

Feedback

A Guide to Formative and Summative Comments

October 2025

What is the difference between formative and summative feedback?

Ideally, feedback is a regular conversation between the educator and the learner. Formative feedback happens on a routine basis to foster continual reflection and growth. Summative feedback occurs when formal, documented feedback is required for program and accreditation purposes.



Formative feedback focuses on development of the learner's knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It tends to be more informal in nature and is generally given with time to allow learners to modify their performance before the end of a given learning experience.

Summative feedback is more formal in nature, focused on assessing the learner's performance at a given moment in time. Summative feedback is provided at the end of a given learning experience to indicate where the learner's knowledge, skills, and attitudes are compared to where they should be.

The Student Performance Evaluation, or SPE, form provides an opportunity to document formative and summative feedback. Formative comments should focus on development, while summative comments focus on assessment. Summative comments will be used for students' MSPE letters for residency application.

What Makes Written Feedback Useful?

Useful comments should include three components¹:

- Specifics – What did the learner do or not do?
- Context – Case or situation information to provide important background and explanation
- Suggestion/Opportunity– What can the learner do to improve? What opportunities should they take advantage of?

After writing your narratives, ask the following questions:

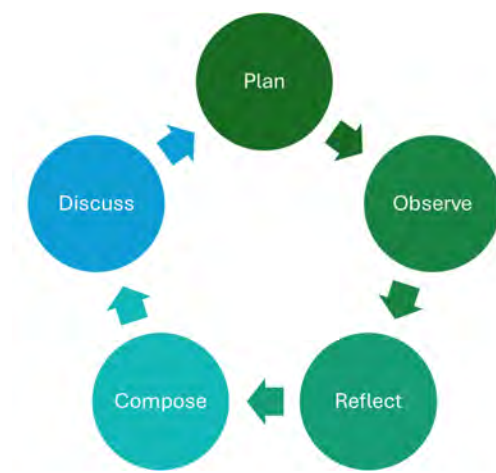
- *Formative comments:* As a learner, would you find this comment helpful (can it be used for continued development)?
- *Summative comments:* As a fellow faculty member, would you find this comment useful (can it be used for decision making)?

1 Specific Description

2 Contextual Information

3 Suggestion for Improvement

How Do I Write Quality Feedback Comments?



Plan

Review learning objectives with the learner. Ensure you are both working toward the same goals. Objectives may be provided by the course/program and/or established with the learner based on their individual development needs.

Observe

Conduct direct observation of the learner's performance. Do not rely on hearsay or assumptions.

Reflect

Process your observations into discussion points based on established objectives. Formulate a plan for what feedback you need to provide to the learner.

Compose

Write your narrative, being sure to include specific behaviors, contextual examples, and suggestions for improvement. Review your formative narrative to ensure it is useful for student improvement. Review your summative narrative to ensure it is useful for program decision-making.

Discuss

Review the feedback with your learner. Provide them with an opportunity to reflect, understand, and plan a course of action for their continued development.

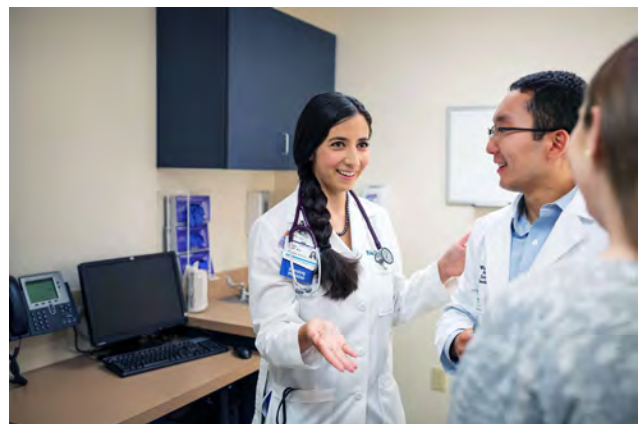
How Will My Written Feedback Be Used?

Students

Students are expected to review their feedback independently and with their clinical preceptor. Students can share their feedback with their Learning Community Navigator to help facilitate continual development discussions.

Faculty

Course and clerkship directors are expected to review written feedback to identify concerns and overall themes. Written comments will be taken into consideration when determining student grades.



Formative Feedback

Student Performance Evaluations (SPEs)
Clinical SnapShot
Daily/Weekly Conversations

Summative Feedback

Student Performance Evaluations (SPEs)

Examples of High-Quality Written Narratives

Specific Description

Contextual Information

Suggestion for Improvement

Formative

- "John's presentation of Mr. L's case was well-structured and included relevant clinical details. I appreciated how he highlighted the patient's volume status and linked it to his symptoms. To strengthen his assessment, he should consider integrating more lab trends over time, such as creatinine and BNP, to support his clinical reasoning."

Summative

- "John consistently demonstrated a solid understanding of internal medicine principles, particularly in managing chronic conditions like heart failure. His presentations were clear and clinically relevant. Continued growth in synthesizing lab data and anticipating next steps in management will further enhance his clinical acumen."

Formative

- "Jane was attentive and proactive in the OR, maintaining sterile technique and anticipating the surgeon's needs. During post-op rounds, her note was thorough but could benefit from clearer documentation of pain management and wound assessment. I recommend she try using a checklist to ensure all key elements are addressed."

Summative

- "Jane showed strong engagement in surgical procedures and demonstrated growing confidence in perioperative care. Her technical skills and professionalism were evident. To further improve, she should focus on refining her post-op documentation and developing a more systematic approach to patient monitoring."

Formative

- "Andy built excellent rapport with both the child and parent, which is crucial in pediatrics. Their explanation of age-appropriate nutrition was clear. Next time, I recommend they consider using visual aids or handouts to reinforce your counseling and ensure understanding."

Summative

- "Andy demonstrated strong communication skills and empathy, particularly in their interactions with pediatric patients and their caregivers. Their clinical assessments were accurate and developmentally appropriate. Continued practice in patient education and incorporating tools to support learning will enhance their effectiveness."

Reference

1. Chan, T. M., Sebok-Syer, S. S., Sampson, C., & Monteiro, S. (2020). The Quality of Assessment of Learning (Qual) Score: Validity Evidence for a Scoring System Aimed at Rating Short, Workplace-Based Comments on Trainee Performance. *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, 32(3), 319–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2019.1708365>

Resource

[Empowering Educator Excellence: Writing Narrative Feedback](#)