

**How to ...  
Guides  
for  
Postgraduates**

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# Asking For Feedback

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Getting feedback from others can be a very positive experience and powerful tool that we can use to improve our own effectiveness, if we approach it with a bit of forethought and planning. However, approached in the wrong way, it can be an unsatisfactory or unpleasant experience which leaves us none the wiser or full of self doubt. These are some suggestions on how to get the most out of asking for feedback.

## Why Do You Want Feedback?

Examine your motives for asking for feedback.

Some positive reasons for which you could probably get good feedback are :

- to find out how you can improve a particular aspect of your performance eg. ideas for improving the way you present to a group of your peers
- to understand the impact you have on others by the way you tackle a specific issue eg. checking to see if the message you thought you had given in a meeting was what was received by those attending
- to assess how close you are to a required standard eg. asking for feedback on a paper you want to submit to a journal

Used effectively, feedback can be a way of getting help from others to guide you to success, or to understand the impact your behaviour has on others.

Take care if you are really trying to get reassurance or praise for something you have done – honest feedback may not be wholly (or even partly) positive. Try to avoid asking for feedback when you are feeling vulnerable. Some people are not very skilled at giving constructive feedback, and clumsy or destructive comments may knock your confidence or leave you feeling worried.

## What Kind Of Feedback Do You Want?

### How others see us

Other people can only see what you do and how you behave. They may believe they understand your motives or feelings, but this might be quite different to what you intended. Bear this in mind when asking for feedback.

For example, someone asking for feedback about a presentation they have given might get comments on :

- a) *their observed behaviour* – “You spoke very slowly and at some length about some very simple concepts”
- b) *the impact they had on others* – “I felt as if I was being treated like a child”
- c) *assumptions about their motives* – “You think you’re so much smarter than us !”

People who are skilled at giving feedback will generally focus on what they have observed and the impact it had on them. Asking for feedback on your observed behaviour and the positive or negative impact it had on someone is more likely to be of use to you – you may be able to change your behaviour which will change the impact you have on others. Protesting

that someone has misunderstood your motives probably won't have much effect if the behaviour which led to their misunderstanding remains the same.

## **What you are prepared to change?**

If you ask for feedback on something you genuinely want to improve, and act on that feedback, it is likely to have positive benefits for yourself, and make the person who gave you the feedback feel valued. However, if you dismiss or ignore their comments, they may not be prepared to help a second time.

## **Possible areas for feedback**

The more specific you can be in asking for feedback, the more helpful this normally is. A general "how am I doing?" request may just get a general or superficial answer. Try to focus on one or two specific areas for each request, rather than a long list. Some suggested areas might be :

- your research – your academic writing and presentation styles, how skilled you are in different research methods, your approach to defending or critiquing an argument
- your interpersonal skills – how well you chair meetings, interact with other attendees at seminars, meetings and conferences, communicate with audiences outside an academic environment
- other areas you may want to improve – your tennis serve, your job applications, your cooking ...

## **Who Could Give You Feedback?**

Ask yourself three questions before soliciting feedback from someone :

1. Will they be honest with me? *(more likely if you demonstrate that you genuinely want feedback and won't take offence if it is not all positive)*
2. Will they show some sensitivity in the way they communicate? *(even essentially honest feedback can be damaging if delivered clumsily)*
3. Do I trust their opinion? *(in the area on which you want feedback, have they seen you recently, do they have relevant experience or expertise?)*

Possible candidates for giving you feedback on your academic performance could be:

- your supervisor
- an academic adviser – if you have an alternative academic member of staff assigned to you, or, informally, if you have someone you can trust who sees you perform in an academic context
- colleagues – other students or researchers in your department or lab
- attendees at presentations or meetings
- external partners in your research

If you want feedback on your non-academic skills or performance, some of the above may still be appropriate. Also consider :

- friends and relatives – as long as they have recent experience of seeing you perform in the area on which you want feedback
- interviewers – if you want to ask for feedback on a recent interview, make it clear that you are asking to improve your performance in future interviews, not to challenge the decision they have made. They may not be prepared to give you instant feedback if you phone up

– give them time to consider what they are going to say (and to dig out their notes to remind them who you are and why they rejected you !)

- careers advisers – get feedback on your applications before you send them, and your interview technique before the real thing

Where possible, don't rely on one person's opinion. Several data points should give you a more reliable result.

## **How To Ask For Feedback – When & Where**

Feedback immediately after an event has the benefit of being based on things which are fresh in someone's mind. There may also be the opportunity to try and correct problems immediately. The down side is that if the person you are asking has a difficult message to give you, they may want time to think about how to tell you – they may just avoid being honest if you put them on the spot.

Think about forewarning someone that you want feedback and get their agreement, ideally before they see you in action. (This also means they are more likely to be paying attention.)

Try to find somewhere quiet, where you won't get interrupted when receiving feedback, so that you can concentrate on the message.

## **Reacting To Feedback – Some Dos and Don'ts**

### **Do**

- listen carefully, without interrupting
- use active listening – show that you are concentrating on the message, summarise and ask for clarification where required, to check your understanding of the comments being made
- ask for suggestions for improvement, particularly if some of the comments are negative
- thank the person for the feedback – they have taken the time to give you what you asked for, even if it was not what you wanted to hear
- keep a record – if it was good, you can look back on it to give you a lift in future; if it was bad, you may be able to look at it from a new perspective once the initial impact has lessened
- devise action plans – there is no point in asking for suggestions for improvement if you don't do anything about it

### **Don't**

- focus on defending or explaining your motives – you already know what you intended, this is a valuable opportunity to get feedback on how your actions were interpreted
- avoid looking at the person giving you the feedback
- try to get in with your own opinion of your performance (*“Well I thought I did pretty well!”* or *“I was dreadful, wasn't I?”*) – unless they ask for it
- counter-attack if you are criticised – if you were the one who asked for feedback, you need to listen rather than give unsolicited feedback of your own
- do nothing with the feedback

## How To Handle ...

- praise – accept it, thank them, show that you appreciate their comments; if you try to dismiss it, this implies you don't think much of their judgement
- criticism – acknowledge their concerns and try to move criticism into problem solving; ask “what would make it better?”, and keep asking this question (it's called the “broken record” technique) if they continue to dwell on their criticism
- someone who asks “what do **you** think?” – frustrating as it may seem, this is a good first question for someone to ask before giving you feedback, to see if you have already picked up on areas for improvement; try to give an honest assessment of your own performance, and use it as an opportunity to test your understanding against that of the person giving you feedback.
- someone who declines to give you feedback – be prepared to back off gracefully, but try to understand why they won't help; they may be worried about how you will react (which is interesting feedback in itself), may not feel they have sufficient expertise or knowledge of you, may lack confidence themselves in how to communicate to you, may have given you advice in the past which you have not followed – or they may simply not have the time

## Getting Started

If you have not asked for feedback before, try to think about

- preparation – who are you going to ask about what, where and when, how will you handle your side
- quick wins – ask friends you know well for feedback on small practical things before you tackle asking authority figures (eg. your supervisor) about areas which matter to you deeply
- priorities – you can't change everything in your life straight away, so work out the areas for improvement which will benefit you most and work on those first, instead of having a long “to do” list hanging over you