Feedback
A guide from the Department of Philosophy
Feedback is information and advice, provided either to help inform current work or help you reflect on work you have already done. Feedback forms an integral part of the process of learning philosophy, alongside other things like the presentation of ideas in lectures and seminars, the reading of relevant literature, the preparation of coursework, and revision for exams.

One of the things that you must learn while at university is how to use feedback effectively: the ability to make the most of your learning opportunities is one of the most important skills which you should aim to develop during your time studying with us.

In education, two main types of feedback are recognised:

**Formative feedback**: this is meant to help you improve or develop your work for some academic unit in advance of receiving a final grade for it—it could amount to, say, some spoken comments on an essay plan that you’ve produced.

**Summative feedback**: this usually comes at the end of an academic unit, summarising your performance in the unit as a whole—it could be a mark on the 100-point scale for your combined performance on some coursework plus an exam, for instance.
Feedback is provided whenever you are provided with information and guidance that is meant either to shape your current work or to aid you in reflecting on earlier work. Some of the circumstances in which feedback is provided will be pretty obvious, but others may be less immediately apparent.

Here are some examples of situations in which feedback is supplied—by realising that all of the following count as feedback you should be able better to appreciate how they may have a positive influence upon your work:

- General advice about writing essays, planning exam answers, and preparing for exams.
- A module lecturer’s responses to philosophical ideas presented in seminars and lectures.
- Advice on essay plans, e.g. as provided in office hours.
- Responses to philosophical questions posed in office hours, by email, in lectures, or in seminars.
- Marks for exams and coursework essays, and for a module as a whole.
- Written comments returned to you with your coursework.

Most of the previous examples are instances of ‘formative’ feedback. But note that the clearly ‘summative’ feedback illustrated by the final cases may also count as formative, as it can significantly influence your future performance.

Always feel free to seek further feedback from module lecturers. So, if you struggle to understand the written comments that you’ve been given on some work, arrange a meeting with the relevant lecturer to discuss the comments in more depth. (Note, though, that it isn’t a good idea to seek further clarification by email: in-person discussion tends to be far more productive.) Personal advisers can also be very helpful here, in providing feedback in relation to more than one module; for instance, if you see worrying trends in the written feedback which you’ve received, you can meet with your personal adviser to discuss possible strategies for improvement.
Feedback forms a crucial part of learning any subject. It is particularly important to philosophy, as the study of philosophy centrally involves the development of certain intellectual skills, like the ability to reason well and to express one’s reasoning clearly in words. The most helpful form of feedback is that which comes via in-person discussions, so do go and see lecturers and personal advisers. (Note too that, while we can’t provide feedback on each and every exam, you are welcome to review and discuss your exam performance with your personal advisers and relevant lecturers, e.g. during their office hours.)

Different kinds of feedback have many different potential uses, too. For example:

You will get lots of feedback from your fellow students and from module leaders in seminars, discussing philosophical ideas. This feedback may help you to understand philosophical topics in more depth; it can clear up misunderstandings; it may help you to decide what you want to write about in coursework essays and exams; and it may affect your thinking about the issues being examined in other modules.

Suppose that you discuss an essay plan with a lecturer. That feedback may help you to understand the relevant topic better; it may improve that particular essay; and it may help you with other essays as well.

You might meet with your personal adviser, to discuss exam techniques. Your adviser may provide you with guidance on revising for exams. That feedback may help you to perform better in that particular exam; but it may also help you to handle other philosophical reading tasks more effectively; and it might aid you in planning essays more generally, so that your future coursework benefits too.
One of the most important aspects of feedback is its relationship to further feedforward: its capacity to have a beneficial effect upon future work. You should thus keep a record of the feedback you receive. So, take good notes on verbal discussions in lectures, seminars, and tutorials; and keep any written comments that you receive. Think carefully about how the lessons thereby learned may be applied in the future. (If a lecturer criticises the way in which you have structured an essay, for instance, take an honest look at your work in a few weeks’ time and consider how its structure might be improved; then make a record of your findings for future reference.)

Learning philosophy is a complex process, one which features many forms of feedback that play different roles. Feedback therefore calls for careful reflection, and using it to its best advantage is a crucial skill that you need to develop. But all of the various forms of feedback that you will encounter in studying philosophy have the potential greatly to improve your understanding of the subject.

Different kinds of feedback call for responses of different sorts, within different timeframes. For example:

Verbal feedback provided in reply to e.g. questions in lectures and seminars. Typical immediate responses: think about how to reply, if necessary; ask further clarificatory questions, if necessary. Longer-term responses: reflect upon the feedback provided afterwards, perhaps amending earlier lecture notes and notes upon reading as required.

Written feedback provided on e.g. coursework. Typical immediate responses: read it carefully; reflect upon exactly what’s meant; identify any important misunderstandings of module materials that you need to clear up; make notes for future reference. Longer-term responses: consider how the points made in the feedback generalise to cover work that you might produce in future; follow up any suggestions for improvements in understanding that have been made; meet with the module leader to discuss matters arising from the feedback; review earlier notes on the feedback when producing later work.
Your advisor & lecturers can all be found at the Department of Philosophy:

Department of Philosophy
The University of Sheffield
45 Victoria Street
Sheffield S3 7QB United Kingdom

Tel: 0114 222 0587
Fax: 0114 222 0588

General Enquiries: philosophy@sheffield.ac.uk
Web: http://www.shef.ac.uk/philosophy

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