



On the use of a personal or neutral tone in written feedback

Rachel Player

Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

Abstract

It is well-known that the emotional response upon receiving feedback can impact how learners incorporate the comments received into their future learning. It is therefore essential that assessors consider the emotional impact of the feedback they provide. One aspect that may influence how the feedback is received is the style and tone of the feedback. This opinion piece introduces the explicit consideration of two styles of written feedback: personal ('you show') and neutral ('the student shows'). Existing literature does not directly examine which (if either) of these styles can be considered as the most effective. I revisit the literature that investigates how the tone and style of feedback relates to the key features of effective feedback. Reflecting on each of the key features, I argue that adopting a personal tone is most natural. I also offer considerations for practice, highlighting that written feedback should be constructive, fair, and understandable, and delivered in a tone that is authentic to the personalities of both the educator and learner, to foster engagement and dialogue.

Keywords: written feedback; tone of feedback; style of feedback.

Introduction

The emotional impact of feedback has been widely discussed (Molloy, Borrell-Carrió and Epstein, 2013). Indeed, an emotional response is immediate upon receiving feedback and this reaction can impact how (or even if) learners incorporate the feedback received into their future learning (Jones et al., 2012; Holmes, 2023). An appropriate style and tone should thus be adopted in feedback, that considers the emotional impact.

Two common styles to written feedback can be classified as personal ('you show...') and neutral ('the student shows...'). To the best of my knowledge, there is no existing literature directly addressing the question of whether either of these two approaches, or a combination of both, is more effective in terms of the emotional impact, or future success in learning. Thus, the main goal of this article is to examine the literature to identify how tone relates to the key features of effective feedback.

There are several reasons why it is valuable for educators to reflect on aspects of their feedback style, including on their tone. Good feedback encourages students to develop a reflective learning style and can support lifelong learning (Clark, 2012; Winstone et al., 2016). It can also encourage engagement with, and hence reduce the chance of withdrawal from, the programme of study (Price, Handley and Millar, 2011). On the other hand, feedback that is perceived to be poor can be a source of dissatisfaction for students and this can lead to lower ratings in assessments of teaching quality such as the National Student Survey and the Teaching Excellence Framework (Winstone and Carless, 2021).

This article restricts discussion to the aspects of effective feedback that are most relevant to the tone of written feedback. More general principles of effective feedback are set out in Sadler (1989), Lunsford (1997), Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), and Winstone and Carless (2019). Other types of direct feedback include face-to-face feedback (Heron et al., 2023), digital audio feedback (Ice, Curtis and Phillips, 2007), video feedback (Mathisen, 2012), and peer feedback (Liu and Carless, 2006). There are also indirect types of feedback such as releasing model answers (Cho and MacArthur, 2010).

The emotional impact of feedback

It is widely acknowledged that the emotional impact of feedback should be considered (Molloy, Borrell-Carrió and Epstein, 2013). Indeed, showing supportiveness, approachability, and sensitivity in the sharing of feedback are identified in Carless and Winstone (2023) as qualities of a feedback literate educator, who can support students to better understand and action the feedback that they receive. Approaches that foster resilience may help students improve their own feedback literacy (Briscoe, Olson and Prior, 2023). Further, it has been noted that the 'tactics' of language (deciding how to say something, as opposed to deciding what to say) can impact on the emotional response of

the reader (van der Sluis and Mellish, 2010). For example, judgemental language may be received by learners as a criticism of themselves personally, and feedback that is very brief (or abrupt in tone) may be interpreted by the student as an indication that their work was not worthy of comment (Willingham 1990; Boud, 1995). Critical feedback should thus be delivered in a constructive way that avoids apportioning shame or blame onto the student, with the marker remaining cognisant of any negative emotions they may be feeling when preparing the feedback (Schwarz, 2017).

Receiving constructive feedback can be an indication to students they that 'matter' in an academic context. This is important for all students, but particularly those who might feel marginalised or are experiencing impostor syndrome (Schwarz, 2017). Educators should consider students' positionalities when giving feedback to avoid further marginalising students (Takacs, 2003). Research has advocated for feedback to demonstrate a sense of care: if students feel that they do not 'matter', this can lead to disengagement (Barnacle and Dall'Alba, 2017; Gravett, Taylor and Fairchild, 2021; Zawada, 2024). A sense of belonging could be fostered when students are encouraged to receive feedback in the context of a growth mindset (Kolyda, 2023).

It has been argued that adopting a neutral tone would be perceived by students as 'more objective' and hence less likely to be critical (Lilly, Richter and Rivera-Macias, 2010). A neutral tone may be appropriate in the context of anonymous feedback, where it may be more difficult to personalise the feedback. On the other hand, a personal tone gives the feedback a more human element, that directly engages with learners and might be better understood. A personal tone may also be received as less detached, and hence more likely to convey that the marker cares about the student and how they will receive the feedback.

The dialogic nature of feedback

Dialogic feedback positions the student as a fellow inquirer (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). This can be contrasted with the situation of an overly passive student and/or an overly authoritative educator, which has been argued to be less effective (Dysthe, Lillejord and Wasson, 2011). In situating feedback as a dialogue, Schwartz (2017) argues that educators should acknowledge the relational context of assessment and feedback. This

idea is supported by Pokorny and Pickford (2010), who found that establishing a rapport between student and educator was necessary for students to feel comfortable to engage in dialogic feedback. Weaver (2006) observes that the way feedback is worded will depend on an educator's values and beliefs, hence it may be that a more personal or more neutral tone will feel more natural depending on the educator's personality and positionality. Moreover, research has shown that the use of paralinguistic cues such as emoticons can alter students' perceptions of an educator's personality (Grieve, Moffitt and Padgett, 2018). This is interesting because perceived good teaching (as identified by students in teaching evaluation forms) is often associated with personal qualities of the educator, such as being approachable (Patrick, 2011).

The mentioned literature suggests that markers should adopt a feedback style that is authentic to their personality. In the context of written feedback, the marker can consider their opening of the dialogue, and craft it in a way that invites a response. In this context, a personal tone, where it suits the marker's personality, is likely to come across to the learner as more engaging.

However, the issue is nuanced. As emphasised in Section 2, it is important to ensure the personal tone is also constructive: for example, a participant in a study of Ferguson (2011) suggested that a phrasing of the form 'you could have tried this' was preferable to 'you did not do this' in terms of how feedback would be received. While both address the student as 'you', the former is phrased supportively while the latter is much more critical. Additionally, as Ajjawi and Boud (2017) note, a neutral tone does not necessarily prevent a dialogic exchange. It may also be that a mixed approach is appropriate: for example, neutral written feedback could be reinforced by a face-to-face conversation once marks are released and the scripts de-anonymised.

The individualisation of feedback

Whatever the tone, feedback should be personalised to the student's own work and should focus on the quality of the specific piece of work submitted, rather than any personal qualities or attributes of the student (Shute, 2008; Dawson et al., 2019). Moreover, feedback should be individualised to ensure it will be understood by the student (Carless and Boud, 2018). The reasons it may not be understood could include implicit assumptions about students' prior knowledge (possibly to the detriment of students from non-traditional

backgrounds); the use of academic jargon; or whether the language of the assessment is a native language for the student (Jonsson, 2013). Indeed, prior research shows that students' perceptions of and reaction to feedback may depend on their cultural background (Ryan and Henderson, 2017; Wood, 2021). While feedback may need to be a certain length to be suitably specific, it should also be concise so as not to be overwhelming (Lunsford, 1997; Lilly, Richter and Rivera-Macias, 2010).

The need for individualisation should be balanced with the need to ensure fairness. For example, it should be the case that the same comment would have applied had the work been submitted by any of the students in the class. Perceptions of fairness are known to influence students' evaluation of the quality of feedback (Colquitt et al., 2001; Lizzio and Wilson, 2008). In this respect, a neutral tone may be more appropriate. It may also be more suitable if feedback will be reviewed by other parties, such as external examiners (Winstone and Carless, 2021).

While Section 3 argues that the tone of feedback should align with the personality of the educator, the mentioned literature on individualisation emphasises that, where possible, feedback should equally align with the personality, and personal situation, of the student. For example, it should be in alignment with the student's expectations given their cultural background. This could be more broadly framed as developing feedback in acknowledgement of the student's positionality. I would suggest that addressing the student as 'you' is a natural way of conveying that the feedback is individualised and developed in consideration of a student's individual needs. It may also be perceived as more directly engaging the student in a dialogue.

Conclusion

In this opinion piece, I considered the use of a personal or a neutral tone in written feedback, with the goal of examining which (if either) is the most effective. To highlight this issue, I revisited the literature to investigate how the use of tone relates to the key features of effective feedback.

Literature suggests that a personal tone can help individualise feedback. A personal tone can also be more supportive, thus creating a dialogic environment in which criticism can

be delivered constructively, and students feel that they matter. On the other hand, a neutral tone can help to ensure that the feedback is felt to be fair, and not critical of themselves as a person. A neutral tone may also feel more appropriate in the context of anonymous marking.

Considering the literature studied, and reflecting on my own practice, I would argue adopting a personal tone is most natural. Having tried both approaches, I would say that a personal tone does suit my personality and is well received by the community of students I teach (final year undergraduates in computer science). However, this experience is anecdotal, and more rigorous study of which, if either, approach is better would be highly valuable. Such research could be extended further to examine a range of teaching contexts (undergraduate, postgraduate, PhD), while considering the diverse backgrounds of learners.

This article identifies the tone of feedback as a key factor affecting its emotional impact and how it is incorporated by learners, that has so far received limited attention. I strongly encourage educators to reflect on which tone might suit the personalities of themselves and their learners best and adapt their feedback style accordingly. I believe this is an important way that educators can foster engagement and a sense of belonging through opening dialogue.

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Author details

Rachel Player is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Information Security at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her main research interests are in post-quantum cryptography and homomorphic encryption. She was awarded the 2019 Radiant Award for Advancing Internet Security by Internet Security Research Group, and in 2022 received a College Excellence Teaching Commendation. She is the co-author (with Sean Murphy) of *Cryptography: a very short introduction*, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 2025).

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