



Using feedback to feed forward



The aim of today's session

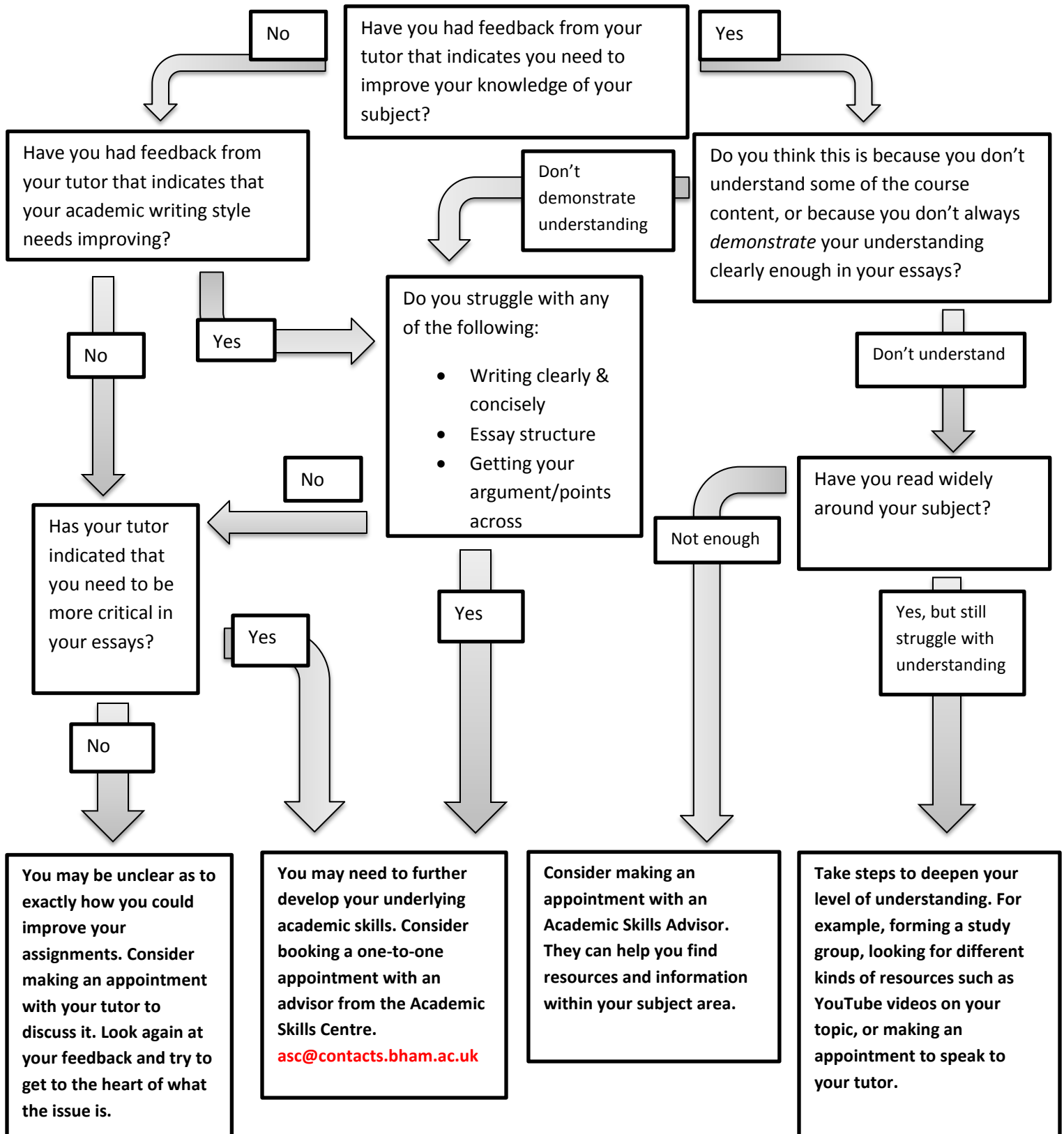
This workshop aims to show you how you can use past feedback to critique and improve your own assignments.

Activity 1

In groups, please discuss and answer the following questions

1. Please write down, and share, one piece of feedback or criticism that you have had on a relatively recent essay or assignment.
2. Could you see why the marker made that comment? Was there anything you were unclear about?
3. What will you do differently this year, based on feedback from last year?

Improving your assignments and essays



Coping with feedback

- * Read the feedback once, then sleep on it.
- * Study the feedback again when you have some emotional distance from it.
- * Re-read your whole essay in the light of the feedback, trying to identify what you would change if you were to submit it again.
- * Focus on both positive and negative comments – it's helpful to study the parts your tutor seemed to like, as well as the parts they criticised. What can you do more of/develop even further, and what do you need to change?
- * Create an action plan of all the key things you need to work on. To avoid overwhelming yourself, pick three priorities to focus on for your next assignment.
- * Continue to expand your action plan as you get more feedback. Look out for patterns or recurring comments – these are the things you *really* need to address.
- * Make an appointment with the ASC (asc@contacts.bham.ac.uk) to discuss the feedback with an impartial advisor.
- * Make an appointment with the person who marked it (if possible) to further clarify the feedback.

Frustrations with feedback

- * Sometimes feedback can be overwhelming or feel excessively negative. Often this is just because a marker is trying to push you to do the absolute best that you can. Remember that academics also critique their colleagues' journal articles and papers to help get them to a publishable standard, so they are used to pushing people towards a higher level by being brutally honest.
- * Occasionally, you get a disappointing mark but all of the feedback on your essay is quite positive! This can be equally frustrating because you don't know how to improve. It may be that the marker simply wants *more* of what you are doing well – more depth, more analysis, more development of ideas. If you are unsure, make an appointment with the marker or your personal tutor to discuss.
- * You may have received a lot of feedback but are struggling to convert that into actual, practical changes you can make. Sometimes it can be hard to see what a tutor means by their comments. This is often because you are too close to your own work to be able to step back and recognise where you went wrong. This is where the ASC may be able to help!

Common pieces of feedback

Any of these sound familiar?? In groups, please discuss ways you could address these common pieces of feedback

Piece of feedback	Possible solutions/ ways to improve
"Essay lacks a clear focus."	
"The writing style makes the ideas unclear or hard to follow."	
"Essay needs to demonstrate more critical analysis."	
"Referencing and range of sources are inadequate."	

Common pieces of feedback – some ideas for solutions

Piece of feedback	Possible solutions/ ways to improve
“Essay lacks a clear focus.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know what you want to argue in the essay before you begin to write • Clearly state the essay’s argument in your introduction • Make sure each paragraph contributes something towards that argument, and that the last sentence of each paragraph indicates the relevance/significance of the point that has been made
“The writing style makes the ideas unclear or hard to follow.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure your sentences aren’t too long or too cluttered with different ideas • Ensure each paragraph makes just one main point • Make the links between each paragraph very clear to the reader – don’t assume they will know how your ideas fit together • Look at the sequencing of sentences within each paragraph – are they building up your point in a logical, easy to follow way?
“Essay needs to demonstrate more critical analysis.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go through your essay, highlighting descriptive writing in one colour, and critical analysis in another. Have you got too much description and not enough analysis? • Look at your chunks of description. Could they be condensed? How could you develop them to become analysis? Where have you missed opportunities to analyse, criticise, or evaluate? • Again, make sure you know what you want to say/argue in the essay overall. If you have a clear argument, your writing naturally becomes more critical, as you try to convince the marker that your point of view is valid. • Never put in evidence or quotes without commenting on them in some way. This might mean evaluating the quality of the evidence, or it might mean explaining to the reader why it is relevant/ important to your own argument.
“Referencing and range of sources are inadequate.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit the I-cite website: https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/icite and brush up on the Style Guide for your School’s referencing system. • Make an appointment with an Academic Skills Advisor, who can help you find a range of good quality resources for your assignments. • Make sure you are spending enough time reading and researching. Good essays are built on a solid foundation of wide, critical reading. • Always link your sources and evidence clearly to the main argument or points of your essay/ dissertation. Don’t leave the reader to guess <i>why</i> a piece of evidence or a reference is there.

Something to try: Categorising your feedback

It can be helpful to sort all your bits of feedback into categories, to provide a clearer focus when trying to improve.

You could look at your marker's comments and try to map them to different aspects of the marking criteria, such as Knowledge & Understanding; Analysis & Application; Communication & Presentation. These headings will vary depending on your department's mark scheme.

Alternatively, create your own categories based on areas for improvement. These might be:

Comments relating to my UNDERSTANDING of the topic

e.g. the accuracy of the information you've included, things you may have got slightly wrong, aspects of the topic you have got muddled over or not explained well.

Comments relating to my ability to ANALYSE, ARGUE, CRITICISE, EVALUATE etc.

This might take the form of comments like "Too descriptive", "Only presents one point of view", "Develop your ideas further", "Say more about this", "What are the implications of this?" When a tutor suggests that you could have interrogated a topic further, they are often implying they want to see your critical thinking skills at work.

Comments relating to my LANGUAGE AND STYLE. If your tutor has repeatedly corrected or circled grammar errors, you know you need to take steps to improve your writing and proofreading skills (see further reading at end). Take careful note of suggestions such as "Please always capitalise this," or "Do not abbreviate such-and-such" or "This word is too informal". These style issues are easy to fix and you can gain valuable marks by getting them right next time.

Comments relating to my use of EVIDENCE. These can take many forms. Sometimes a tutor wants better quality evidence. Sometimes they want you to stop relying too heavily on a single author. Sometimes, particularly in the sciences, they like to see you citing several authors to back up just one point – to indicate that you have synthesised ideas from several different sources. Sometimes they want to see a much clearer link between your references/evidence, and the arguments or points you are making.

Putting yourself in the marker's shoes

Imagine you are marking 50 essays.

What would irritate or concern you if you saw or read it in an essay?

What would give you a good first impression of an essay and make you happy to read on?

What might help an essay to stand out from the other 49?

Applying the marker's point of view to your own work: a checklist

After you have written your essay, leave it for a few days, or for however much time you can afford within your deadline. Don't look at it! Then go back to it and try the following processes...

- Print out your work and get into the marker mind-set. Imagine you are the marker, and the essay in front of you is the 50th one you've marked. Get yourself a red pen to really get into character!
- It might also help if you print your essay out in a large font, well-spaced. Imagine reading it for the first time, and consider the following things.
 - ✓ Does the introduction tell me what's going to happen in the essay? Am I clear about the writer's intentions, and any reasons for approaching the question in a particular way? Have I got enough context to allow me to read on (or maybe too much)?
 - ✓ Is the starting point a logical one? Is the first main point clear and strong?
 - ✓ Do I understand the link into the next point? And the next, and the next...?
 - ✓ Is there an argument or message threading through the whole essay, and is it clear what that argument is?
 - ✓ Am I convinced by each of the writer's points?
 - ✓ Does every paragraph link to the question?
 - ✓ Does every point have evidence to back it up?
 - ✓ Does every piece of evidence have some kind of commentary or reflection to accompany it?
 - ✓ Does the conclusion effectively summarise what has happened in the essay, rather than bringing in some new idea that has not even been mentioned till now?
 - ✓ Have a range of good quality sources been used and correctly cited?

Remember: you should also consult any marking criteria or learning outcomes that you have been given, and look through your essay for **clear** evidence that you have fulfilled all the criteria.

Further Reading

Visit the Academic Skills Gateway for Canvas courses and reading lists related to specific skills that you might wish to improve, based on feedback you've had:

[Libguides.bham.ac.uk/asg](http://libguides.bham.ac.uk/asg)