



THE BRITISH
ASSOCIATION FOR
CONTEMPORARY
LITERARY STUDIES

BACLS

HELP

SHEETS

Setting Assessments and Providing Feedback

Setting Assessments

- Setting assessments is often the final element of course design, and consequently often rushed. However, many students still report that they focus their study on the expectations set by the assessments, so it's worth thinking about them carefully.
- When setting exam/essay questions, think about the extent to which the questions you ask match up to what you expect the student to learn. Does a question allow a student to demonstrate what they've gained from a course (or a section of a course), or is it just a quote you thought was interesting?
- When setting essay/exam questions, try to have a variety of approaches (text-specific, theory-specific, more general); especially in a pressurised setting, what leaps out to students as appealing (or possible) will vary enormously, according to the student.
- Ask yourself, for every question, if you yourself could provide a good answer in the word count or time allotted. There's no point setting a brilliant, exciting question if it would require 5000 words to answer well.
- Especially for large undergraduate courses where many students will be answering on the same material, make sure your library or other resources are appropriate to the type of question you're asking.
- Diversity in assessments benefits not only your students, who will have different strengths and approaches to learning, but yourself as a marker (before any intellectual weariness creeps in). If possible, including presentations/blogs/posters/video components/journals and so on not only aids students in developing transferable skills, but allows them better to showcase their learning.
- If you have leeway over submission deadlines, a soft deadline is often far more successful than a hard deadline. My own policy, for instance, is that students are allowed a three-day extension for any, or no, reason; if they fail to get it in at that point, they have to meet with me in person. Moving to this policy has not only reduced student anxiety, but perhaps surprisingly resulted in students being more likely to submit their work within three days.
- The best time to think about future assessments is immediately after marking. Where did students consistently answer a different question than the one you thought you set? What questions seemed especially hard or easy? Which of them ended up being somewhat irrelevant to the material you ended up covering?

Providing Feedback

- Keep in mind, as you're marking, whom the feedback is for. That is, what do you expect the student to do with the feedback they've received? Noting that a student might have benefitted from looking at a particular source they didn't include, or filling the page with lengthy digressions, isn't always useful to them.

- Students, when surveyed, have said that the most important elements in their feedback are: 1) clear correlation between mark, feedback, and marking criteria; 2) fairness and transparency; 3) timeliness. Advertising your marking criteria in advance, and using that language in your feedback, helps students understand why they received a particular mark.
- Feedback should be based on trust. While you might suspect an essay was hastily put together, or that a student has not read the work they claim to, write your feedback on the assumption that they've done their best, because you really don't know. While showing a student where they might have gone wrong is essential, denigrating them for it will make them less receptive.
- If a particular student has a disability provision, reflecting this in their feedback (e.g. 'You have not been penalised for spelling') both ensures the student know the marking has been done fairly, and is very helpful for moderators/external examiners/exams officers.
- The most useful feedback is that which is directed not at the current assessment, but on the next one. It's always useful to give students two or three specific areas to focus on for their next submission. (In current pedagogic parlance, this is called 'feedforward'.)
- It's especially useful, for students with borderline marks, to indicate how they might move up a level. What is the one thing you think their work really needs?
- Discuss with your students how they would like their feedback presented. While it's impossible to tailor your feedback to each student, knowing if as a whole they prefer handwritten/electronic/verbal feedback can be really useful.
- For small groups, especially if you're not marking anonymously, asking students to indicate the particular area where they'd like feedback can be very beneficial. Students often have a clear idea of where their weaknesses lie, and tailoring your feedback to those anxieties means that they'll be especially attentive.
- There's nothing worse than marking a batch of essays and discovering your students haven't even looked at their feedback. Finding mechanisms to make sure they do is useful: requiring students to receive feedback in office hours (or dedicated class time), asking them to copy the 'feedforward' elements into the cover sheet for their next assessment, and, where possible, indicating how they've progressed between individual assessments can all help make sure they're actually reading what you've said.
- Very few teaching contracts allow sufficient time for marking, and it's important not to be exploited. Don't feel it's necessary to correct every single error; instead, highlighting indicative errors, and suggesting how they can be improved, is often more effective, and will often save you time. A student who receives an essay back absolutely covered with your notes will often be less likely to read any of them, or to differentiate between what you see as central problems and minor errors.
- Don't take bad essays personally. Sometimes it can be very frustrating to see material from class come back in an entirely garbled, misunderstood way, but don't see it as a personal affront.
- Always let your students know when they can expect their work to be returned. If for some reason there's a delay, almost all students will accept it, as long as you let them know – but clear communication saves a lot of stress for both parties.
- Feedback on formative work (or assessment *for* learning) is often just as important as feedback on summative work (or assessment *of* learning) – techniques like draft submission and peer review can be just as helpful as more formal instructor feedback.
- Where possible, making space for students to respond to your feedback, and thinking of it as part of an ongoing dialogue, makes the process far more rewarding.
- Don't, whatever you do, share 'howlers' on social media. Even if that student never sees it, other students will, and they will approach their own work with greater anxiety and less trust. Likewise, try not to complain to your students about your marking load, and so make them feel like a burden. While marking is rarely fun, it can often be one of the most rewarding parts of the teaching process if both staff and students approach as part of a genuine, ongoing dialogue.

This Helpsheet was written by Timothy C. Baker, institutional lead for Feedback and Assessment at the University of Aberdeen. The tips are collated from a number of institutions and disciplines, but should not be taken as authoritative.