



# MELBOURNE CSHE TEACHING AND LEARNING SHORT GUIDE SERIES

## CONSTRUCTING EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK COMMENTS: THREE LEARNER-CENTRED PRINCIPLES

Tracii Ryan<sup>a</sup>, Michael Henderson<sup>b</sup>, Kris Ryan<sup>c</sup>, Gregor Kennedy<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne

<sup>b</sup>Faculty of Education, Monash University

<sup>c</sup>Portfolio of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education), Monash University.

Feedback is 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” (Henderson et al., 2019, p. 1402). Learners are at the centre of the process and, with this in mind, it is critically important to consider how to construct feedback information so that learners can make sense of the information, be able to act upon it, and ultimately improve what they do in the future.

While we know that effective feedback can have a powerful effect on learning outcomes, research also indicates that learners don’t always understand or know how to act upon the comments being offered by teachers. In response, our research has examined the alignment between the intent of teachers’ feedback comments and the ways that learners made sense of those comments. This short guide summarises three principles of effective learner-centred feedback and offers evidence-based guidelines for teachers about how to construct feedback that can support learner sensemaking, agency and impact.

### PRINCIPLE 1. FOCUS ON FUTURE IMPACT

Impact from feedback is more likely when comments highlight actions learners can take to improve their future performances. This is the central focus of feedback. To increase the likelihood of impact, consider providing comments that offer actionable information to help learners:

- improve aspects of similar tasks they may undertake in the future (e.g., “Ensure that code is checked for syntax errors before you submit your next assessment”);
- achieve the learning outcomes for the subject (e.g., “Try to develop your arguments further in the next assessment task”); and
- develop learning skills, processes or strategies that could be useful across and beyond their degree (e.g., “Video recording yourself rehearsing your piece and then watching it back can be a useful way of self-identifying errors in technique and improving before the final performance”).

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## TIPS FOR CONSTRUCTING FEEDBACK COMMENTS THAT FOCUS ON FUTURE IMPACT

- Include explicit calls to action using imperative or future tense verbs and clear descriptions of relevant actions. For example, rather than, “I really don’t understand this point”, consider, “In the next draft, try to step the reader through the key arguments rather than assuming these will be naturally understood.”
- Offer *sufficient* detail to help students make sense of actionable information. For example, rather than, “Inadequate or inappropriate punctuation confuses readers and misrepresents your ideas. Make sure you know the correct usage of commas, colons, semicolons, hyphens, apostrophes, etc.”, consider, “Adding a comma between clauses in long sentences makes it easier for readers to interpret”.

## PRINCIPLE 2. PROMOTE LEARNER AGENCY

Agency is enabled by explicit feedback statements that construct agentic learner roles; attend to learners’ social, emotional and motivation needs; and encourage learners to be open to evaluative comments and pursue dialogue within productive pedagogical relationships. When constructing feedback to promote learner agency, consider including comments that:

- encourage them to take an active role by discussing their work with the teacher, engaging in further study, or seeking help from sources other than the teacher (e.g., “You may find it useful to search for online videos which describe the process of photosynthesis”);
- strengthen the relationship between teacher and learner (e.g., “Hi Alex, I really enjoyed reading this reflective piece”) and
- affirm their achievement on the completed performance and/or encourage them in future performances (e.g., “Overall, this was a well-researched and convincing first draft. I look forward to reading the final essay.”).

## TIPS FOR CONSTRUCTING FEEDBACK COMMENTS THAT PROMOTE LEARNER AGENCY

- Being sensitive to learner affect, self-esteem and motivation is important for encouraging agency, but this should not be enacted by using ambiguous or mollifying statements to mitigate against negative emotional impacts. For example, rather than, “You demonstrated some knowledge of the topic”, consider, “This particular essay did not illustrate a deep understanding of the topic. Next time, think about defining all key concepts and presenting contrasting viewpoints from the literature.”
- Encouraging and affirming comments should be clear, relevant, succinct, and performance-based (i.e., specific, rather than generic). For example, rather than “Great effort on this painting!”, consider, “The selection of colours in the painting was excellent, and highlighted the emotions being portrayed”.

### PRINCIPLE 3. FACILITATE LEARNER SENSEMAKING

Sensemaking is more likely to lead to impact when comments provide learners with clear evaluative details about why their current work is strong or weak. To aid sensemaking, consider including comments which:

- highlight strengths and weaknesses in terms of specific aspects of the task, such as grammar, content, structure, etc. (e.g., “This figure is not captioned correctly”); and
- summarise the overall strengths and weaknesses of the learners’ performance in relation to the learning outcomes / assessment criteria (e.g., “The arguments in this essay identify important historical issues”).

### TIPS FOR CONSTRUCTING FEEDBACK COMMENTS THAT FACILITATE LEARNER SENSEMAKING

- Aim to use clear adjectives coupled with a succinct and explicit description of strengths and/or weaknesses. For example, rather than, “Unsupported arguments”, consider, “The arguments made in the presentation would have been more compelling with one or two supporting references”.
- Critiques should always be constructive, sensitive, and focus on the work produced rather than personal qualities (e.g., avoid the use of personal pronouns, such as “you”). For example, rather than “You were obviously not paying attention when I explained the purpose of this task”, consider, “This design does not address two key requirements of the task. In particular, ...”.
- The inclusion of strength-focused comments should be authentic and not simply a tactic to mitigate critiques. For example, rather than, “Good effort, but there were many problems with formatting and style”, consider, “The range of references selected for this annotated bibliography demonstrated wide reading. Keep working to improve the formatting of the references according to Chicago style guidelines”.
- Explicit and simply constructed comments about strengths and/or weaknesses are more likely to be interpreted effectively than complex or vague sentences. For example, rather than “Good use of graphs!”, consider, “The graphs represented the data appropriately and adhered to APA guidelines”.
- Be cautious of overloading statements with multiple implicit intentions as learners may misinterpret the meaning or incorrectly emphasise one intent over another. For example, rather than “Good, but what information is missing here?”, consider, “The methods section contains all of the essential headings. In future, it is important to indicate how many times the treatment was given to participants prior to data collection”.

## Further Reading

Michael Henderson, Michael Phillips, Tracii Ryan, David Boud, Phill Dawson, Elizabeth Molloy & Paige Mahoney (2019). Conditions that enable effective feedback. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(7), 1401-1416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1657807>

Tracii Ryan, Michael Henderson, Kris Ryan & Gregor Kennedy (2020). Designing learner-centred text-based feedback: a rapid review and qualitative synthesis. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 46(6), 894-912. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1828819>

Tracii Ryan, Michael Henderson, Kris Ryan & Gregor Kennedy (2021). Identifying the components of effective learner-centred feedback information. *Teaching in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1913723>

Tracii Ryan, Michael Henderson, Kris Ryan & Gregor Kennedy (2022). Feedback in higher education: aligning academic intent and student sensemaking. *Teaching in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2022.2029394>

### Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education

Level 1, Elisabeth Murdoch Building, Spencer Road  
The University of Melbourne  
Victoria 3010 Australia  
[melbourne-cshe@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:melbourne-cshe@unimelb.edu.au)

 [melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au](https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au)