

# IN and OUT

## The Two Essential Elements of Online Student Feedback

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**A**lthough the online classroom often has feedback—on assignments and students' overall performance—that can overlap the type of feedback given in face-two-face classes, it becomes unique because of additional avenues for feedback and the online environment. There are two primary types of feedback in an online class: that which impacts all actions of the student **IN** the class and feedback that extends beyond the class—**OUT** of the class—to the professional world, where a student will be spending much of his or her time. Feedback does not necessitate giving grading and comments on the grading of assignments alone. Rather, feedback can also be broader in offering suggestions, insights, and information to a student on study skills, overall performance, and the connection of a subject or course to the world of work. Included in this column are several suggestions for the online student's feedback that will—as always!—hopefully enrich your online teaching efforts. (NOTE: Not all suggestions may apply to your school.)

They are ...

### **IN—RELATING TO THE COURSE AND ASSIGNMENTS**

#### **DON'T GIVE FEEDBACK THAT IS TOO LONG**

Students need detailed feedback; they need to understand **WHY** something is incorrect and **HOW** to get it correct. Conversely, it's important to praise students for efforts well done! In both instances, however—especially offering feedback for items that are incorrect—too much feedback can create a wall of words that students might skim or skip over—neither of which is good. Look at feedback from the view of the student, that is, give what is necessary but not beyond.

#### **BE SPECIFIC IN RUBRICS**

Each rubric has boilerplate language; points deducted are for whatever is stated in a rubric's section. However, often that boilerplate language is not specific enough, so a few words to tell a student exactly what was wrong—and where it can be found on the assignment—are important. Also, always pick at least one point to praise. And these comments do not need to be made for each section of a rubric.

## **USE AUDIO**

Giving audio feedback to each student is extremely time-consuming, however giving audio feedback to the class on one or more areas of an assignments with which many students seem to have a problem can be helpful. Tone of voice, strength of voice, and merely hearing the voice can make feedback seem more personal and “real.” (Of course, individual feedback is also always an option!)

## **CHOOSE VIDEOS TO INCLUDE FEEDBACK**

Videos require more effort and time than giving audio feedback, as each one usually includes a PowerPoint or Prezi, as well as examples (such as what a written assignment should resemble or what makes a great Main Post in Discussion or other assessment tool). However, a video is a powerful feedback tool, simply because it offers that faculty member’s voice—complete with tone, strength, and a few chuckles (important!)—and the visuals of the PPT or Prezi and the assignment examples. Being shown what to do and what not to do—and knowing students can continually revisit the video—can prove to be a strong feedback aid.

## **ALWAYS GIVE HOLISTIC FEEDBACK (THE REST OF THE COURSE)**

Students often forget or don’t realize how one assignment ties into other assignments in the course, and that each assignment is somewhat like a piece of a puzzle, with the course being the entire puzzle. Thus, remind students that any assignment lends itself nicely to the next and previous assignment(s). This allows for a greater understanding of why a thesis statement or math formula or historical event or molecular structure, et cetera is crucial far beyond one assignment. This can result in fewer of the initial problems in future assignments. And don’t forget: depending

on the item or assignment to which you are giving feedback, a reminder to the student of how this will also prove helpful with other school courses is an important part of good feedback.

## **MAKE A DISCUSSION MINOR INTO A MAJOR**

In Discussion there will always be one or more students who have minimal postings; the reasons for this vary, of course. But one helpful bit of feedback is to take one item from the student’s post, and respond with a positive comment, pointing out the student’s point was insightful, was good, was ... brilliant! This can have the effect of giving that student a bit more confidence, and rather than merely putting his or her toes into the waters of Discussion the student might be tempted to jump in now that the faculty member has praised what the student posted.

## **NO “SCRATCH-THE-HEAD-FEEDBACK”**

It is easy to give so-called generic feedback, i.e., the feedback that offers little in detail, such as, “Poor thesis statement” or “Your formula is wrong.” Such comments have two huge negatives attached to them: First, they offer nothing positive, thus possibly resulting in a student’s feeling of hopelessness with his or her efforts; and, second, it gives no indication as to why the item is wrong and how to correct the item, thus leaving the student scratching his or her head as to why it’s incorrect. Always give feedback as if you were the student: by telling the student the “why” of it being incorrect and “how” of getting it right the student has the info needed to improve—and the feedback is done in a positive manner.

## **IF POSSIBLE ... HOLD “SPECIFIC FEEDBACK” LIVE CHATS**

A Live Chat (the names can vary depending on the school) means that students will

be participating live, in real time, and thus can ask questions that will receive immediate feedback. Conversely, the faculty member can ask questions and respond to comments of students, again with immediate responses. Holding a Live Chat with an emphasis on feedback, and almost always with only one or two subject components, can be a very effective feedback tool for the students who attend. And this can also allow the faculty member to remind the students of the component's/components' tie-in to other parts of the course and to the world of work.

### **AH ... USE THE PHONE!**

Talking with students can take feedback to a higher level, as it is one-on-one, and thus specifics of a student's efforts on an assignment and all of the class can be discussed, with the student information he or she perhaps would not offer with other students around (such as in a Live Chat) or the somewhat impersonal feel of an email or social media message. There is the close interaction by the faculty member, too, which gives an important "I really am interested in you" feel to the student, often making the difference between just getting by in a class or kicking up the student's efforts a notch. Finally, much more attention can be paid to what the student might not understand about an assignment or a component of an assignment, resulting in better clarity for the student.

### **REMIND STUDENTS TO LOOK AT "THE BIG PICTURE"—NEVER ONLY ONE OR TWO GRADES**

It can be easy for a student to give up or begin to lag in course involvement after receiving one or two poor grades. In giving the student feedback on any such assignment take a positive approach by reminding students the assignment is one of many, and by showing improvement a student can turn what may seem like a shark

chomp into nothing more than a mosquito bite! Also: a general Announcement and email to the class on this reminder can prove helpful.

### **NEVER FORGET THE WRITING FOUNDATION**

Certainly, what I call the Writing Foundation (grammar, punctuation, spelling, and proofreading) is an integral part of any English course, yet no matter the course students look to us as models for what is or is not good writing. In our feedback we should read it over for any writing errors before we submit it to the student—or the class—so we can offer writing that is as good quality as we are able to produce.

### **THINK OF TEXTING**

Texting is not meant to take the place of an email, yet it can prove helpful as a motivating tool/reminder to a student—in a short post—to look at a video/or attend a Live Chat and/or reread a comment you made on an assignment. Certainly, texting is not the vessel offering up that detailed feedback so important for student improvement, yet it can serve an important function in tickling the student's brain about your feedback or upcoming efforts on feedback.

### **OUT—RELATING TO THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD AND STUDENTS' PERSONAL LIVES**

#### **DISCOVER STUDENTS' MAJORS/CAREER INTERESTS EARLY ON**

As a course begins, learn as much as possible about each student's major, current employment situation, career goals, and personal interests. This allows you to always give feedback that includes this information, thus extending the course and course assignments beyond X number weeks.

### **DEVELOP A “PARAGRAPH BANK” FOR CAREER FEEDBACK ON ASSIGNMENTS**

For a specific component of a student assignment—for example, a thesis statement, understanding the causes of the Civil War, an algebraic formula, et cetera—develop a brief paragraph that ties in that item to life outside of the course, especially to the professional world. These paragraphs can be dropped into assignment feedback as is or you can tweak each one per a student’s efforts or needs. And as a course goes on, and as you build more and more courses taught under your belt, this “paragraph bank” will grow!

### **HAVE A VIDEO THAT TIES IN ALL PARTS OF A COURSE TO “THE REAL WORLD”**

Developing such videos—these go by a wide range of names at different schools—reminds students (visually and with a voiceover) how all parts of a course (the specific assignments, as well as following directions, time management, and being actively engaged) relate to and are appreciated by employers. This can be looked at as *preemptive* feedback in that it reminds students what they do in class is very important, and thus focused attention should be paid to each part of an assignment and study skills.

### **HAVE A SPECIAL EARLY ANNOUNCEMENT REMINDING STUDENTS OF TIES TO “THE REAL WORLD”**

Another example of what I refer to as preemptive feedback, posting an Announcement in class early on/sending this Announcement as a class e-mail can serve as an early-on call to think of each assignment and each needed study skill as to how it would relate to the students’ major and career goals.

### **MAKE SURE STUDENTS KNOW ABOUT ANY JOB SEARCH MATERIAL AVAILABLE IN YOUR SCHOOL’S ONLINE LIBRARY**

Many school libraries are well-known for their thorough attention to citation formatting, as well as extensive databases, information relating to specific courses, and helpful librarians. Additionally, many of these libraries also hold a “bunch” of great websites to take students beyond their courses, into the world of employment. Just one or two sentences included in feedback to remind students of this excellent resource (with a link to the library) will prove helpful.

### **SHARE EXAMPLES OF HOW A SUBJECT IS IMPORTANT IN THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD**

Showing students or telling students how the class subject—or a component of the class subject—and/or study skills are important in a professional setting through examples really drives the point home as to the impact the item can have beyond a class. Examples abound—good and bad—and often students would not make the tie-in to the course item(s) unless the faculty member points out it or them. You can also follow this up by asking students to send you e-mails with their examples, and this accomplishes two items: getting the students more engaged in the course and having students better understand how their efforts in the class will be helpful after class.

### **ASK QUESTIONS IN DISCUSSION THAT ALLOW STUDENTS TO CONNECT THEIR RESPONSES TO THEIR MAJORS/CAREER GOALS**

Discussion presents an excellent opportunity for students to discuss their majors and career goals as they relate to the course. At the end of several of your posts to students—not every post—ask the stu-

dent how something in his or post would relate to the student's major or career goal. (Prior to the beginning of each Discussion week remind students to respond to your questions in Discussion—and tell students that each question is open to responses from all students in the class.) This feedback is generated by the students, and often results in more Discussion postings and ongoing reminders about the value of the course subject in “the real world”!

### **E-MAIL TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS WITH A FOCUS ON ERRORS**

Students make errors in their assignments; we did while in college, and they always will—it is part of the learning process. But

these errors can be turned into positives with the students' lives outside the classroom and beyond the school by sending some students emails pointing out an error or two made on an assignment, and asking the students how such an error or errors might have an impact on their job or a responsibility of their job in the employment scene. This serves to keep students in the know about a specific item's importance, and thus why more attention should be paid to it.

*Remember:* A sculpture in its rough form looks okay—but it's the sanding and honing the sculpture receives that results in something beautiful for the world to appreciate.