

How to Provide Constructive Feedback— That Won't Exasperate Your Students



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It's easy to exasperate your students. Have unrealistic standards. Grade arbitrarily. Assign busywork. Be a bully. Be harsh. Be emotionally distant. Show favoritism. Ask questions as if there is only one right answer.

One of the biggest challenges you face is to make the grading and evaluation process constructive. The feedback process is the best chance to improve student learning and enhance their skills. To be effective, feedback needs to be timely, encouraging, and carefully tailored to the student.

1. Establish a climate of trust and respect.

Remember, student egos are fragile. Feedback should be given to help, not hurt. Be encouraging. Remember, negativity creates defensiveness.

2. Don't overwhelm students.

Limit feedback to the amount of information that the student can absorb. Identify the key areas that need additional work.

3. Keep comments impersonal.

Focus on specifics.

4. Refer back to your grading criteria.

5. Couch comments in "I" terms.

I got lost here. I'm confused—did you mean to say...?

6. Structure your comments as questions or suggestions, rather than as criticisms.

7. Rephrase the paper's main points

If you take students' ideas seriously, they will work harder to express them clearly.

8. Use questions to identify errors.

You might, for example, ask students for more information, or ask whether this is what they meant to say.

Teach Students to be Their Own Best Readers

Encourage students to ask the questions that you ask when you grade an assignment.

1. Is the opening lively and interesting?

2. Is the argument clear?

3. Is the argument situated in a larger scholarly conversation?

4. Is the argument compelling? Is it supported with concrete and convincing examples?

5. Is the essay's organization logical?

6. Does the essay take adequate account of counter-arguments and alternate interpretations?

Incorporating Peer Feedback into Your Class

One way to improve student performance is to introduce them to the grading process.

1. Ask them to read the first paragraph of an essay, then stop and respond to the following questions:
 - “Are you interested in continuing to read? Why or why not?”
 - “What do you think the essay will discuss?”
2. Does the opening paragraph clearly identify the paper’s theme and focus?
3. What unanswered questions remain in your mind when you’ve finished the essay?
4. How would you strengthen the essay’s argument?
5. What objections might be raised against the argument?
6. What suggestions might you give the writer of the paper?

Effective and Ineffective Advice

1. How would you respond to the following advice?
 - Omit this paragraph
 - You might consider omitting this paragraph
 - I wonder what you gain by having this paragraph here
2. How would you respond to the following comments?
 - These arguments are not convincing
 - Explain why this is the case
 - I find this statement less than convincing
 - Your point might be clearer if you state, point by point, your opponent’s view, as clearly and objectively as you can. Then you can deal with each of the arguments and show the weakness in the position.
3. How would you respond to these comments?
 - Have you proved your point by merely asserting this?
 - What is it that you most want me to know about your position?
 - In academic writing, the trick is to express your opinion with authority

Commenting Meaningfully on Student Writing

Meaningful comments engage students’ ideas, responding to the thesis, use of evidence, analysis, and organization. They help students understand that grades are not measures of their intelligence, but of a particular assignment’s quality. They also help students learn how to self-edit and self-evaluate.

1. Respond like a reader—not a grader.

2. Use the first person singular.

I think.... I read....

3. Be positive.

You need to strike the delicate balance between truth and kindness. As Somerset Maugham observed, “People ask you for criticism, but they want only praise.”

4. Suggest how the student can do better next time.