**Preventing Feedback Fizzle**

**Susan M. Brookhart**

There's more to feedback than just crafting thoughtful comments. Here's how to avoid common pitfalls and make the most of feedback.

Feedback is certainly about saying or writing helpful, learning-focused comments. But that's only part of it. What happens beforehand? What happens afterward?

Feedback that's helpful and learning-focused fits into a context. Before a teacher gives feedback, students need to know the learning target so they have a purpose for using the feedback they receive. Say you're trying to teach students how to identify the main idea in expository text. If a student isn't trying to learn how to do this with the text he or she is working on, your feedback about emphasizing a certain point (such as, "Tell us more about the Articles of Confederation") will seem like something you want the student to do to comply with your wishes, instead of something the student needs to learn (such as why the Articles of Confederation are so important to the main idea of the text).

But there's another essential component to effective feedback. After receiving feedback, students need the opportunity to digest, understand, and use it.

**It Starts with a Target**

Before feedback occurs, students need to know what they're trying to learn. Learning targets are student-friendly descriptions—through words, pictures, actions, or some combination of these—of what you intend students to learn or accomplish in a lesson. They're connected to a performance of understanding—something the student actually does to pursue the target—as well as to accompanying criteria for good work that students use to gauge their progress toward the goal. Learning targets are not instructional objectives, which teachers use for instructional planning and which can span one or more lessons.

For example, suppose a teacher's goal is, "Students will recognize and draw shapes having specified attributes, such as a given number of angles or a given number of equal faces" (part of Common Core Mathematics Standard 2.G.1). Students will work on this goal for a whole unit. There will be lessons (and objectives in teacher language) about identifying angles, faces, and other attributes of various figures; lessons about congruence; lessons about solving problems; and so on.

One day, students are learning that congruent figures have exactly the same attributes. Here's how the teacher might state the learning target: "I can draw a figure that's exactly the same size and shape as an example." (Notice that the learning target is expressed from the student's—and not the teacher's—point of view.) The teacher shows students their learning target using correct and incorrect examples of congruent figures. Then she engages students in a performance of understanding. Using grid paper, students are to exactly reproduce two irregular polygons and receive feedback from a partner about whether their figures are the same as the examples. Then each student must create an original irregular polygon on grid paper for his or her partner to replicate. Students turn in their final work with explanations for why their figures are exactly the same as the examples provided.

Notice that the teacher told the students what the learning target was (using the I-can statement) and showed the students what the learning target was (using the correct and incorrect examples). Then the students had the opportunity to show themselves what the learning target was and how they were doing (the performance of understanding, the grid paper exercise). The criterion, in this case, was built in (Are the two figures exactly the same?).

If students do an assignment simply because you asked them to, that's compliance. Compliance is reactive, not proactive. Of course, students should do what you ask, but they won't learn much unless they understand why you're asking. When you say, "You can show how well you understand what a food chain is by drawing one and then solving some what-if problems related to it. Here's an example," students aren't just complying, but also learning about food chains and producing evidence of what they're learning.

Feedback can't work if students aren't trying to reach a learning target—or don't know what the target is, or don't care. In that instance, information is an answer to a question students aren't asking. Feedback without a learning target is just somebody telling you what to do.

**When Feedback Fizzles**

When the learning target and the performance of understanding don't match exactly and the criteria aren't clear, students often experience feedback as evaluation or grading rather than information for improvement, as in the following example.

A middle school mathematics teacher was teaching his pre-algebra students how to solve one-step equations with one variable. The concept he wanted them to learn was that using inverse operations will isolate a variable on one side of the equation and lead to an efficient solution. The class did several examples together, and then the teacher had the students do a problem set individually. The directions on the problem set read, "Solve. Show all steps." There was no mention of inverse operations except as implied in the term steps. In an effort to keep calculations easy, many of the problems could be solved with mental arithmetic.

One of the problems read m + 8 = 15. Quickly calculating this in her head, one student wrote m = 7. The teacher marked the problem wrong. The student's first reaction to this feedback was, "That's not wrong!"

The fact is, they were looking for different things. The teacher was looking for evidence of the use of inverse operations; he wanted the student to understand how subtracting 8 from both sides of the equation would solve the problem—and he wanted the student to show this work. The student was looking for an efficient solution to the problem, which she achieved. The teacher's feedback wasn't descriptive; it was an evaluation.

It's not that the teacher's objective was wrong. My point is that the teacher didn't communicate the objective as a learning target the student should aim for, and the result was ineffective feedback. The student got angry instead of looking to learn more.

**When Feedback Sparkles**

When the learning target and the performance of understanding match exactly and the criteria are clear to both students and teacher, teachers can give feedback that students understand and use right away, as in this example.

Erica Smith teaches a Title I, extended-day kindergarten class. Her learning target for students for one day's lesson was this: "I can recognize whether there's a short ă sound in the middle of a word." For this lesson, the teacher described and modeled the criteria for students, saying, "We'll know that the word has the ă sound in the middle if our mouth is open wide and our tongue is flat when we say the middle sound." She modeled the strategy of "stretching" the word with her hands (fl – a – t) to more clearly emphasize the middle sound.

The performance of understanding was for students to stretch words and decide whether there was an ă sound in the middle. They began by pronouncing some words as a group and shaking heads (yes/no) to identify whether the middle sound was ă. Then students did this several times individually, with Erica giving oral feedback. The final product was completing a written assignment that had five picture words for students to indicate whether there was an ă sound in the middle.

One student, Marisa, made a mistake with the word flag; she said there was no ă sound in the middle. Erica's feedback began with the question, "Tell me the picture name." Marisa responded "flag," showing Erica that the source of error wasn't that Marisa didn't know the picture name. Next, Erica asked Marisa to stretch the word flag. When Marisa did, she realized it did have an ă sound in the middle. When Erica asked, "How do you know?" Marisa modeled an open mouth and a flat tongue, showing she used the criteria herself. Using a series of questions to delve into a child's understanding—what Clarke calls "scaffolded prompts"1 —is an effective way to extend students' learning.

**It Finishes with Use**

Feedback can't be left hanging; it can't work if students don't have an immediate opportunity to use it. In my experience, teachers are better at giving immediate feedback than at setting up opportunities for students to use it.

One exception to this is teachers who use the writing process. These teachers already know the "immediate opportunity to use" principle. Students regularly incorporate first-draft feedback into revisions for their final copies.

This approach works in a wide variety of situations, however, not just in writing class. Whether students are writing reports or doing projects, the teacher should give them feedback on drafts and partial products so they can incorporate the feedback into their final products, revise them, and then reflect on how the changes improved their work.

**When Feedback Fizzles**

When students get feedback on a performance that's not followed by an opportunity to demonstrate the same knowledge or skills, feedback will fail. Feedback "so they know better next time" is a waste of energy. This isn't the students' fault, and it doesn't mean they didn't take your feedback seriously. It's just a characteristic of how people learn.2

For example, a middle school reading and language arts teacher wanted her students to learn how to summarize nonfiction text (her instructional objective). She told her students that "summarizing nonfiction text" was their learning target, and she gave them a worksheet that divided a chapter in their social studies text into five sections (for example, "Summary of pages 321–324," "Summary of pages 325–337," and so on), with blank spaces under each for students to write their summary. She reminded the students that a summary restates the big ideas of the text, eliminating details. She told them they would know they had succeeded when they could write their own summaries of chapter sections, using those criteria (big ideas, no details), and get a minimum grade of 75 percent.

This example is a double fizzle: To begin with, the teacher never provided a clear, shared learning target and criteria. Then, to compound things, the feedback came as a grade at the end of the learning episode. Because summarizing textbook information is a basic skill, the teacher reasoned, the students would use the feedback they received in some as-yet-unspecified future textbook reading.

First, consider the learning target. "Summarizing nonfiction text" isn't a daily learning target; it's a major skill that develops over the course of a student's education. Moreover, the students were given no examples or models, just told that a summary contains the big ideas from a text. The learning target should probably have been something like this, expressed from the student's point of view: "I can summarize information on ecosystems from my textbook, and I'll know I can do it when I can put all the important ideas in one section of the textbook in a single paragraph."

Second, consider the performance of understanding, what the students were actually supposed to do to move toward their target and show evidence of having learned it. It was just a list of five page ranges, the supposition being that when students read text, they'll be able to capture main ideas.

Third, consider the criteria. Using big ideas and eliminating detail are descriptions of quality summaries of the sort the teacher envisioned, but "getting a minimum of 75 percent" is an evaluative criterion that is of no help to students as they're writing their summaries.

Finally, consider the summative or end-of-story nature of the feedback. This is what breaks my heart about this example. What the teacher actually wrote on her students' scored worksheets was very thoughtful, descriptive feedback, with suggestions for next steps. For example, on one set of summaries that she awarded a grade of 3 out of 4 she wrote, "I can see you made an effort to keep your summary brief, and that was a goal of this lesson. If you had told us how the Everglades was formed and then almost destroyed, this would have given you a 4." Just looking at this feedback, without knowing the rest of the story, you might judge it effective.

But there was no next step. The assignment was done, the students were finished, and the feedback was moot. If the teacher had given the same feedback as an intermediate step, before the final set of summaries was due, the student could have used it to revise the work before turning it in for grading. An alternative, and probably a better use of time, would have been for the teacher to ask students to write a summary of one of the five sections she listed and turn it in for feedback. Students could then have used her feedback to revise that one summary and, with this knowledge under their belts, write the additional four summaries.

**When Feedback Sparkles**

Teachers set up feedback to be effective when the learning target and the performance of understanding match, when students have a clear idea of the criteria for their performance and get immediate feedback on that performance, and when they have an opportunity to perform this skill or activity again. Here's an example.

A 9th grade physical science teacher wanted her students to learn how varying conditions affect projectile motion. This was her objective. Her learning target for students was that they would be able to predict how projectiles would move. For a performance of understanding, she asked students to predict the effects of four projectile characteristics (the object's angle of launch, initial speed, mass, and diameter, both with and without air resistance) on three characteristics of the projectile's motion (how far it goes, how high it goes, and how long before it hits the ground—or, range, height, and time, respectively). In groups, students wrote a statement about how they predicted each of the four characteristics would affect the three aspects of motion and explained their reasoning.

The next learning target was that students would be able to assess the accuracy of their predictions and reasoning. The performance of understanding was a lab. Students used a web-based simulation in which they changed one input variable at a time and created a table to record their results. Then they compared the predicted and observed results for each input variable and wrote down whether the simulation results supported their initial reasoning or not. The criteria were accuracy of comparison and soundness of scientific reasoning.

Students used their prediction sheets and data tables to write lab reports, and they submitted rough drafts to the teacher. She gave feedback on the substance of the reports—that is, on students' observations and reasoning about how changing the characteristics of objects affected their projectile motion. Her feedback was not about lab report format or "correctness" of conclusions, but about the observations and reasoning. The feedback was not "giving away answers" but rather pushing students to learn more. For example, on one student's report she noted, "A larger diameter should have a shorter range, distance, and hang time than a smaller diameter when air resistance is present. How can you show this?" Students then had an opportunity to revise their lab reports before handing them in for a final grade.

**Avoid the Fizzle**

To avoid feedback fizzle, take the following steps.

First, share the learning target and success criteria for each lesson with your students. Make sure your performance of understanding—what the students actually do during the lesson—is a spot-on match with your learning target. This accomplishes several good things. By sharing the learning target in the assignment itself—and not just in words—students can envision what they're supposed to learn by looking at what they're asked to do. As students do their work, they make progress toward the target. This work produces evidence on which teachers can base effective feedback, which students can use, in turn, to self-regulate their learning.

Second, whether your feedback is oral or written, choose your words carefully. Describe the work's strengths and give at least one suggestion for a next step that is directly in line with the learning target. Use words that suggest the student is an active learner and will make decisions about how to go forward, not words that suggest a student should use the feedback by complying with a request. For example, you might say, "What were you thinking as a writer when you described the tree?" and not, "Why did you write about the tree?"

Third, follow episodes of feedback with immediate opportunities for students to use their feedback, before you give them a grade. For writing and complex projects, students may use feedback for revisions and redos. However, for solving a mathematics problem, applying punctuation rules, balancing chemical equations, and other application-level tasks, revisions and redos are not appropriate because students have already seen the answers. They need to use feedback to tackle other similar problems. They don't necessarily have to do another whole page of work; sometimes another problem or two is enough to show themselves and you that they've been able to use the feedback and are ready to move on.

Put these feedback tips in place—and watch your students sparkle!

**Good Feedback Is …**

Timely. It arrives while the student is still thinking about the work and while there's still time for improvement.

Descriptive of the work, not the student personally. It focuses on one or more strengths of the work and provides at least one suggestion for a next step. Don't assume that your students know what they did well and that they only need corrections or fixes.

Positive. It shows how learning is a journey forward, and it's honest about both strengths to build on and weaknesses to improve. Its tone conveys to the student that the teacher thinks of him or her as an active learner.

Clear and specific. It's specific enough so the student knows what to do next, but it leaves the student with some thinking to do.

Differentiated. It meets the needs of each student with respect to the current work. For some students, a reminder is all that's needed for a next step; others may need prompts or examples.

Source: How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students, by S.M. Brookhart (2008). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

**"How Am I Doing?"**

**Jan Chappuis**

Effective feedback helps students see what they know and what they need to keep working on.

One day when our daughter Claire was in 3rd grade, she brought home a math paper with a -3, a smiley face, and an M at the top. After we looked at it together, I asked, "What do you think this means you know?" She looked puzzled and said "Math." When I asked, "What do you think this means you need to learn?" she looked more puzzled and said, "Math?" Claire had no idea what the marks on her paper said about herself as a learner of mathematics. Her paper did not tell her what she was good at or what she needed to keep working on—the marks did not function as effective feedback.

We know that feedback plays a crucial role in bringing about learning gains. However, Lorrie Shepard (2001), in summarizing Kluger and De Nisi's meta-analysis on feedback research, points out that only in about one-third of the 131 studies examined did feedback improve learning.

It turns out that it isn't the giving of feedback that causes learning gains, it is the acting on feedback that determines how much students learn. Shepard and other researchers (Ames, 1992; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Butler, 1988; Hattie & Timperley, 2007) have concluded the following:

What feedback describes is the key to its impact.

Feedback that directs attention to the intended learning has a positive impact on achievement.

Feedback is most effective when it points out strengths in the work and gives guidance for improvement.

**Prerequisites for Effective Feedback**

Unless students know the answer to the question, "Where am I going?", feedback is just a series of instructions disconnected from a learning destination. For example, as an elementary teacher I might have begun a lesson like this:

OK kids, time for math. Remember, we're studying decimals. Take out your books and turn to page 152. Read the instructions at the top of page 152, and when you know what you're doing, send your table leader up to get your materials. We're going to go on a decimal hunt.

What have I told my students? The subject (mathematics); the topic (decimals); the resource (page 152 in the book); and the activity (decimal hunt). What have I not told them? The intended learning: "We are learning to read decimals and put decimal numbers in order." My students are on their own to figure out what they are learning. Chances are they think their job is to "go on a decimal hunt."

Absent a learning target, students will believe that the goal is to complete the activity. When students believe that finishing rather than learning is the goal of their effort, acting on feedback about place value may be regarded as more work, not an opportunity for learning.

Three conditions related to the learning need to be in place before we offer feedback. First, students need a clear vision of the intended learning. Second, our instructional activities need to align directly with the intended learning, and students need to see the connection between the learning and what they are doing. Third, assignments and assessments need to be set up so that students can interpret the results as indicators of what they have or have not yet learned.

**Five Characteristics of Effective Feedback**

Drawing from research, we can think of effective feedback as having five characteristics (Chappuis, 2009):

*1. Effective feedback directs attention to the intended learning, pointing out strengths and offering specific information to guide improvement.*

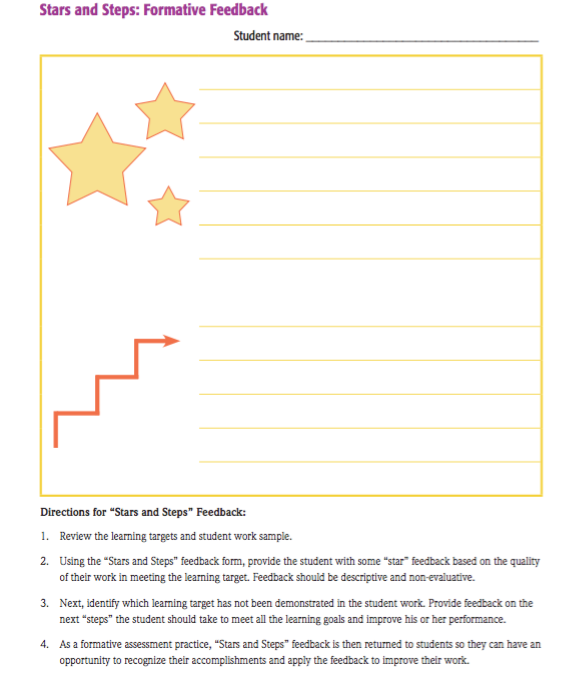
Effective feedback lets students know the strengths in their work and helps target problems to address. We can think of pointing out strengths as success feedback. For example, "The strongest part of your solution is … ." Success feedback can identify what the learner did correctly, describe a high-quality feature of the work, or point out the effective use of a strategy or process.

We can think of "guidance" as intervention feedback. For example, "The drawing you made didn't seem to help solve the problem. Try using the tree diagram we learned about yesterday." Intervention feedback generally identifies a correction, describes a feature needing work, points out a problem with a strategy or process, offers a reminder, makes a specific suggestion, or asks a question.

With younger students, we can use a form such as the "Stars and Stairs" shown in Figure 1 , where the star is the success feedback and the stair is the intervention feedback. This helps establish a forward-looking stance to corrective feedback: "What's my next step? What do I need to do to accomplish this learning?"

With older students, we can use a similar frame with a section labeled "That's Good" for success feedback and "Now This" for intervention feedback. If we want to monitor the actions students take, we can add a section to the form in which students note what they did with the feedback and identify one or more aspects that they think have really improved. (See www.ascd.org/el0912chappuis for an example form.) Their comments, which they turn in with the revised work, help us know whether they understand our feedback.

If the assessment information comes in the form of success criteria or a rubric, students can complete a form such as the one shown in Figure 2 before receiving feedback. We can then agree, offer additional information, or offer different information. Asking students to think about their work before receiving feedback scratches up the "soil" in the brain so the feedback seeds have a place to settle in and grow. In addition, this protocol offers guided practice for students in becoming competent self-assessors.



**FIGURE 2. Assessment Dialogue Form**

Students can complete the first part of this form before receiving feedback. The teacher then provides the feedback on the form, and the student responds with the plan for what to do next.

Assignment: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Feedback Focus: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

MY OPINION

My strengths are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

What I think I need to work on is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

FEEDBACK

Strengths \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Work on \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

MY PLAN

What I will do now \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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*2. Effective feedback occurs during the learning, while there is still time to act on it.*

Sometimes we give feedback with a final mark or grade. For such feedback to influence subsequent learning, students must remember it, translate it into advice that is generalizable across tasks, and apply it the next time they encounter a task in which this learning could apply. Generally, strong students are able to do this, but struggling students aren't.

Think about a girls' volleyball coach. When the girls are practicing their serves, how long does the coach let them practice serving incorrectly? Vince Lombardi is frequently credited with saying, "Practice doesn't make perfect; practice makes permanent. Only perfect practice makes perfect." To ensure students are practicing perfectly, successful coaches intervene as soon as possible to correct errors in form or motion. They don't wait until after the game. In our classrooms, how long do we allow students to repeat a mistake or cement a misconception? "Where's the practice?" is the question that guides us to the most effective feedback point in the learning cycle.

*3. Effective feedback addresses partial understanding.*

When student work does not demonstrate at least partial understanding of a concept or process, feedback is not usually effective. In their 2007 meta-analysis of research on feedback, Hattie and Timperley conclude that when student work demonstrates little or no understanding the problems are best addressed through further instruction. Feedback can only build on learning; if the learning isn't there, the feedback isn't going to move it forward.

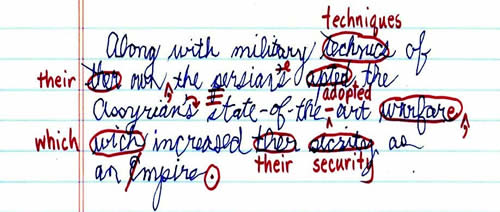
Corrective feedback in the absence of partial understanding can have a negative emotional effect. If students don't understand the task but try it anyway, and then receive feedback they don't understand, they can come to believe they are incapable of succeeding. One simple clue that a student's work is not ready for feedback is that you can't find any legitimate success feedback to offer. When the work doesn't demonstrate any understanding, don't give feedback—reteach instead.

*4. Effective feedback does not do the thinking for the student.*

If you have ever said to your child, "Clean up your room" more than once and then given in and cleaned it up yourself, the reason for this recommendation will be apparent. When I do the work for my child, I get a cleaner room, but my child is no closer to becoming a competent room cleaner. I haven't taught her to clean her room; I have taught her to wait me out.

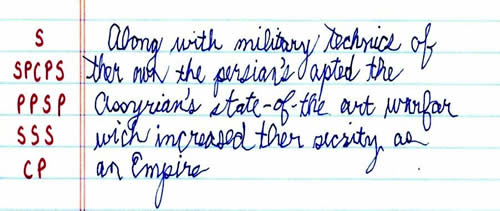
When teachers provide students with more guidance than they need, feedback doesn't deepen the learning because students don't need to think. For example, teachers at the secondary level often notice that students' written work includes errors in conventions taught at earlier grades. The next images show three ways a teacher might give feedback on a sentence from a 10th grade social studies paper with typical errors. The first is an example of overfeedbacking, the equivalent of saying "clean up your room" and then doing the work yourself. The second example provides guidance by indicating which types of errors appear in each line (C = capitalization, U = usage, P = punctuation, S = spelling), but it doesn't do all of the student's thinking. The final example indicates areas still needing work, with a dot in the margin for each error in that line. The student is doing more of the thinking, thereby increasing he chances that he or she will learn from the experience.

**OverFeedback**



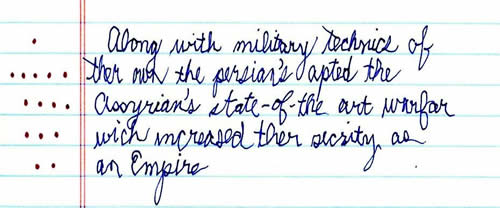
*The feedback in the example above does the thinking for the student*.

**Feedback with Guidance**



*The feedback in the example above gives the student guidance on types of errors and where they appear (S = spelling, P = punctuation, C = capitalization).*

**Feedback That Notes Areas Needing Work**

 *The feedback in the example shows the student where errors appear but requires the student to determine what the errors are and how to correct them.*

*5. Effective feedback limits corrective information to an amount the student can act on.*

How much corrective feedback can each student reasonably be expected to act on in a given time? Information beyond that is less likely to be used. In a review of research on written composition, George Hillocks (1986) noted that in studies on error correcting, teachers who marked every error were no more effective in increasing the quality of students' work than teachers who only marked the errors that current instruction focused on.

Students differ in their capacity for responding to correction, and too much corrective feedback at one time can cause a student to shut down, guaranteeing that no further learning will take place. In such cases, consider letting go of the urge to provide all correctives necessary to make the work perfect and instead provide as much guidance as the student can reasonably act on.

**Feedback Leading to Action**

Recently, I accompanied my mother to doctors' appointments in preparation for a difficult surgery. She interacted positively in some situations and negatively in others, and she walked out of one appointment. When I asked her about the differences, she told me she trusts the doctors and nurses who listen to her and doesn't trust the ones who don't. Regardless of what treatment is in her best interest, she only wants to take the advice of the ones she trusts because they took information in before giving advice out.

There is a lesson here for educators. For feedback to be effective, students must act on it, and we can enhance our students' willingness to act on our feedback. By looking closely at their work to understand what they understand and identify where they need help, we are listening to our students. Our feedback can communicate to them that we have heard them, and they will be more likely to trust us enough to follow our advice for that sometimes-difficult next step.