

# Adopting a ‘Pen Pal’ Mindset When Giving Feedback

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## Assessment

Simple changes to the quality and tone of feedback matters when it comes to developing nurturing, trusting connections with students.

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Michael Austin / [theispot.com](https://theispot.com)

Traditional grading and feedback is often viewed as an exercise in fixing what’s wrong with student work—grammar, vocabulary, factual errors, and problems with structure, logic, or sequencing. It’s all too easy to slip into that familiar mindset when beginning to work through an assignment, but it’s worth stopping to reconsider the approach.



When educators shift the tone and quality of their feedback to be less about correcting shortcomings and more about supporting and nurturing student learning—positioning themselves as co-learners, asking open-ended questions, and offering encouragement to continue revising—it can create powerful connections with students, build trust and confidence, and deepen learning. This year especially, that’s a vital mindset shift worth thinking about.

Educator Henry Seton highlights this approach in an article for the *Usable Knowledge* blog, urging teachers to revisit “the humble in-class revision block,” a practice he says “deserves a fresh look as a way to regain closeness and collaboration at this time.” A regular revision block gives students the time to “respond to our feedback as they revise their work” and encourages teachers to “remember the powerful connection that comes from collaborating with students as they revise their work in class,” he writes. A colleague of Seton’s likens in-class revision work to becoming pen pals with students: “Writing to them and them writing back to me, there is a closeness and a directness.”

Becoming a highly effective collaborator, in this model, requires the teacher to deftly shift mindsets—from red-pen wielding grader-in-chief to mentor and learning confidante. Here are tips and strategies from Seton and from other teachers who’ve

published in *Edutopia* for making this subtle mindset shift.

## Try a Coaching Approach

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To reframe feedback as a supportive, growth-oriented process, try looking outside the classroom. “Kids on a soccer team or in the cast of a play are always considering their own strengths and weaknesses,” writes Ron Berger for *The Atlantic*. “They receive constant feedback from peers and their coaches or directors about how to notice opportunities for passes or how to use their body onstage.” During practice or rehearsal, they usually don’t receive letter grades, “but they do leave with specific knowledge about what they need to do better,” writes Berger, who is senior advisor of teaching and learning at EL Education and teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Their motivation to improve isn’t based on grades. Instead, it comes from careful coaching, plenty of collaboration with peers, and the knowledge that they’re preparing to perform at a high level for an outside audience. “Often, the higher the team’s expectations, the more potential for growth,” notes Berger.

In his sixth-grade classroom, Berger used this as inspiration for developing a collaborative style of assessment where students “regularly tracked and reflected on their academic growth with others,” he writes. Students presented portfolios of their work to their families and other teachers, and toward the end of the school year, “formally presented their portfolios to a panel of school-board members, educators, and community members—our game day, so to speak—showing evidence of their skill levels and reflecting on their strengths, challenges, and goals related to academics and personal character,” Berger writes. “When students collaborated in their own growth, they continually sought critique and knew what they needed to improve.”

## Practice Empathy

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To deliver feedback that’s empathetic and supportive, and encourage students to process and learn from it rather than feel defeated or discouraged, instructional coach Beth Pandolpho recommends trying a warm, cool, and hard feedback framework.

Warm feedback—highlighting students’ efforts and progress, rather than innate qualities like intelligence—might sound like, “This was a really challenging assignment, but I really like the way you...,” Pandolpho writes. Cool feedback could be a probing question designed to “invite students to collaborate in the feedback process,” putting them in charge of deciding how to improve. For example, “If I read this aloud to you, can you identify whether your writing conveyed what you were

trying to say?” Hard feedback, like “So what” and “Who cares?,” challenges students to expand their ideas, but should only be used “once we’ve worked with a student and they know and trust us,” and feel comfortable taking academic risks, says Pandolpho.

## **Focus Your Feedback**

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Providing too much corrective feedback demotivates learners. When he gives feedback to students during in-class revision work, Seton likes to keep his comments tightly focused. “For something like an essay, try restricting your comments to one specific commendation and one specific recommendation,” he writes. Or when using a rubric, mark something the student is doing well with a plus sign; use a delta symbol to indicate an area where they need to improve.

High school history, government, and journalism teacher David Cutler favors a less-is-more approach to feedback. “If you point out the same blunder once or twice on a given assignment, it’s best to stop there,” Cutler writes. “When I notice the same mistake again, I refrain from making yet another correction. Instead, I highlight the sentence or passage and ask the student to think about what needs revision. This lets students know that I have faith in them to address the problem without me and gives them more responsibility for their learning.”