Narrative Feedback
A Guide to Writing Feedback on Performance Evaluations

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What is the purpose of narrative feedback?

Written narrative feedback serves multiple purposes. First, and perhaps foremost, it provides formative information to the learner about their performance, fostering continued learning and development. When summative in nature, written feedback assigns and explains a judgement of performance. Summative feedback provides a defense of quantitative measurements when assigning a grade.
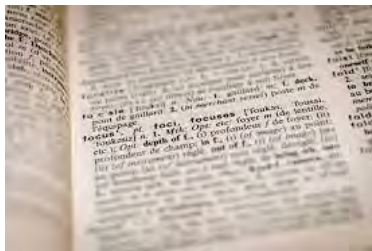
Written feedback provides evidence of a learner's performance. In the medical school, written comments are used to construct the Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE), or Dean's Letter, for residency applications. They also assist the evaluator and course leadership in writing letters of recommendation when requested by the student.

Quality written feedback provides the learner with perspective on their performance and actionable steps they can take to improve future efforts. Feedback should be provided in a timely manner and be written in a way the learner can understand their level of performance and ways they can improve.

What are common pitfalls in writing feedback?

The primary pitfall in written feedback is not providing it at all. Busy schedules and discomfort in providing constructive or negative feedback may prevent the evaluator from commenting on the student's performance in any detail. However, comments such as "Good job" or "Read more" leave the learner without the information they need to improve.

Written feedback should be consistent with any quantitative measurements provided in an evaluation. Incongruence between numerical and written feedback creates confusion and invalidates the evaluation. Written comments should elaborate on the numerical data, providing an explanation as to why such marks were given.

Feedback should provide the learner with a clear understanding of where they can and should improve. It should focus on observable behaviors, not on the student's personality. While it may be nice that a student is a "hard worker," simply saying that does not provide the student with actionable information. However, describing how the student made an extra effort in fulfilling their duties would provide meaningful feedback.

What are the features of quality written feedback?

High quality written feedback indicates the relative strengths and weaknesses of a student's performance, providing concrete examples of each as appropriate. It explains low or borderline marks on numerical ratings, giving context to those marks so the student understands how they need to improve.

Quality feedback is based on observable behaviors, not personal attributes. The focus should be on what the student did, not on what the student is like. Suggestions for improvement should be provided in a clear, actionable manner that is as specific as possible. Be sure to explain descriptors, such as "pleasant" or "rude," providing context to the words so the reader can understand the circumstances in which the behavior occurred and how it affected those around the student.

Formal written feedback should follow a conversation between the evaluator and student and should not be a surprise to the learner when they receive it. As such, written feedback should indicate how a student responded to constructive feedback and/or any remediation efforts.

Lastly, written feedback should be written in a supportive but definitive tone. The focus should be on the student's continued growth and professional development.

How can I write effective feedback?

Begin the process of writing feedback by identifying their relative strengths and weaknesses. This can be done through an initial review of the student's performance ratings to ensure the narrative feedback matches your ratings.

Next, write out detailed comments about their strengths and weaknesses. Provide evidence to support your ratings. Again, focus on observable behaviors, what the student did or did not do during their time with you.

Check to ensure that your numerical ratings of their performance are consistent with your narrative feedback, and that your feedback explains any low or borderline ratings to provide context to them. If need be, adjust your numerical rankings to ensure they are consistent with your examples of their performance.

Written feedback should be detailed enough to withstand independent review. That is, your narrative should provide a clear, consistent picture of the student's performance. Anyone reading the comments should have an accurate understanding of what the student did and did not do during their time with you.

If you have any questions about improving your written feedback, please contact educational_improvement@mcw.edu.