**ACTING ON FEEDBACK**

**How to respond to tutor comments**

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| **AIMS**:   * To encourage students to think more closely about the feedback that tutors/graders give; and to use that feedback constructively. * To de-code the terminology and phrases used by graders. * To help students implement improved techniques of writing. |

Many times, students get a mark they are not pleased with but are unsure as to how best to improve their next paper. In particular, tutors and markers will use the same phrases and comments for the most part. Understanding what these refer to is a crucial step in improving your writing and thus your mark as you move through the course and your degree.

***This, of course, means that it is crucial to impress upon tutors that they need to give detailed comments on the students’ assignments. The feedback should firstly and most importantly focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the content of the assignment, followed by comments about writing style and then formatting concerns.***

**LECTURE**

**SECTION ONE: THE PURPOSE OF FEEDBACK [5-10 minutes]**

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| Perhaps begin by asking the class: “how much attention do you pay to your tutor’s feedback?” Stress the importance of reading through the feedback tutors leave on assignments. You should mention that the feedback should leave the students with an understanding of why they received the grade that they did. This means that they should still engage with the comments even if they are satisfied with their result as they will have a handle of why they performed well. This should help them to maintain or improve their result. |

Discuss the merits of feedback:

* Feedback and comments on coursework should explain areas where improvement could be made (if they do not, you should challenge your tutor on this).
  + Comments will cover a huge array of issues, including more substantive issues such as structure, argumentation and quality or resources to less substantive but nonetheless important issues such as referencing, grammar, and word count.
  + This means there will be a mixture of more fundamental and smaller matters that you can ‘fix’.
* There are repeating comments that it is important to understand – we will decode some of them in this lecture.
* By engaging with and responding to feedback – through that written on the page and through consultations with your tutor – you can make significant improvements in future assignments.
* So there are tangible benefits from ‘looking back’ and reflecting on feedback, and time should be allotted for this task.

Outline the components of the lecture: common themes in essay feedback – what markers would like to see more of and less of; comment relating to essay structure; and comments relating to the quality of research.

**SECTION TWO: Common themes in essay feedback [10 minutes]**

**Need for more:**

*Elaborate*

*Explain further*

*Expand*

*Substantiate your claims*

*Analyse*

**What do these comments mean?**

Explain that the way your argument fits together, and what follows from what you have said already is always more clear in your mind than it is in the mind of the reader. This is natural as you have been researching and been immersed in your subject. Thus students should realise that they need to be as explicit as possible in **explaining the links in their arguments**, why something follows from previous analysis or why they draw a certain conclusion from a piece of analysis. This last part is especially important for substantiation.

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| Q: What do you think of when you hear the word **analyse**? What does it mean to you?  A: Try and guide students to see that analysis comes when you make an effort to explain ideas and quotes beyond their superficial meaning. Relating ideas to previous issues and engaging in criticism and questioning are all ways of improving your analysis. A key way of doing it is to link ideas from different paragraphs – showing a level of coherence in your answer |

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| **Class activity**: being analytical.  One simple exercise to do here is propose a simple claim such as “democracy is desirable” – and then play the “why game” – showing the number of levels of justification one would need and the way each level could be analysed.  Example: Democracy is good because it allows for representation of citizens – why do we value representation? How does it ensure representation? Why is it better than other forms of government? And these questions lead us to further questions… |

Let’s use the topic “Democracy is the preferable system of governance”.

* **Elaborate** / **Expand** – This means that you have likely asserted a point without taking it to its logical end. In other words, the idea that you have introduced is incomplete. This means that the reader is left with the allusion of your argument, but without the actual points being said. To correct this, you must ensure that you clearly spell out what your argument is, and avoid merely alluding to it. For example, “Democracy is preferable to non-democratic forms of governance since democracy encourages active citizenship.” This point is incomplete – it is unclear 1) why active citizenship is important, and 2) how democracy facilitates this.
  + **Rather,** “Deliberative democracy ensures that there are on-going platforms for citizen participation. This may include referenda, open hearings and public consultation by parliament, and various constitutional rights such as the right to assembly and the right to protest. Deliberative democracy therefore provides a political environment that encourages active citizenship. Active citizenship is an important component of governance since acts as a counter-balance to the power held by official government posts. This helps to minimise abuse of these posts, as well as helps to ensure that citizens are directly and indirectly affecting the outcomes of debates that concerns them.”
* **Explain further** / **Substantiate your claims** – This means that you need to provide the premises (sub-arguments) that lead to conclusion that you are asserting. You may have written your point, but you have not sufficiently substantiated the assertion that you have made. For example, “democracy is the ideal system of governance”. You have not explained *why* it is ideal.
  + **Rather**, “Democracy is the ideal system of governance because it allows for free and fair elections. This means that citizens have the opportunity to participate in electing who governs their country. This may help make leaders more accountable to the public since they know that their jobs are at stake if they do not perform well.”
* **Analyse** – This is often a major shortcoming in students’ written work. Often students only repeat (paraphrase) other authors’ arguments without showing that they have thought about the argument being made. Sometimes students will contrast different authors, but without showing analytical think this often amounts to little more than “Author X says this. Author Y says that.” The problem with this is that the student has failed to show why these points are significant for the argument that they are trying to make in their paper. For example, “Smith provides a weak definition of ‘democracy’. He defines democracy as ‘free and fair elections’. However, Watkins provides a stronger definition of democracy and this is more useful. Watkins defines ‘democracy’ as ‘free and fair elections’ as well as a change in the ruling political party, whilst retaining a stable political environment.” This example shows that the student has simply regurgitated two definitions from readings that they have done, and they have failed to provide any analytical insight. Consequently, they have failed to link it to the essay topic.
  + **Rather,** “Watkins’ definition of democracy is preferable to Smith’s. Watkins agrees with Smith that ‘democracy’ must include ‘free and fair elections’. However, Watkins also argues that a system of governance can only be considered a ‘democracy’ once there has been a peaceful handover of power between different political parties. This means that there is a stricter condition set for what is considered a ‘democracy’ that requires that out-going political parties accept their electoral defeat and handover power without destabilising the country. The definition of ‘democracy’ is crucial when considering the statement “democracy is the preferable system of governance" since there ‘democracy’ is a deeply contested concept. Both Watkins and Smith’s definitions can be considered “weak” definitions. While Watkins’ provides a stricter definition, his version still overlooks important components of democratic living, such as public participation.”

**Need for less:**

*Too descriptive*

*No argument*

*Too lengthy*

*Not to the point*

*Not answering the question*

*Omit*

*Confused/Unclear*

**What do these comments mean?**

In order to address the last three comments, this interactive question may be a way to begin the discussion:

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| Q: How many of you have been frustrated in the past by a short **word limit**?  A: Most will probably say “yes”. The point here is to say that any superfluous information or description hurts their mark on more than one front – i.e. it takes up space where their other material could go. This is in fact the point of enforcing a word limit. |

Next – go through some of the common mistakes that students make in an essay:

* **Too descriptive / No argument** –There are two components to consider. Firstly, have you analysed the information that you are introducing into your paper, or merely repeating or describing it? Secondly, are you making a point or argument? Remember, the majority of your paper should be analytical therefore you need to minimise contextual information to that which is essential for understanding the topic and your argument. For example, when discussing the causes of the Rwandan genocide, it is important not to spend too much time describing the events of the genocide – i.e. all the different massacres. Your focus needs to be on answering the question: what the *causes* of the genocide were.
* **Too lengthy / Not to the point** – You need only include information that serves the purpose of supporting your thesis statement. You should try to do this as directly and concisely as possible. Examples are an important tool for illustration but should be to the point and clear. Ask yourself: “why am I telling the reader this?” An important skill in academic writing is to communicate as simply and succinctly as possible. This means avoiding verbosity and pretentious language.
* **Not answering the question** – This is a huge problem and one that can be easily avoided. Before writing your paper or exam you need to take some time to ensure that you have clearly understood the question that has been set. Next, you must make sure that your thesis statement is arguing a point that answers the question or responds to the statement. You must be able to show how your argument relates to the topic in a clear way.
  + For example, if the question set is one that asks you “What, according to Mahmood Mamdani, was the **main** cause of mass participation in the Rwandan genocide? Is this convincing?” and you fail to identify what Mamdani asserted as the main cause, you have not answered the first part of the question. If you do not explain why or why not it is a convincing argument, you have ignored the second part of the question. If you fail to clearly show *why* or *why not* Mamdani’s argument is convincing in light of other literature, you have not answered the second part of the question. The reader needs to clearly see what Mamdani has argued and what you think about his argument, and why you have arrived at this conclusion.
* **Omit / Not knowing when to introduce information** –You may ***not*** introduce *new* information in a conclusion. You should not include unnecessary information.
* **Confused / Unclear** – Take some time to plan the point that you wish to make in a paragraph, as well as how this links to your thesis statement. Drawing a mind-map may help with this process. Confused or unclear writing can be the result of missing premises, hidden assumptions and pretentious language. To avoid these you must carefully reflect on the logical steps that lead to the conclusion you are drawing, as well as edit your work.

**SECTION THREE: Structuring an argument – logic and flow [10 minutes]**

*Structure and flow*

*Valid and sound arguments*

*Common logical fallacies*

A potential piece of advice to students is for them (when writing their paper) to write a paragraph, and then ask themselves whether they would accept the conclusion only based on the rest of the evidence present in that paragraph/paper. If not – your ‘point’ in that paragraph is not being made clearly. Perhaps there is space here for another extract to look through.

It is worth reiterating to students that the connection may exist, but because it is so obvious in the mind of the writer due to their specific perspective, there needs to be a special effort by the writer to make it explicit to the reader.

Explain the basic structure of arguments and that good arguments need to be both **valid** and **sound.** See slides 20 to 21.

It may be helpful to explain typical logical fallacies that are committed in academia. A detailed list (and useful poster) can be found at <https://yourlogicalfallacyis.com/>.

Three fallacies have been singled out in the slideshow: *ad hominem*; false dichotomy; and the confusion of correlation and cause. (Slides 23 to 27).

**Structure:**

*Weak introduction*

*Where is your thesis statement?*

*So what?*

*Weak conclusion*

**Introductions**: It is also important to tell students that they can move beyond mechanical introductions where all the sentences start with “this essay will show” or “then it will conclude...”. Ask students how they can avoid this and for ideas to make an introduction more discursive. Potential ways are a single sentence introducing the context of the paper, or the introduction of the key ideas you will be discussing.

**Thesis Statement**: Start this by putting up a simple essay question – then reform it as a statement and ask if this is ok as a thesis statement (one of the common errors made in this regard). After clarifying that a thesis statement needs to be a more explicit statement of intended argument and findings.

**So what?**: It is very difficult to mark essays when the marker has to try and work out what each paragraph is trying to get at. Again, ask the students how they would traditionally structure a paragraph to help with this. Ideas are:

* Linking sentences that explain the continuity or discontinuity with a previous idea/paragraph.
* Concluding each paragraph with a statement about how that material supports the thesis.
* Constant reference back to the thesis statement (and question).
* Stress the value of making it obvious to the marker why they have included something.

**Conclusions**: a good way of going about this is to ask what a conclusion should be – a common answer will be a summary – which is what a conclusion shouldn’t be! Point out how redundant a summary is if it is pure repetition of your previous analysis. Stress that new information is not allowed but that a good conclusion will put down the central finding of the paper in a way not obviously stated previously. It might also suggest consequences of the findings or some of the unanswered questions (which is ok to recognize).

**SECTION FOUR Quality of Research [5-10 minutes]**

*Unreliable source*

*Insufficient Research*

*Misinterpretation*

*Misrepresentation*

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| Q: How does one identify a **reliable source**?  Ask students the ways they identify them and try and tease out the good and ‘bad’ methods mentioned. In particular – numerous mentions or citations does not guarantee that a source is reliable (ask why at this point). It may also be helpful to ask students what they have drawn from the previous lecture on ‘finding your voice’. Have they found any of that information helpful in finding good sources and do they themselves have any suggestions? |

* **Reliable sources** – Related to the issue of identifying the right sources, it is a good idea to ask the students how many of them always check the **dates** of when their sources were written. Discuss why it is important to consider this information. Generally it is good to point out that more recent information and research is very valuable but that a lot of crucial ‘seminal’ pieces will be older and are essential to being ‘in the literature’.
* **Misinterpretation** – the biggest issues with most students is not reading sources through and picking things out of context. A good example is Mamdani’s presentation of alternative causes of the genocide. If read in isolation, one may think that Mamdani stresses scarcity of land as a prominent cause. It is only by reading the chapter/paper/book on the whole that one will ensure accurate representation.
* **Misrepresentation** – mainly reiterate what is mentioned above. Also point out that tutors and lecturers are generally more aware of authors in the literature and will know if they are being accurately represented.
* **Insufficient research**. This will vary with the nature of the paper – however it is important to read authors on both sides of an argument. Also – ask the students whether they would be convinced by an account supported by only one person? It is unlikely. Quantity is not everything but it can add credibility to an account or argument.

**SECTION FIVE: Conclusion [5 minutes]**

In concluding the lecture, it is important to point out that the best way to truly understand the feedback you receive is to take the time to **talk to the marker**. By using the information in this lecture, a student can take more directed and helpful questions to the tutor to pick up what needs to be improved for the next time. There really is no reason for a student not to improve their essay marks over time.



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