



# Feedback & Coaching NOTES

## The Benefits of Specific Feedback

**Specific** (spi-sif-ik)-- *adjective*: having a special application, bearing, or reference; explicit or definite. (Dictionary.com)

When speaking with teachers about observed episodes of instruction, it is good to remember the benefits of making that feedback specific, rather than general. General feedback is more valuable than no feedback at all, but it pales in comparison to the wide ranging positive effects of specific feedback.

If a classroom observer were to say *“Mark, I very much enjoyed your lesson today. Your students are really responding to your teaching. Keep up the good work.”* That’s a nice compliment, and many teachers would be happy to receive it. It doesn’t, however, give the teacher much to go on if he’s interested in improving his lesson.

Let’s try that again with a little more specificity. *“Mark, I very much enjoyed your lesson today. One thing that I thought was particularly effective was how you regularly asked your students to turn to a shoulder partner and verbalize what they were thinking. I noticed that you were carefully listening to their conversations so you could gauge their levels of understanding and use that information to decide what to do next. That process was really benefitting your students today. Nice work.”* Hear how the increased specificity provides the teacher not only a professional compliment, but also describes the specific technique that was responsible for the positive outcomes. With this higher level of specificity, the teacher can take action based on the feedback. Mark can use the technique more often, expand on it, collect more and different information, use variants of the technique, and/or combine it with other effective practices. It’s difficult to take action on *“I enjoyed your lesson. Keep up the good work.”*

Let’s take a third try and go with even more specificity. *“Mark, I enjoyed your lesson today. As you were teaching the difference between fact and opinion, you regularly asked your students to turn to a shoulder partner and explain why your example was either a fact or an opinion. As I was listening in, I heard Alyse say ‘I think it’s an opinion because each person thought something different.’ I could tell that you heard Alyse too, and her answer informed your effective decision about what to do next—provide more examples. That was fun to watch- nice work!”* Notice that in this third try, the feedback includes references to the content the teacher was teaching, individual student responses and names, and the teacher’s exact response to the student’s actions- and also a nice professional compliment.

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Let's distill a few tips on providing specific feedback from the examples, above.

1. Instead of naming the teacher's approach, name the teacher's specific actions. Instead of saying "You were circulating throughout the room." Say "You spent some time at table 3 and then moved to table 2, then table 4. While at table 4, you spent some extra time examining that group's work."
2. Refer to individual students by name, if possible. Instead of saying "You were giving good feedback to your students as you moved around the room." Say "I listened in as you gave Jessica feedback on her persuasive paragraph..."
3. Quote the teacher's exact words. Instead of saying "You were asking high level questions today." Say "When you asked the question 'What other character in the story has these same characteristics?' your students had to ponder that and struggle for a bit."
4. For written feedback, put the date and time on your note- and sign it. These small additions increase the sense of accuracy and specificity in the written feedback.

Let's get specific about the benefits of getting specific.

1. Specific feedback is actionable. The value of a bit of feedback is relative to the extent that the receiver of the feedback can use the feedback to create or add value to the teaching and learning process. A compliment is nice and often appreciated, but a compliment, by itself, is not actionable enough to create or add value.
2. Specific feedback is affirmational. When feedback is specific, it reveals a higher level of attention and effort on behalf of the observer. This affirms the teacher's good work. The subtle message communicated by specific feedback is that the teacher's work is worthy of the observer's focused attention, great effort, and careful analysis. Conversely, general or vague feedback sends a clear message that the teacher's work does not merit the observer's careful consideration.
3. Specific feedback builds the observer's credibility. Think, for a moment, about the teacher's thinking as she is receiving extra-specific feedback from an observer. In addition to considering the feedback, the teacher can't help but think "This is really specific feedback. My observer was obviously working pretty hard on my behalf to collect this feedback and is pretty knowledgeable and enthusiastic about teaching in general and, at this moment, my teaching in particular."

One of advice columnist Dear Abby's most requested reprints is her advice on how to give a proper compliment. Her advice... I'm sure you've guessed it. **Be specific.** Just as with the feedback tips above, a specific compliment is more valuable and memorable because it reveals extra effort and insight on the part of the provider and evokes a stronger, more positive response from the receiver. All Feedback is powerful. Specific, skillfully delivered feedback is memorable, and sometimes transformational.