



## Keeping the Destination in Mind

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**Good feedback lets students know how they're progressing, how close they are to their goal, and what to do if they take a wrong turn.**

Many of us use a global positioning system (GPS) unit when we drive. The GPS lets us know where we are as we progress toward our destination. It reinforces us by telling us how many more miles to the next turn, and if we go the wrong way, it gives us directions on how to get back on track. As drivers, we depend on this feedback. If our system fails, we get frustrated, shut the GPS off, and probably take a few unnecessary detours or stop at a gas station before getting back on our route.

The feedback process in school—and its effect on learners—resembles a GPS. When students receive clear, high-quality feedback that's tied to learning targets, student learning moves forward. When they're deprived of feedback or given feedback that's barely connected to learning targets, students get frustrated, lose sight of goals, and take many detours before they arrive at the desired learning.

### Seven Practices for High-Quality Feedback

Assessment expert [Susan Brookhart](#)<sup>1</sup> recommends that to keep students on track, feedback should

- Connect to clear learning targets that teachers have shared with students.
- Begin with the strengths in the student work under discussion.
- Discuss questions or concerns about the work.
- Provide direction on how to address these questions and concerns.
- Be individualized to each student.
- Be delivered in student-accessible language and forms.
- Arrive when learners can still use it.

As a learning consultant, I've seen many teachers deliver feedback that honors Brookhart's recommendations. Let's examine these practices in action—and consider how opportunities are squandered when teachers forget to use them. As I'll show in several examples, one of the best procedures teachers can use for feedback is to break it down into three chunks: strengths, questions and concerns, and next steps.

### Connect Feedback to Learning Targets

Let's begin with William, a 5th grader. William's teacher, Mr. Grabel, is teaching a series of lessons aligned to the Common Core English Language Arts standard "Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, and pacing, to develop experiences and events or show characters' responses to situations." Throughout the week, Mr. Grabel has been conferring with students about their work. When he meets with William, Mr. Grabel focuses on his spelling and punctuation.

This is an example of a detour. Although the destination was clearly established, Mr. Grabel took William in a different direction. The most valuable feedback he could have provided would have connected to his lessons and focused on how well William used dialogue, description, and pacing to develop his piece. He might have saved spelling and punctuation for an editing session.

## First Strengths, then Questions and Next Steps

Most feedback to students focuses on what is lacking in their work. High-quality feedback first reinforces what a student did well, then identifies areas of weakness and provides direction on how to address these weaknesses. Consider the following paragraph written by a 2nd grader:

Once upon a time a little girl named Leanne she was going to the docker to get the floo shot all ustutin she fell into leves but she was ok so she got to the docker's ofis she skeeeeeeeed loud a skirl chast her AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA but then she took a walk in the fall aer a squrl eating nuts. The End. —Leanne

Leanne's teacher, Mrs. Green, wrote her the following note, using the strengths–questions–next steps protocol. She also made these points during a conference.

**Strengths:** Your story is really exciting. I like the way you added sound effects like *skeeeeeee* and *AAAAA* to describe how you felt. I want to know more about both the squirrel and the doctor's visit.

**Questions:** Did you scream because of the shot or because the squirrel was chasing you? Did the squirrel chase you after you left the doctor's office or when you went for a walk?

**Next Steps:** Go back to the web we created before you wrote the story. Look for any details you forgot to include that would help the reader understand what happened with the squirrel. Be sure to include these details in your revision.

Leanne's assignment, reflecting one of the Common Core State Standards, was to write a narrative in which she recounted one well-elaborated event or a short sequence of events, including details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings. Mrs. Green directed her feedback toward this learning target, using an organizer that helped her remember to discuss each student's strengths, areas of weakness, and next steps. Notice the way she presented the area of weakness in Leanne's story as a question and then connected it to next steps for revision. This approach allowed Mrs. Green to coach Leanne through revision.

## Make It Individualized

Often teachers rely on such catch phrases as *use more details* or *elaborate*. Such feedback is distant from the student and his or her work. Feedback should include direct references to and examples from the piece of work in question.

Consider this piece by 7th grader Ben and the feedback from his teacher, Ms. Warden. The assignment, which fulfills two Common Core English Language Arts standards, was to (1) determine the theme of the novel *Walk Two Moons* and how this theme was conveyed through particular details, and (2) explain the theme, citing textual evidence. Ben wrote,

Everything in life has two parts. "My father started chipping away at a plaster wall in the living room of our house in Bybanks, shortly after my mother left us one April morning. Our house was an old farmhouse that my parents had been restoring room by room. Each night as he waited to hear from my mother, he chipped away at that wall. On the night we heard the bad news—that she was not returning—he pounded on that wall with a chisel and hammer. At two o'clock in the morning, he came up to my room. I was not asleep. He led me downstairs and showed me what he had found. Hidden behind the wall was a brick fireplace."

This was part of the book *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech. As that hidden fireplace emerged, so did my emotions as the tale of Sal and Phoebe unfolded. In the course of a lifetime, this book really did matter.

As I said in the beginning, everything in life has two parts to it. This is how I feel about this book and my own life. No matter how something may seem, it may not be that way. My grandfather was an active guy, but he was stricken by a heart attack. When he got sick, I felt bad that I'd always made a fuss about going to visit him.

"In the course of a lifetime, what does it matter." Things like 9/11 matter in the course of a lifetime. But if you aren't able to go over to a friend's place, it wouldn't matter.

Ms. Warden addressed the goals of Ben's essay and used specific examples from it:

**Strengths:** You establish the theme of the essay by stating that "everything in life has two parts." Also, you support the theme with the opening quote from the book and you provide specific examples—your grandfather and 9/11—that show how you connect to the theme.

**Questions:** How does your opening quote illustrate the idea that everything in life has two parts? Also, how does the novel relate to your question, "In the course of a lifetime, what does it matter?"

**Next Steps:** I suggest you talk with your book group about why your opening quote is important and how it serves as an example of the idea that everything in life has two parts. See if you can capture some of your discussion in your opening, so the connection between this passage and the concept of "having two parts" is more evident. See if you can find a quote from the novel that illustrates the statement "In the course of a lifetime, what does it matter?"

Ben felt validated by this response. He went away with specific examples of what he did well and what he needed to do to improve this essay.

## Make Feedback Accessible

For feedback to help students know where to go, it must use language that they understand and that reflects language used in the classroom. If the teacher uses the [six traits of writing model](#), teacher comments should use terms related to the traits. If the teacher uses a specific strategy to help students take next steps toward improvement, he or she should explicitly refer to this strategy, as Ms. Warden referred Ben to class book groups. Feedback should be appropriate in length and form. Never write more than the student writes. This is particularly important for young students; although we may feel the need to point out every weakness, doing so may actually interfere with a student's ability to use the feedback. Let the learning targets prioritize the feedback, and provide multiple opportunities for feedback so that each student can focus on one aspect at a time.

For example, Mrs. Victor asks her 9th grade algebra students to solve a multistep math problem. Her priorities, in order, are that her students will be able to translate the problem into an algebraic equation, correctly solve the problem, and explain their reasoning. Using this list, she can determine the content of the feedback she'll give each student and the order in which she'll provide it.

## Provide Timely Feedback

The best time for students to receive feedback is when they can still use it to improve their work—before a paper's due date, say, or as they develop a group lab report. This doesn't mean students shouldn't receive feedback on final products, but comments on final products should be different from those that students receive while they're developing the assignment.

Feedback given on final products should be more general and should indicate how to apply the critique to future work. Consider Ms. Warden's comment on Ben's draft: "How does the book relate to your statement, 'In the course of a lifetime, what does it matter?'" This comment referenced a specific statement in Ben's draft.

If she'd been commenting on his final essay, Ms. Warden would've done better to write, "I was wondering why you made the statement, 'In the course of a lifetime, what does it matter?'" In future pieces, you may want to explain your thoughts with a specific citation from the book. Try this strategy in your next paper." Ben could use this feedback

later. Too often, teachers spend a lot of time giving written responses on final products that students don't read. Without an immediate opportunity to use the feedback, students can't see how it helps.

## Managing the Process

One efficient tool for giving students feedback is a simple checklist of the seven practices for high-quality feedback mentioned earlier. Teachers can check their written feedback against these criteria. Even simpler, teachers might create a three-part chart grouping feedback into strengths, questions, and next steps. This structure can focus oral feedback during teacher-student conferences; teachers might give each conferee a sticky note detailing each element.

For lengthy pieces, provide students written feedback on a rotating basis, rather than all at the same time. A teacher of older students might tell the class that students who are interested in receiving feedback on long-term projects should contact her by a certain date.

The benefits of feedback for students are obvious. However, crafting quality feedback benefits educators, too. By examining trends in student work, a teacher can determine which learning targets learners met and to what degree. This gives insight into what he or she probably emphasized during instruction and what, if anything, he or she needs to reteach. Trends of mastery, or lack of it, among students indicate how learners should be clustered for small-group instruction.

By engaging students in a good feedback process, we teach them to be critical thinkers and independent learners. Most of us rely on our GPS unit mainly when we're traveling to a place we've never been to before. After repeated trips to the same place, we no longer need it. If we make a wrong turn, we can self-correct—but we still like to know our GPS is there.

This is how feedback works. We want our students to learn how to use our feedback, ask for it when they need it, and even provide feedback to other students. But we hope they eventually learn enough from the feedback process that they can arrive at their destination without needing our guidance all along the way.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Brookhart, S. M. (2008). *How to give effective feedback to your students*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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