



The Art of Feedback

Using Tone to Your Advantage

What's missing in the online classroom are the face-to-face cues that lend nuance to our communication. In their absence we have to express not only our ideas, but also our tone in writing. If you have any doubt that writing can express tone, voice, and point of view, think about the last letter or email you got from a friend or even a great novel you once read. Clearly, writing alone can express great subtleties of emotion and thought. On the other hand, not all of us are talented writers.

Generally speaking, the online environment tolerates a **more casual tone** in the classroom than we find in most business or academic writing. This brings with it a dilemma--with so much depending on the interpreted signifiers behind a printed word, isn't **casual** the very opposite of what's needed?

--**Yes and no.**

In our writing in conferences and chat rooms, we are trying to approximate the atmosphere in the classroom. If you personally feel more comfortable in a formal atmosphere, you can set the tone by your own manner of addressing the students.

For example, if you sign your announcements and emails, "Dr. so and so" that immediately lets them know you wish to be addressed more formally and that they can probably expect the same from you. If you are a trainer or teaching a workshop of peers, you may signal that you prefer to be on first-name basis.

Many people advocate using **emoticons** to make up for the lack of facial cues. :-) While these may be helpful, they can also be cloying or annoying when used excessively online. Often they are a substitute for inarticulate expression or even an excuse for bad manners. "To h--- with you" followed by a smiley face may only convey that the person wants to have his or her cake and eat it, too. So while one can make good use of emoticons when used sparingly, one shouldn't use them as an excuse for not making an effort to express oneself clearly.



How do You Sound to Others Online?

If you are really unsure how you are coming across in the classroom and via email, ask one of your colleagues to give you his or her impressions--in fact, ask several for their impressions. While your colleagues may feel awkward about volunteering their suggestions for improvement, you might be surprised at the valuable recommendations they will make when invited to do so. Also, analyze the responses others are giving you in discussions. Are these out of sync with your intentions? These are some indications that you are not projecting the voice or the persona you think you are.

What about tone when giving feedback on individual assignments and progress in a course?

Tips That Focus on Tone

1. **Avoid being too short in response**--too much brevity is often perceived as being curt, brusque, dismissive or cold.
2. Whenever you have to deliver what might be sensitive criticism, **shade and soften your words** with such phrases as "would be best to," "might want to," "it's recommended that," "might be better or more effective to," etc.
3. **Be careful about giving feedback on papers when you are tired**--we all tend to write with less precision and care when we are fatigued.
4. **Take a break** after grading particularly annoying papers or poor work--if you don't, you risk treating the next student's work more harshly! ("Darn, this is the third one in a row who has given me this sort of answer!")
5. If students seem too flip or casual in responding in conference discussion, posted assignments or individual papers, **a few follow-up questions that are written with more formality** will often do the trick to extract complete sentences and more completely expressed or supported ideas.
6. **Don't dash off quick, casual emails to students when these contain partial evaluations of work or answers to questions about the assignment requirements.** Pause and make sure you can present the full picture to the student.



7. Use a **formal tone with difficult or rude students** even if you don't normally do so. Don't allow unreasonable students to dictate the tenor of your communications. Turn the conversation back to the assignment in question and what the student needs to do in order to fulfill the assignment.

8. Above all, **anticipate your audience's reaction** to your feedback before you draft feedback.

Tips That Focus on the Assignment Itself

When you find that you are not able to give effective feedback because

- a. a majority of your students have missed the point of the assignment, or
- b. ignored the assignment and have been unresponsive,

you may need to reconsider the assignment itself. While your assignment may seem to be matched to a particular learning objective, one or more of the following may be the problem:

1. Students are **not adequately prepared** for the assignment--this could be due to external reasons, for example, a lack of background necessary for the assignment (e.g., students who have had little experience in putting together a research paper), or it might be the way that you set the stage or sequenced the assignment in the course.

In this case, you may improve the assignment by doing a better analysis of your student audience, giving a pre-course survey, changing the sequence that the assignment occurs in your course or giving more preparatory information and guiding students to some references and resources to consult (e.g, if you are assigning a term paper, give links to MLA or APA source citation guides for those students who aren't familiar with the practices).

2. **Insufficient details, definitions and guidelines** have been given to students--you have incorrectly assumed that students know what you mean by an "analytic" paper or have not made clear how comprehensive you want students to be in their answers in terms of word length or academic vs. popular support. Perhaps you have not specified that students should use Maryland's online databases through the library or peer-evaluated resources rather than just the Internet? When in doubt, it is better to err on the side of giving too many guidelines rather than too few.



3. You have given students **too much choice or too little in assignment topics**--a list of tailored options to choose from for an assignment is often better than overly broad categories. The latter often are an invitation to plagiarism as well. Also, avoid forcing students into an assignment which **requires that they divulge personal experiences or confess their emotions**. Many students do not feel comfortable doing so--instead, give them a choice of a personal experience or an observed experience--the latter might be a current event that relates to X.

4. The **pacing or length of time** needed for an assignment has been miscalculated. Perhaps you have not built in sufficient time for preparing the assignment, or the assignment requires a set of steps that you have not appropriately paced.

Finally, don't be afraid to revise or even scrap an assignment. The first time you use an assignment in a class, analyze the results and modify the assignment accordingly. Don't hesitate to ask students to evaluate an assignment's effectiveness through a mid-course or end-of-course survey question.