be an element that you have missed or a skill that you need to develop, there is some decision-making to be made by you. You will have to decide how, when and where you are going to develop those areas before your next assessment.

# Acting on and prioritising your feedback

## Acting on feedback

The final stage in making the most of your feedback is setting a plan of action for yourself. To create a plan of action, you need to actively engage with your feedback and decide what to do with your feedback. All types of feedback you receive can be fed forward to your next assignment or piece of work. In this section, we will take you through the main steps of prioritising and actioning your feedback which are:

1. Identify areas for further development
2. Prioritise which areas are most important for your next assignment
3. Create an action plan to help you develop those aspects of your work

How do you currently prioritise actions from your feedback?

You may not always be able to fully address every issue raised in your feedback in time for your next assignment (this is perfectly fine!). Therefore, you should think about what you can do in the short, medium and long-term.

Categorising your priorities in this way will help you decide what actions you will need to take.

### Top Tip

Always download and save your feedback for future use.

### Practice activity

Take a look at the latest piece of feedback you received on your work, and compare this to an upcoming assignment by looking at the assignment brief or marking criteria. What area of your work do you need to develop?

## How academics prioritise feedback

Read this transcript with advice from academic Harsha Parmar on how she prioritizes her own feedback:

Harsha Parmar: “I’m a senior lecturer at the University of Manchester and I get feedback in all sorts of different ways. So for example, if I was writing a journal article, I would send it off to the journal, to the editor, and then they would get some peer reveiws to have a look at that feedback and actually that can be quite a brutal process, because you spent months and months on end putting a piece of work together. You’ve had colleagues who’ve also worked on that piece of work and it becomes really close to you and it’s a piece of work that you’re really proud of. And then six weeks, eight weeks down the line, you get an email to say, ‘sorry, we’re not going to accept it unless you make these changes,’ and it’s actually quite horrific.

“But you kind of learn that when you send something away you’re always going to get comments back, because actually that’s just part of the process and because you’ve been working on it so closely, it’s always good to get another pair of eyes on it, just to see how you could improve it. So you almost have that belt and braces approach where you’re expecting, you know, some pretty harsh comments to come your way, but once you’ve gotten over there, read them through, that’s what I do, I read them through, but then I need to take a few deep breaths before I do that, and then I start prioritising and saying, ‘okay, these comments are quite significant. This is something that I need to take back to my team and work on in a little bit more depth. But these ones aren’t too bad,’ and it’s something that you can manage in a small space of time. And always, always, always remember to have a look at the good stuff as well. It’s quite often with feedback you’re just going straight in, what did they like and what is it that I’ve done wrong, your style of writing and things like that. So that’s one thing that I do when I’m receiving feedback from journal articles.

“As an academic you have peer reviews as well, so we do have other academics that come in and look at our teaching to see how we’re performing, what we’re doing well, what we could improve on, and I kind of see that as a nice process, so it’s not someone coming and watching you as such and trying to find faults with what you’re doing. They may see things differently to how you perceive them going on, so very often people will come in and they’ll say I really liked what you did there, you could see that students were engaged and see think, ‘okay, I’ll carry on doing that’.

But there may be things that they pick up on that you’ve not seen or mentioned before perhaps there are certain phrases that you use too often, perhaps you’re talking about or over-emphasising certain points so you have to not take it too personally, because feedback is not meant to be personal in terms of you as a person. It’s very much about a product of what you’ve produced and you have to kind of take yourself, always remove yoruself, from that situation, and imagine you’re a helicopter and you’re looking down at what’s happening around you and try and look at it objectively. It’s taken me a long time to do that. I always did take things very personally and to heart, and became disappointed with some of the outcomes that I got, but you know, as I become older and wiser, dare I say it, you learn to remove yourself from a situation and just see it for what it is.”

## How students prioritise feedback

Read the transcript below where student Simone shares tips on how they prioritise their own feedback actions.

“So how can you prioritize feedback? So firstly, what I like to do is, I like to identify which areas need development. Then I see which of these areas are most important for my next assignment. So for example, this could be referencing or better transitions. Then I develop an action plan to help improve these areas. For example, with referencing, I may look up the correct way to refernece and test this out on examples online. For ‘smooth the transitions’, I might look up popular transition words and try to use them in my own text. Or I might read essays and papers in my subjects and analyze how they use transitions in their writing.

## Reflection

How will you prioritise feedback?

What new strategies will you now use to prioritise actions from your feedback?

# Contributors

Special thanks to our academic colleagues who helped to produce this guide, you can find links to their professional profiles below:

* [Jennifer Rose](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/jennifer.rose.html)
* [Dr Nick Weise](https://www.mub.eps.manchester.ac.uk/uomchemistryblog/2019/11/meet-the-department-dr-nick-weise/)
* [Juliette Kendall](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/juliette.kendall.html)
* [Harsha Parmar](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/harsha.parmar.html)

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