The Feedback Feeding Frenzy: Adding Audio and Technology to the Mix

By Amy B. Levin and Joe Regalia

Amy B. Levin is an Associate Clinical Professor of Law at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, California. Joe Regalia is an Associate Professor of Law at the William S. Boyd School of Law, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

“What is the shortest word in the English language that contains the letters: abcdef? Answer: feedback. Don’t forget that feedback is one of the essential elements of good communication.”

–Anonymous

Well-developed research confirms that feedback and regular formative assessments are key to better learning outcomes. But how that feedback is communicated is just as important as the feedback itself. We are teaching a new generation of students—digital natives—for whom traditional written feedback does not seem to resonate in the same way it did for most of us as baby boomers and Gen Xers. Our students’ attention spans are shrinking, many of them struggle with criticism, and they prefer to communicate on anything but paper. So, doesn’t it make sense to rethink how we provide feedback these days? Doing feedback better does not mean drastic changes—or even much extra work. Instead, a few tweaks to our existing methods may dramatically improve our feedback and how students use it.

One exciting tweak is to incorporate some audio into your feedback. Written comments allow professors to provide detailed, easily accessible suggestions about writing style—for example, punctuation, word choice, and sentence-level organization of words. But audio feedback allows professors to dive deeper and connect differently—opening up new channels of communication to address high-level organization and analysis and to provide more detailed explanations for critiques. At the same time, audio recordings are more personal and engaging (and, perhaps, a bit better received) because students can hear the professor’s tone and inflections.

In this Article, we will explore some of the learning characteristics and expectations of this current generation of students, why we think audio plus written feedback is worth trying, and how professors can incorporate audio recordings (and even some other new types of feedback) into their teaching.

Know Your Audience

We, as professors, have a different audience now from ten or twenty years ago. The millennial and Gen Z students are digital natives. They do not know a world without the Internet. Technology is an everyday, all-consuming part of their personal and professional lives and will forever remain so. So if we want to reach them, we need to understand and use it, too. Because our students have grown up in a world permeated with technology, they receive and digest information differently from prior generations. They are saturated with audio and visual information, delivered instantly, continuously, and in small bites. To keep up, they have been conditioned to process this information quickly and often superficially, and as a result have developed shorter attention spans and less patience for detailed, longer-form reading. It therefore behooves us to deliver feedback in a way that captures their attention and maintains it. If we use the technologies they have grown accustomed to, then we have a better starting point.

Our students’ expectations have changed as well. The “ubiquitous red pen” worked well for baby boomers and Gen Xers, who make up most of the

1 See Susan M. Brookhart, How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students 89 (2d ed. 2017).
current legal writing faculties. These generations hand-wrote notes and papers in school and learned by reading in print. Only in the last twenty years or so have they begun to rely on computers and electronics for writing and reading. Baby boomers and Gen Xers accept lengthy detailed feedback and criticisms of their writing because they have been schooled and have worked in top-down hierarchies in which there is organizational loyalty. They have sent their work up the ladder for review and have received the final word from above.

But detailed written feedback, without more, does not work as well for our students now, who prefer flat rather than hierarchical models. Our students want to be mentored, guided, and shown how to succeed rather than told how to do so, and they are as concerned—perhaps even more so—with what they did right as with what they did wrong. In their view, written comments are a one-way “monologue” allied to power and authority. Instead, they seek a reciprocal, dialogic approach centered on discussion, detailed feedback, and mentoring, one in which the professor is an ally and collaborator rather than a superordinate figure.

As the “everyone receives a trophy” generation, our students may also need more praise and positive feedback to learn and excel. They crave feedback in the form of detailed guidance and expectations before they write (hence, the new focus on grading “rubrics”), and they expect thorough feedback after they write. But, when professors provide copious written comments, the students often become overwhelmed and shut down rather than embracing the suggestions. As focused as they are on receiving detailed feedback, they are more sensitive to critical feedback. This may be because they find the comments impersonal and irrelevant to their future work. If they do not think the comments benefit them, they may simply ignore them.

Professors Are No Longer Teaching in the Same Environment
Not only have our students changed, but the practicalities of teaching have changed. Tuition revenue has shrunk along with faculty sizes, which has resulted in increased student load at some schools. That means, for many, there is simply less time to provide detailed written feedback for every student. And live grading, which has the enhanced benefit of one-on-one interactions with the students, is not practical with larger class sizes. It is difficult to reflect on the spot, and this difficulty is magnified with students who are nervous and sensitive to critical feedback.

We thus need more efficient and effective methods for providing meaningful feedback, and students need a method for receiving that feedback that fits with their shorter attention spans . . .”

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3 Id.; Kate Rockwood, The Largest Generation in Today’s Workforce Is Forging its Own Path—And It’s Wrong to Call Them Lazy, 104 ABA J., Jan. 2018, at 52, 53.


6 See Minority Corp. Counsel Ass’n, supra note 4, at 10, 21; Voelkel & Mello, supra note 4, at 26.


many of the benefits of an in-person meeting, without some of the drawbacks, all by incorporating some audio into their feedback practices. Audio feedback fills many of the needs felt by both professors and students. For example:

- For busy professors, audio comments save time, especially if the professors are proficient with the technology needed to produce the comments.
- There is less "physiological intensity" over time in terms of concentration, stress, and marking ennui.10
- The comments are more detailed and explanatory than written comments in margins and summative letter grades, so the professors provide more benefit for their students in less time.
- Professors have the opportunity to explain both what the students did correctly and what they can improve rather than focusing merely on what the students did wrong.11
- And, professors can blunt critical feedback with tone of voice and by providing more in-depth explanations for the suggestions, which benefits our students, who are more sensitive to criticism.

Audio comments better simulate a live meeting or classroom than written comments. Professors have more of a social presence with the students and seem more interested in the students’ learning through audio feedback.12 Professors can “speak” to students and convey a more nurturing tone than they can with a red pen. The tone is more spontaneous and less guarded, so the comments feel less threatening and more “approachable.” Because live grading and lengthy meetings are more difficult with larger class sizes, audio feedback is an effective compromise because students and professors get the feel and depth of a live meeting, but professors can provide this in less time. The students also tend to have fewer questions after receiving the feedback than they do with written comments because audio comments are generally clearer and more detailed than written ones.

From the students’ perspective, audio comments are more explanatory and motivating.13 Audio may convey the feeling that professors have devoted more time to them, and some students may be more willing to engage with professors after hearing their comments. The students understand what they need to do to improve because the professors offer explanations and suggestions rather than just correcting errors without further explanation. Students appreciate the advising and how to avoid similar mistakes in the future; they are being shown what to do instead of told what to do, which is what this generation wants. And, because they can hear the professor’s tone, they can better detect social cues and nuances from audio feedback. Writing may be more difficult to understand and open to misinterpretation, or students may just accept tracked changes without truly understanding the feedback.

Putting Audio Feedback into Practice

Hopefully we have convinced you to incorporate some audio into your feedback. But how do you do that? To make the change easy, we have put together some best practices and ideas for you to consider at the outset.

1. Audio feedback can synergize with written feedback

Our love of audio does not mean professors should forego written feedback altogether. There is value in brief, written comments with a purpose: like showing students how to rewrite a troublesome sentence, illustrative examples, or some tracked changes to offer ideas about formatting or organization.

For example, to help students spot a sentence with passive voice, a brief written comment in the margins of the document (or in a Word comment)


11 Voelkel & Mello, supra note 4, at 26.

12 Bless, supra note 10, at 85, 87.

13 Id. at 96.
can be clearer than audio feedback. As another example, one of the authors often rewrites a couple of the student’s sentences as a model to demonstrate writing style moves like places of emphasis. In sum, written feedback might be best for things like:

- Examples of specific writing styles, like demonstrating the active voice;
- Short points to emphasize your audio commentary (much like a PowerPoint slide helps by anchoring the audience on a concept);
- Anywhere else that you are having trouble verbally explaining a concept such that a bit of writing will make your point clearer.

Audio feedback is great for the dense, complicated commentary that often fills up the margins of a student’s paper (or is summed up in confusing shorthand). This includes any lengthy discussion of substantive points, authority, organization—and anything else that in a live meeting you would discuss with your student.

2. Audio feedback can be as simple or as advanced as you are ready for

There is both an easy and advanced option when it comes to audio feedback. The easy option is to simply run an audio recorder (a handheld one or an app on your smartphone, tablet, or computer) as you review your students’ papers—and comment out loud. At the end, you will have a single audio file that you can send to your student (enlist your IT support if you do not already have a simple shared drive or online classroom to share big audio files).

If you go this simple route, we recommend that you read through the student’s paper once without recording, perhaps while making some notes for yourself. This ensures that you do not ramble and keep the conversation on point for your student. To make things easier on you and your students, consider using a program that allows you to easily pause and restart the recording. That way you can think about what to say, hit record, and keep your comments concise. This is a big benefit of pre-recording comments rather than giving them in a live meeting. In person, you have to speak off the cuff (and it is much easier to get off course). With a simple recording app, you can take all the time you need to say precisely what you want. If you use a nifty recording app like Kaizena, Apple’s Voice Memo, or Audacity, this process will be simple and intuitive.

Another point to keep in mind is that (unless you use a program that does this for you, which we discuss more below) you will likely want to give your students audio cues so that they can link up what you are telling them with the specific parts of the document for which you are offering feedback. So if you are discussing some ideas for writing more persuasive headings, you could point the student to the page and paragraph of a problematic heading in the brief so that the student has some context for your comments.

To get more advanced, specialized programs allow you to take your audio feedback to the next level. For example, Kaizena allows you to easily link mini audio comments to specific points in a paper. This will help your students immensely in figuring out which sentence, paragraph, or section your audio comments relate to. Kaizena also has many other feedback features, like the ability to color-code your audio comments. Another great option is Screencastomatic, which allows you to record your screen as you give your audio feedback. This approach allows you to make your feedback even more dynamic by producing an audio-visual. You can point out features in the student’s paper as you voiceover your comments.

14 See Nicol, supra note 7, at 503 (discussing benefits of some written feedback).
15 For examples of the sort of sentence-level written feedback one of the authors commonly gives students, see Joe Regalia, ‘The Art of Legal Writing: The Sentence, Appellate Advocacy Blog (May 19, 2018), http://write.law/blog/power-of-words.
16 Kaizena can be found at https://www.kaizena.com.
17 Apple’s Voice Memo can be found at https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/simple-audio-recorder/hopfkembkmkllehkacjjbncmpdnnlogg?hl=en-US.
18 Audacity can be found at https://www.audacityteam.org.
3. Reach out to your IT support to make the process easier
Regardless of the approach you take, you may need some help. Audio files are big; video files are even bigger. So get strong IT support and shared network space so that you can easily send your upgraded feedback to your students.

Your IT folks may also have some great solutions to carry out the recording itself. As law schools jump to increase their online capabilities (particularly in the wake of the ABA’s revised standards), many have created sophisticated online environments. Platforms like Moodle allow you to easily record and share audio or video feedback directly to students.

4. Audio feedback and student dialogue
For those wanting to take audio feedback one level further, consider allowing your students to respond to you. You can either ask your students to respond to your feedback with an audio recording of their own or ask them to respond to a few particular points that are most pressing in their writing. It will take a bit longer to review your students’ commentary, but just getting them to think hard enough to respond can be helpful to their learning. This approach really leverages all the benefits of in-person or live feedback without having to meet up.

If you are open to using a program like Kaizena, the platform can handle this student-teacher dialogue for you. Kaizena allows your students to insert recorded responses to your specific comments that are linked to portions of the paper. This allows you to ask the student questions as part of the feedback process. So you could say, “Can you come up with another way to write this?” and actually get the student to respond.

5. Audio feedback, like any feedback, should be S.M.A.R.T.¹⁹
Like any other feedback, audio feedback works best when it is given thoughtfully. There is great research on best practices for giving feedback. Perhaps the most important is that audio comments should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based—also known as S.M.A.R.T. feedback.

Specific means that you should strive for feedback that is specific enough for the student to grasp and work on fixing now. Generic comments like “be more concise” are hard, if not impossible, to put into practice.

Measurable is about giving feedback that you and the student can keep track of—making formative assessment possible.²⁰ This can be as simple as giving students a sense of where they are and where they should be for specific skills you teach.

Achievable means that you should aim to deliver feedback that the student is ready for.²¹ Telling a student who is struggling with basic grammar all about alliteration is not going to do much.

 Relevant means showing students how feedback is relevant to their overall writing or advocacy goals. This can be as simple as telling students in a sentence or two why they should consider writing a sentence in a different way (say, to be clearer so their reader does not stumble).

Time-based means you should give students a sense of when they are expected to incorporate a piece of feedback.²² Another time-based point best practice is to give feedback as soon as possible after students turn in their papers. Because audio feedback is often much quicker than the written kind, that should help here.

6. Audio is the beginning; consider other ways to bridge the generational divide
Although much of this Article has focused on improving professor feedback by incorporating audio, there are other tools that might help, too. For example, some professors, including one of the authors, provide video feedback either as links in documents or as a supplemental file. These can be screencasts of your live editing—or a video of the professor talking.

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help students measure tone and affect even better than audio comments because the students can see the professor’s expressions while listening to the comments. And screencasting live edits lets students see your written suggestions in real time.23

Another helpful tool is to link to supplemental readings in your feedback comments, directing students to resources to help improve a specific problem area. This provides more explanation for your comments without the need to write more.

Finally, professors can easily color-code their feedback to help students prioritize their review and avoid feeling overwhelmed. One of the authors uses green colors to point out substantive feedback, blue for writing style, red for citations, etc. This lets the students compartmentalize the feedback and tackle one big category at a time.24

Even though we are not diving into the details of these other feedback practices here, we encourage you to consider incorporating different tools into your feedback and formative assessments that help bridge the gap with younger generations.


24 Kaizena does this color-coding automatically.

Concluding Thoughts: Audio Is Worth a Try

We believe that jumping on the technology bandwagon by trying even one of these suggestions will make a huge difference to your students. We have been doing this a while, and neither of us would go back to relying on written feedback alone. There has been the occasional hassle—like when you accidentally delete an audio file or when students have technology issues of their own.

But on balance, our students have overwhelmingly said that they prefer hearing our voice. And although we have not yet done anything empirical here, anecdotally, audio feedback seems to be more effective. Students appear to take more feedback to heart in later drafts. And they appear more likely to follow up with questions. So give it a try. And if we can be of any help in setting things up, please don’t hesitate to reach out to us.