Making the Most of Instructor Feedback[1]

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Feedback is a process, not a product—and it's one of the most powerful influences on your learning. But it only works if you can make use of it. That requires your active participation. The most effective learners don't wait passively for comments—they engage with feedback, make sense of it, and apply it to improve their future work.

When feedback works well, it helps you:

- Understand what you're doing well and where you can improve
- Develop better study habits and self-regulation skills
- Build confidence in your ability to grow through effort and practice
- Prepare for challenges you'll face in your career and beyond

The key insight is that **information becomes feedback only when you act on it** to improve your work or learning strategies. How you use and respond to feedback matters.

Your Role in the Feedback Process

Feedback works best when you're an active participant, not a passive recipient. Using feedback effectively requires building four skills: appreciating feedback, making judgments, managing emotions, and taking action.

Developing these capabilities positions you to use feedback not only for university success but also as a core skill in the workplace and for lifelong learning.

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[1] Content developed with AI, based on the CAST UDL Guidelines™, scholarly sources, and web resources. Icons courtesy of *Flaticon.com* contributors.

1. Appreciating Feedback

Understanding the purpose and value of feedback is your first step. Feedback isn't about judgment—it's about growth. Recognizing your active role in this process shifts feedback from something done *to* you into something you *use*.

Strategies:

- Recognize that feedback comes in many forms: written comments, verbal discussions, peer reviews, self-assessments, and even your own reflections on your work
- Use technology to access, store, and revisit feedback—create a folder or document where you collect comments across assignments
- View feedback as information about your performance and strategies, not as a verdict on your ability or intelligence

2. Making Judgments

Developing the capacity to evaluate your own work—and the work of others—helps you rely less on external feedback and generate your own insights about quality. This skill, called evaluative judgment, grows through repeated practice.

Strategies:

- Study examples of high-quality work in your field to understand what excellence looks like
- Participate actively in peer feedback opportunities—giving feedback helps you recognize quality
- Before submitting work, ask yourself: What are the strengths? What would I improve if I had more time?
- Compare your self-assessment to the feedback you receive—this helps calibrate your judgment over time

3. Managing Affect (Emotions)

Critical feedback can provoke strong emotional reactions and sometimes feel threatening to your sense of self. How you handle these feelings directly affects whether you can engage productively with the feedback. Managing emotions doesn't mean suppressing them—it means processing them constructively.

Strategies:

- Give yourself time before responding—initial defensive reactions often fade with reflection
- Separate comments about your work from judgments about you as a person
- Seek clarification when feedback feels unclear—ask questions rather than making assumptions
- Remember that instructors who provide detailed critical feedback are investing in your growth
- Develop a habit of striving for continuous improvement based on both internal reflection and external input

4. Taking Action

This is where the feedback loop closes. Taking action means actually using the information you've received to improve future work. Research shows that many learners recognize that feedback can help them progress but underestimate their own responsibility for making that improvement happen.

Strategies:
- Don't just read feedback—translate it into specific actions for your next assignment
- Look for patterns across multiple pieces of feedback—recurring themes highlight priority areas
- Apply insights as soon as possible—feedback is most useful when positioned between tasks
- Keep a record of what you've tried and what worked—build your repertoire of strategies
- When submitting revised work, explicitly note how you've responded to previous feedback

Key Takeaway

Feedback emphasizes the role of effort and practice—not innate "intelligence" or "ability"—as the path to growth. When you receive feedback that focuses on specific ways to improve, you're being given a roadmap, not a judgment. Your job is to use that map.

The most effective feedback is specific (telling you exactly what to do), timely (arriving when you can still use it), and future-oriented (focused on what comes next, not just what went wrong). When you receive feedback like this, take advantage of it. When feedback falls short of this ideal, ask questions to fill in the gaps.

Ultimately, your active engagement is what makes feedback powerful. This isn't just a skill for college—it's a capability that serves you in the workplace and throughout life.

Resources

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