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Short guide to using feedback



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Why is feedback important?

The best way to improve your assignments is by taking on board the feedback that you receive from your tutors.

This may be formative (feedback that acts as a learning aid, rather than an official assessment) or summative (feedback on an assessed piece of work, often at the end of a module). Both types are essential to your academic progress.

It can be difficult to receive criticism of work that you have put a lot of time into. You may feel surprised, deflated or even angry. But feedback is an integral part of learning. It can help you to produce the best work you can.

No assignment is ever perfect, so your tutors will always highlight ways to improve. Implementing their suggestions, and building them into a personal action plan, is key to success.



Different forms of feedback

You may receive feedback in different formats, and varying levels of detail.

Sometimes it may come in the form of a summary or grid at the end of your essay; other times there will be annotations on the assignment itself; sometimes a tutor may give collective feedback to a whole cohort.

The trick is learning how to link any comments back to your work – and, more importantly, identifying things you could change about your approach in order to address the areas highlighted by the feedback. Making feedback transferable to your other assignments is so important.

Tips for handling feedback

- When you first read your feedback, you may have an emotional reaction. This is normal! Try leaving it for a few days before studying it again and deciding how you are going to respond. Sometimes the comments take a while to sink in and make sense.
 - Re-read your essay in the light of the feedback, trying to identify what you would change if you were to submit it again.
- Look at the mark scheme and any learning outcomes, too. Your feedback may point you towards criteria you didn't meet, and it is helpful to remind yourself what your work was judged against.
 - Focus on both positive and negative comments. Reflect on the parts your tutor seemed to like as well as the parts they criticised. What can you do more of? How can you develop your strengths even further?
 - Create an action plan of the key things you need to work on. To avoid overwhelming yourself, pick three priorities to focus on for your next assignment.
 - Continue to expand your action plan as you receive more feedback. Look out for patterns or recurring comments – these are the things you really need to address.
 - If possible, make an appointment with the person who marked it, to further clarify and discuss the feedback.

Potential challenges with feedback

□ **'There is so much I need to improve!'**

Sometimes feedback can be overwhelming or feel excessively critical. This is because the marker is trying to push you to do the absolute best you can.

Remember that academics also review their colleagues' journal articles and papers to help get them to a publishable standard, so they are used to scrutinising the rigour, accuracy and writing style of academic work. Be glad that they are applying the same level of scrutiny to yours! Make a list of recurring comments and prioritise the most important to start working on.

□ **'I don't know what I need to improve'**

Occasionally, you may get a disappointing mark but all of the feedback on your essay may appear quite positive. This can leave you unsure of how to improve. It could be that the marker simply wants more of what you are doing – more depth, more analysis, more development of ideas.

Look at the parts the marker liked and consider if you could have taken them a step further.

□ **'I understand the feedback but don't know how to implement it'**

You may have received a lot of feedback but are struggling to convert that into actual, practical changes you can make. This is often because you are too close to your own work. The Academic Skills Centre or other support services may be able to help. Discussing your work with somebody impartial can help you to see it more objectively. The following pages of this Guide also suggest some techniques.



Categorising your feedback

It can be helpful to sort all of your pieces of feedback into categories, to provide a clearer focus when trying to improve.

You could look at your marker's comments and map them to different aspects of the marking criteria. Alternatively, create your own categories based on areas for improvement. These might be:

- **Comments relating to my UNDERSTANDING of the topic**
These may refer to the accuracy of the information you've included, theoretical concepts you need to gain a better understanding of, or aspects of the topic you have become muddled over or not explained well.
- **Comments relating to my ability to ANALYSE, ARGUE, CRITICISE, EVALUATE etc.**
These might take the form of 'Too descriptive', 'Only presents one point of view', 'Develop your ideas further', 'Say more about this', or 'What are the implications of this?'
When a tutor suggests that you could have interrogated a topic

further, they want to see your critical thinking skills at work. It may be that you have only brushed the surface of the issues you have covered.

- **Comments relating to STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE AND STYLE**

If your tutor has repeatedly corrected or circled grammar errors, you need to take steps to improve your writing and proofreading skills.

Clear writing will enable your marker to understand your points and therefore give you credit for them. Many essay problems are also related to disorganised or illogical structuring, so look out for comments that allude to this.

▣ **Comments relating to my use of EVIDENCE**

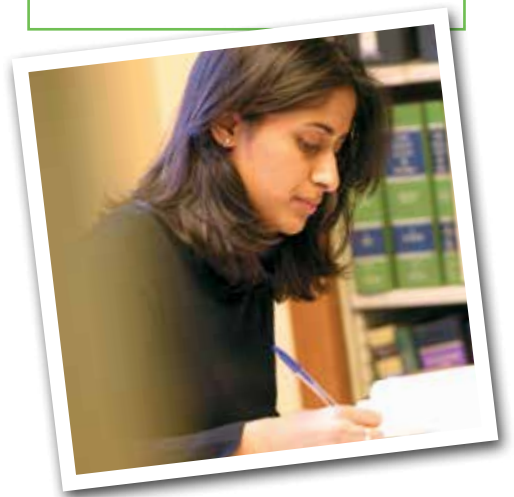
Sometimes a tutor will urge you to draw on better quality evidence and source material. Sometimes they want to see evidence of much wider reading. Often they want a clearer link between the literature you are referencing and the arguments you are making. Look out for feedback related to your use of source material and consider how to improve your reading and research processes.

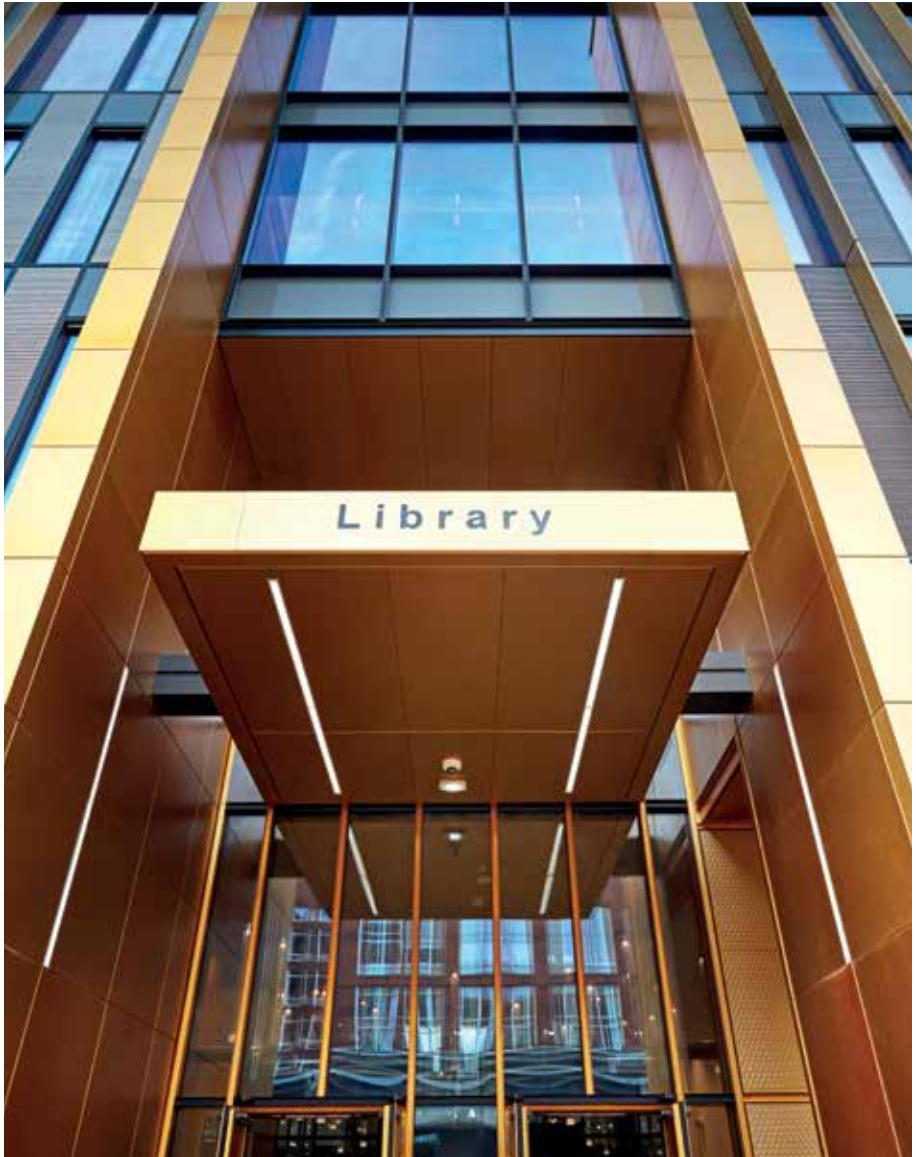
Try making a grid of the different categories (also available as a separate ASC handout), and then organise your feedback into the relevant columns. This may help you to gain a clearer idea of how to move forward – for example, by clarifying areas of knowledge, planning more effectively, looking out for particular errors at the proofreading stage, or by reading more widely before you even begin to write your next assignment.

Download your template for categorising your feedback from the ASC website.

You'll find it under 'Downloadable Resources' at the following URL: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/skills/asc/ASCresources.aspx>

You'll also find a worked example to show how you might use the template.





Addressing your feedback

Below are some areas for improvement that are commonly highlighted by markers. See whether you recognise them, and consider some of the suggestions for how to address them.

Piece of feedback	Possible solutions/ways to improve
'Essay lacks a clear focus'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Make a detailed plan before you start to write, considering the points you want to make and the order in which you will present them. ❑ Decide what you want to argue in the essay (based on the literature you've read and the thinking you've done) before you begin to write. ❑ Avoid waffling your way into an essay with too much unnecessary background information. Answer the question from the start. ❑ In your introduction, clearly state the essay's argument, and outline its structure. ❑ Make sure each paragraph contributes something to your argument, and that the relevance of all of your points is completely clear.
'The writing style makes the ideas hard to follow'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Always strive for the clearest, most concise way of expressing an idea. ❑ Make sure your sentences aren't too long. ❑ Ensure each paragraph makes just one central point, and that you are not leaping around or smudging your ideas together. ❑ Look at the sequencing of sentences within each paragraph – do they build up your point in a logical, easy to follow way? ❑ Take steps to revise grammar and punctuation.

Piece of Feedback	Possible solutions/ways to improve
'Essay needs to demonstrate more critical analysis'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Go through your essay, highlighting descriptive writing in one colour and critical analysis in another. Have you got too much description and not enough analysis? ❑ Look at your chunks of description. Could they be condensed? How could you develop them into analysis? Where have you missed opportunities to criticise or evaluate?
'Referencing and range of sources are inadequate'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Visit the I-cite website: https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/icite and brush up on the Style Guide for your department's preferred referencing system. ❑ Make an appointment with an academic skills advisor from the library who can help you find a range of good quality resources for your assignments. ❑ Make sure you are spending enough time reading and researching. Good essays are built on a solid foundation of wide, critical reading.

Conclusion

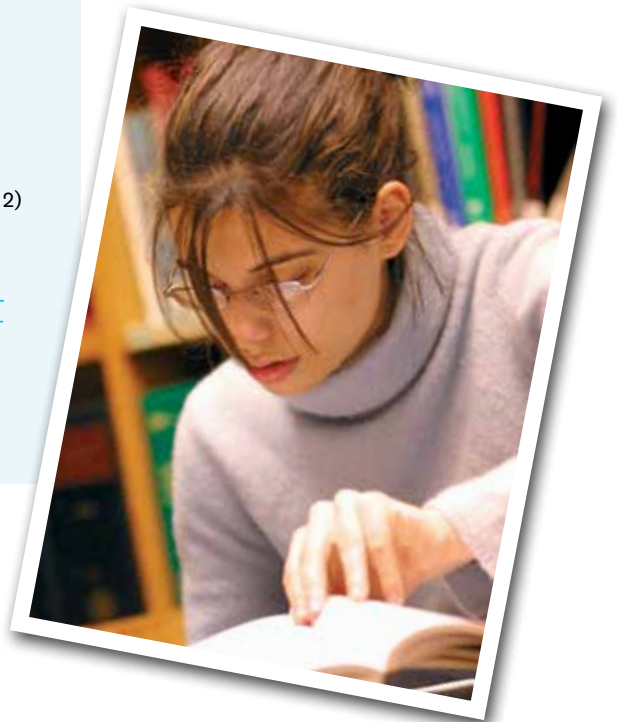
Being able to understand, respond to and implement feedback is one of the most important skills to develop at university.

If you spend time thinking about what your feedback means and how you can act on it, you will learn valuable lessons about what your tutors expect and how you can reach your potential.

References and further reading

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UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Edgbaston, Birmingham,
B15 2TT, United Kingdom
www.birmingham.ac.uk

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