

# 10 TIPS for Providing Formative Feedback



## Formative feedback stimulates students' thinking and provides teachers with information to guide future instruction.

Feedback may be motivational, informative, or corrective. You may provide it immediately or delay it, and you may decide to present it either in writing or verbally. Here are 10 things to remember about using formative feedback.

- 1 It probes the status of learners' knowledge.** By using formative feedback, you can inquire into the student's current knowledge and experience. Use feedback to explore the what, how, and why of the student's thinking.
- 2 It challenges the critical thinking process.** Target feedback to encourage learners to conduct the error analysis themselves. Ask them questions like "Did you make any assumptions when \_\_\_\_?" and "Would you consider your \_\_\_\_ to be strong or weak?"
- 3 It aligns with self-assessment.** Ask a student to assess his or her own performance and then help him or her diagnose any areas that need improvement. Give sufficient information so that students can address those areas. Be sure to focus your feedback on the task, not the learner.
- 4 It provides non-evaluative input.** Make your comments constructive to guide learners to the next level of understanding. For example, you could say "You might consider measuring \_\_\_\_\_. What would happen if \_\_\_\_\_?" Avoid comparisons with other students—directly or indirectly—or providing an overall grade at this stage of assessment.
- 5 You can use formative feedback to make observations.** Consider how a student's thinking has changed over time and point this out to the student to reinforce his or her thought process. Feedback like this supports students' autonomy when they are completing assignments.
- 6 Make your comments simple and specific.** Rather than giving many suggestions for improvement, work with the learner to set a single goal for the next assignment. Give only enough information to initiate new thinking, remove uncertainties, or clarify objectives. Provide feedback in small chunks so that it is not overwhelming or ignored.
- 7 Offer formative feedback frequently.** Build in multiple checkpoints for feedback. Provide timely responses to students' work. Use immediate feedback to help students retain procedural or conceptual knowledge. To promote transfer of learning, consider using delayed feedback.
- 8 Formative feedback should be differentiated.** Tailor your comments based on the learner's characteristics. There is no "one-size-fits-all" formative feedback. Provide early, structured, and corrective support for low-achieving students by offering explicit guidance or directive feedback. For high-achieving students, provide verification and facilitative feedback in the form of accuracy checks, hints, cues, and prompts. Consider the nature of the task and instructional goals and customize your comments to ensure your feedback is valid, objective, focused, and clear to the learner.
- 9 You can use multimedia formats to provide formative feedback.** Explore the potential of multiple modes for feedback, including written, verbal, graphic, video, and electronic means.
- 10 Do not allow formative feedback to interrupt active learning.** Minimize the use of formative feedback during implementation of an assignment. Comments at this time may take control or overly influence the direction of the task. They may also distract the learner from focusing on the task at hand.

*This issue was written by Sandy Buczynski, associate professor of science education at the University of San Diego in San Diego, California.*

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