Getting Instructor Feedback

Love it or you hate it, you’re guaranteed to have received feedback at some point, whether it was from a teacher, coach, parent, or friend. But now that you’re in university, you are likely receiving a lot more of it – especially when it comes to your writing assignments!

Feedback & where to get it

Different people have different ideas about what feedback is, and what it should look like. But for the purpose of this resource, feedback consists of constructive comments on your writing. Feedback should outline what you did well, but also point out areas where your writing can be improved.

Nobody writes perfectly. Although you’re the expert on your own writing and you know exactly what you are trying to say, your instructors aren’t privy to that information. So, if something about your writing is unclear to them, chances are that it will be unclear to any other reader as well.

In addition, we can all learn from different perspectives and experiences. Your instructors spend a significant amount of time reading and writing. They usually have some valuable insight to share.

Therefore, feedback matters because it’s meant to help you grow as a writer. It is intended to help your writing blossom.

Critical feedback can be upsetting of course, but remember it only reflects your writing in its current state. It doesn’t reflect on you as a person.

There are many ways you can get feedback at Waterloo! These include:

1. Writing and Communication Centre (WCC) staff
2. Peers and/or classmates (through a peer-review process)
3. Teaching Assistants (in some classes, your TAs may mark your assignments and tests)
4. Your instructors

This resource will focus on the third and fourth sources of feedback. But if you’d like more information on giving or receiving feedback in a peer-review context, check out this WCC workshop on LEARN: Getting and Giving Feedback.
The Feedback Process

Now that you know what feedback is, why it matters, and who you can receive it from, let’s delve into the sometimes-uncomfortable topic of receiving feedback from your TAs and instructors.

It’s important to emphasize here that feedback works in a cycle that includes 2 or 3 steps. If you want feedback on your writing prior to the due date of an assessment, the process involves three phases: asking for, receiving, and implementing feedback.

On the other hand, sometimes you haven’t asked for feedback, but you receive it anyway along with your grade when an assessment is returned. In this case, the cycle involves two phases: receiving and implementing feedback.

We’ll go through each of these phases in detail below.

Phase 1: Asking for feedback

While your instructor’s feedback is a great thing to have prior to finishing an assessment, students should be aware that their instructors don’t always have time to review early drafts. So, always ask your instructor if they accept draft assignments before asking for feedback at this stage.

In addition, consider why you’re asking for feedback. For instance, is this a draft you don’t feel confident about, or an assignment you didn’t do well on? Knowing why you want feedback can help guide your instructor as they look through your paper.

It’s important to note that asking for feedback is not the same as expecting your instructor or TA to proofread your paper for you. Instead, consider what you struggle with as a writer, and then try to ask for feedback related to those concerns. For example, you may ask for insight on:

1. Sentence-level clarity of your piece
2. Structure and flow of your arguments
3. Potential gaps or misconceptions in your content
4. Where you could expand or should re-focus your argument(s)
5. Structural changes to improve how you deliver your content

This will help guide your instructor, so they can give you more targeted feedback.
With that said, if you’re looking for feedback from your instructor or TA, there’s a general process you can follow for best results:

1. Contact your TA or instructor. Send them an email or approach them during office hours and ask if they accept drafts.
2. Explain what you’re struggling with. This is where you point to the bigger picture questions like, “Are my arguments fully fleshed out and supported by evidence?”
3. Give them time to review your material and provide feedback. Instructors and TAs are as busy as you are, so don’t expect an immediate turn-around.
4. Thank them for their help.

You can also come see us at the WCC! We host virtual, one-on-one appointments to help students with their writing and communication assignments. One of the main features of these appointments is providing students with feedback and helping them find the supports and resources they need to grow as writers. We can assist you at any stage of the process, from initial brainstorming to final revisions. So, don’t hesitate to book an appointment or drop into a session with one of our peer tutors!

Visit the end of this learning resource or click here for links to more information and to book an appointment.

**Phase 2: Receiving feedback**

No matter what the grade is on your assessment, it’s very important to look at any feedback provided and examine what it says. Look for comments about any errors, missed insights, opportunities to add or remove information, stylistic choices, as well as what you did well on the assignment!

If the feedback doesn’t make sense to you, try and clarify it with your instructor or TA. The better you understand what they saw in your writing, the more improvements you can make in the future. It isn’t rude to ask for clarification, either; think of it as an opportunity to keep learning. Similarly, don’t be afraid to ask specific questions; for example, “You mentioned my thesis was missing an argumentative drive, but I’m not sure what that means. Could you give me an example?”

However, clarifying what your instructor meant may be difficult if the feedback is negative. And while it’s perfectly okay to feel upset about critical feedback, it’s important that you don’t let it defeat you!

Take some time away from the assessment to gather your feelings. When our emotions are running high, it’s difficult to think about the feedback critically.
Once you’ve taken some time to gather your feelings, set up an appointment with your instructor or TA to discuss the feedback. Often, written feedback sounds harsher than it would if it’s spoken aloud because tone-of-voice is not conveyed well through text. Going over the comments with your instructor will likely give you some more guidance on what you can do better next time and may give you some encouragement.

The WCC can help here, too! In an appointment, our friendly and knowledgeable staff will walk through feedback with you.

**Phase 3: Implementing feedback**

Now that you’ve gotten the feedback, and you’ve looked it over or discussed it, what do you do with it? First, **build on your strengths**. Don’t ignore the positive comments left on your work; rather, acknowledge them and make a commitment to continue strengthening them. For example, if your instructor compliments your ability to concisely deliver an argument, continue to do so in the future!

Similarly, it’s important to **acknowledge and adapt** your writing based on the constructive feedback you were given. This is especially true in nested assignments or when you receive feedback on a draft assignment.

A nested assignment is a one where you have multiple, smaller assignments that cumulate in one larger project. For instance, you may create an outline, a draft and then a final copy of a report. You will receive feedback and a grade for each stage of the assignment, but it results in one final, polished paper.

But how do you go about revising your paper to incorporate feedback? Here’s a brief overview of that process:

1. **Prioritize** what to revise. What revisions are most pressing or important, and what can be done later? A discussion with your TA, instructor or a WCC staff member can help you identify the most crucial changes to make.
2. Start with **large-scale** revisions (i.e. strengthening weak arguments, removing unnecessary information, improving the flow and organization of your ideas, etc.). Small-scale edits like spelling and grammar can be done last.
3. **Plan** out when you’re going to revise.
In addition, keep in mind that implementing feedback is the most important part of the process. Every writer can get better, so having others’ insights is always a valuable thing. However, if feedback makes you feel stuck, confused or if you’d like extra support, there’s lots available! Here are some resources that you might find useful:

1. Book a virtual, one-on-one appointment with the Writing and Communication Centre: [https://uwaterloo.mywconline.com](https://uwaterloo.mywconline.com)
2. Drop into a session with one of our peer tutors: [https://uwaterloo.ca/writing-and-communication-centre/virtual-drop-appointments](https://uwaterloo.ca/writing-and-communication-centre/virtual-drop-appointments)
3. Review the WCC workshop “Getting and Giving Feedback” on LEARN

Wrapping Up

We’ve discussed a lot, so here’s a rundown of what to keep in mind:

Feedback is integral to your university career (and beyond!). Receiving constructive comments on your writing can help you grow and improve as a writer and learner.

When you receive feedback from your TAs or instructors, make sure you look at it and know what to do with it. If you don’t, talk to your TA or instructor or book an appointment with the WCC.

In addition, keep in mind that implementing feedback is the most important part of the process. Every writer can get better, so having others’ insights is always a valuable thing.

As you revise, take care to clarify your decisions and defend them with evidence if necessary. For example, imagine you wrote an essay about hurricane activity on the east coast of the United States. If, in their feedback, your instructor asked you to clarify whether you considered the economic implications of increased hurricane activity, you should make sure to address this topic, even if you want to focus on the social implications more heavily. In your paper, you would acknowledge that there are negative economic consequences associated with more frequent hurricanes, but specify that your paper will focus on the social consequences instead. It may also be necessary for you to explain why focusing on the social consequences of increased hurricanes frequency is important.