Feedback is any kind of information that someone gives you about your performance, skills, or understanding, and can represent one of the best opportunities for improving. However, receiving feedback is not enough; it is what you do with it that counts.

Feedback could be a grade on your essay, or comments or suggestions given to you verbally or in writing. It might come from your supervisors, but also from friends, family, or even from yourself.

The first stage in the feedback process is to receive it. But on its own it is of little use.

Many students don’t take notice of their feedback. This can be for many reasons, but it’s very difficult to improve without getting any input on what to do differently, and how.

Obstacles to using feedback

1. The language can be difficult to understand. Your supervisors may use a marking scheme to ensure that their marking is consistent and transparent but the terminology may not mean a lot to you unless you ask about the detail.

2. It can be difficult to know what practical steps you could take. Even if you understand the feedback, it’s often the case that you think: “Well, what can I DO with this?”

3. It can feel like using feedback is pointless. It may feel like putting feedback into action doesn’t pay off, perhaps because you have different assignments for different papers, or because you feel like your weaknesses are impossible to change.

4. It can be difficult to feel motivated. On top of everything else, you may feel quite demotivated by feedback. It can feel like a lot of effort to use feedback.

Despite these potential obstacles, it is important to engage with feedback. It is your responsibility to carefully read or listen to feedback to make improvements in your work. Take notes in supervisions, read and highlight key sections of written feedback, and keep them in a prominent place so you can re-read them to help you improve next time. Think about how you can engage with those comments.
**Why you should use feedback**

If you have done well, you will want to ensure you do just as well next time. Your feedback will help you to understand why and show what you should do again in future. Also look out for ideas on how to improve.

If you have done less well you may lack confidence. But it’s important to remember that the feedback is about your work, not about you as a person. Put your feedback aside for a few days; when you come back to it, it’s often easier to absorb and use. Feedback can be instrumental in telling you why you have a disappointing mark.

If a piece of work was a one-off you may feel that the feedback is irrelevant for future assignments. But there’s always something to gain from it. For example, it may comment on issues that apply to all written assessments like structure, grammar, or referencing. Or it may comment on things that you can apply elsewhere, like the clarity of your workings, quality of your critique, or depth of further reading.

If you feel that the feedback wasn’t constructive and detailed enough to be useful, don’t dismiss it. Sometimes the most valuable part of feedback is your reflection upon it. For example, even if you disagree with a suggestion, thinking about why can help you clarify your understanding, or realise how you could better justify your arguments.

**Ways to improve written work**

**Being critical**

Interrogate theories and question the conclusions made by studies. Do they correspond with what you know and have read elsewhere?

**Structure**

The best way to improve structure is to plan your work in detail before you start writing. What exactly do you want to say? What does the marker need to understand first, before they can understand the rest? How can you make each section of your work flow into the next, so that the marker won’t get lost?

**Use of evidence**

Sometimes students feel so confident in their understanding of a topic, that they forget to show evidence to support their claims. Use references to back up your arguments.

**Style**

Your writing style can be hard to change. When you read books and articles, don’t just focus on what they say, but also on how they are written. If you find papers that are really clear and easy to understand, keep them as examples of the kinds of style you could emulate.

**Engaging with feedback**

Feedback should be a conversation and the Cambridge supervision is one of the best examples of that. You receive written and verbal feedback and then get a chance to ask questions and explore what that actually means in order to help you improve for next time.

However, that doesn’t mean that you can’t engage in other ways. Write out the positive and negative comments to remind you what went well and what you need to do to improve. Make them visible on your wall or in a journal to help you next time you come to do some work.

Ask yourself:

- What are the main messages from the marker?
- Is there anything in the comments that you do not fully understand? If so, what?
- Why have you done some things well and do other areas need improvement?
- How will you go about improving your skills and what resources do you need to help you?

Set goals for your next piece of work and make use of academic and library staff, books and e-resources to help you achieve them. If you try to implement an improvement, reflect on whether it was successful and seek advice from the marker if not.

Content developed from Higher Education Academy (2016) [www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/developing-engagement-feedback-toolkit-deft](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/developing-engagement-feedback-toolkit-deft)

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