

"Will I ever be good enough?": Using feedback constructively

Amanda Lee

ORCID ID [0000-0002-6708-4566](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6708-4566)

Senior Lecturer in Business and Management, University of Derby

Email: A.Lee2@derby.ac.uk

This is a pre-publication version of: Lee, A.L. (2024) "Will I ever be good enough?": Using feedback constructively. In Townsend, K. & Saunders, M.N.K. (Eds.) *How to Keep Your Research Project on Track: Insights from When Things go Wrong* (2nd edition). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Abstract

In this chapter I share my experiences of dealing with supervisor feedback and show how you can turn this potentially negative experience, into something positive and constructive. The chapter is structured into three sections, firstly, I reflect upon my own personal experiences of dealing with supervisor feedback at the beginning of my doctoral studies. Secondly, I reflect upon my experiences during the middle and later phases of my doctoral research. Finally, I present lessons on how to keep your research project on track, that I would liked to have received at the start of my doctoral adventures.

I'm just not good enough

Wondering if my writing is ever going to be good enough has been a perennial theme throughout my academic life. Writing convincingly and articulately, is a highly skilled craft, and like all skills it takes time, practice, and patience to master. From my experience, practice was undoubtedly the key. In my attempts to produce work of reasonable quality, I remember thinking "*What's the point in writing if I don't have anything to say?*" However, I soon learnt that that even if you don't think you have anything to say, write anyway. I found that once I begin writing I start thinking, creating, reflecting, and critiquing, all which ultimately contributes to and supports my writing.

My doctoral research spanned six years, with the added complexity of being a part-time distance learner and full-time working mum. Six years prior to embarking on my doctorate

I had completed a master's degree and considered myself to be reasonably articulate in respect of my writing skills. However, all that changed when I became a doctoral student and received detailed written feedback from one of my supervisors. Even though this happened several years ago, the memory of how utterly stupid and useless I felt is still vivid. I was upset and confused, because I had already received some encouraging feedback from my other supervisor. Thankfully, I had a very close colleague and friend in whom I could confide, so my first response was to call her up and tell her how I felt. She was also a full-time working mum and studying part-time for her doctorate, so I knew she would understand my situation. As a part-time student researcher, I found the support of colleagues, friends and fellow students was, and is, incredibly important. For me, the doctoral road was very long, often lonely, introspective, and frequently all consuming. The knowledge that someone else was going through the same trials and tribulations was a comfort and reassurance to me. The first piece of advice my colleague offered was to capture my feelings in that moment, so I wrote them down.

From the beginning of my doctoral studies, I kept a reflective research journal in which I recorded my thoughts, feelings, experiences, and observations. These related both to the subject of my research, as well as my own introspective reflections. This extract from my journal captures my feelings and state of mind on receiving this feedback:

"Feeling rather fed up this evening. Received feedback on my managerialism chapter in the post today and although comments were very constructive it made it clear to me that I have such a long way to go. I am getting so tired, work is very demanding at the moment, yet I am aware of how much more time I need to spend on my research. It isn't just time, its useful time. It really struck me that work produced for my doctorate can't be just good enough, it has to be much better than that, it has to make a difference and it has to matter. At the moment I feel as though it is all far beyond me and unachievable. I really hope this feeling passes soon as it is affecting my motivation and I am finding excuses as to why I shouldn't just get on with it."

Perhaps this extract strikes a chord with you, if so, I hope it reassures you that you are not alone. On the other hand, if you have not been on the receiving end of such feedback it may help to prepare you for such an experience. The good news is things will, and do, get better. It is all part of the steep learning curve synonymous with postgraduate research. That journal entry was written towards the end of my first twelve months. Working full-time I found it incredibly difficult to juggle the demands of my job, doctorate and family and regularly felt guilty that I was not devoting enough time to any of them, but particularly my doctoral research. When something had to give, it was invariably my research. As I read through my supervisor's comments, I came to the realization of what is required to produce a body of work considered to be of doctoral level and, especially significant for me, how (and how much) to write. I had previously sent short pieces of written work to my supervisors, but their feedback had been sparse. Looking back, this was because I hadn't actually written anything of substance for them to comment upon.

A few weeks after receiving this feedback I attended a conference where my supervisor was chairing a developmental paper session. It was difficult (not to mention a bit scary), but I told him how I had felt when I received his feedback, and I was surprised at his reaction – in a good way. He was genuinely concerned that I had been so upset by his comments and this was clearly not his intention. He explained that whilst my written work was good, his role was to help me make it even better. I was very appreciative of this; it cleared the air and helped me get things into perspective. He also told me I needed to write more, but as I have already indicated, I was fully aware of that. Talking frankly to my supervisor was beneficial, and if you find yourself in a similar situation, I strongly recommend you do this, but maybe after a few days when you have given yourself time to fully digest their feedback and see things more objectively. It was also a learning experience for my supervisor who, because of this experience, told me he is more reflective and considered in the way he gives feedback. Although his students still say his comments don't pull any punches!

After six years, as I reached the enviable final stage of writing up my thesis, I looked back on my journal entry, and it seemed as though I was reading about someone else. It was only

with the benefit of hindsight I could see how far I had come. I felt as though I wanted to reach out to my earlier self and tell her everything would be all right in the end. The successful completion and award of my doctorate is testament that it was. As my research and writing developed, I became accustomed to receiving critical feedback and was better prepared both emotionally and practically. I also got to know my supervisors' own idiosyncratic styles, likes, dislikes and expectations. This helped me cultivate a clearer sense of what they believed I could achieve. However, this was not necessarily compatible with estimations of my own ability, which were somewhat lower. Another recurring theme throughout my professional and academic career, and to some extent my personal life, has been the notion of Imposter Syndrome (Bothello and Roulet 2019). I am still convinced that someday, someone, will find out that I don't have a clue what I am doing, or know what I am talking about. Indeed, it is my association with this phenomenon that led me to the title of this chapter. That aside, I do acknowledge that by the time I had written the first full draft of my thesis, I could see the extent to which my writing had improved. But, had it not been for the honest, frank, comprehensive and critical feedback received from my supervisors, I do not believe this would have been the case. So, I suppose what I am saying is, it hurts like hell at the time, but it really is worth the pain!

Actually, I think I might be OK

Towards the end of my second year, I was writing more, though not as regularly as I would have liked. Despite my efforts to write 'little and often', the demands of my job and family often precluded this. So, I would block time out in my diary and use annual leave to enable space for concentrated thinking and writing. As the volume of my written work increased, so did the frequency and depth of the feedback I received. By this stage I had developed a strong relationship and bond with both my supervisors and in some cases I was able to anticipate their feedback. For this reason, I would often include my own notes and comments in drafts to show them my thought patterns and plans for how I thought the writing of my chapters should progress. This process worked very well for me, and it also made it much easier to respond to their feedback. The following are some journal extracts written when I was working on a peer-reviewed journal article on which my supervisors were second and third authors;

“Feedback received from first supervisor and main comments were that I needed to inject a more nuanced picture into my narrative. But overall, she felt it was a rich and interesting discussion. Obviously, feeling more anxious about second supervisor’s comments.”

A day later I received feedback from my second supervisor;

“Feedback received from second supervisor and the paper, together with both sets of comments, is pasted in my journal. Second supervisor wanted me to include more quotes/comments that I’ve observed and beef up the conclusion considerably.”

What I find interesting to note in these journal extracts (as opposed to my earlier example) is that the focus is on summarizing what I need to do, rather than how I was feeling. Nevertheless, the first extract above does reveal I was more apprehensive waiting for my second supervisor’s comments.

Within the paper were numerous comments, suggestions, amendments, additions, and deletions from both supervisors, but by now I was much better equipped to deal with and respond to them. I did this by systematically working through each point, making the necessary modifications, and detailing my response in writing for my supervisors. I realized as I was doing this, I was honing skills that would be needed to respond to other academic peer reviewers outside of the comfort zone of my own supervisors.

Ultimately, the paper we were working on was accepted for publication and this was a high point in my doctoral studies. As first author I had to respond to the journal editor’s comments and I drew heavily on my experiences of responding to my own supervisors’ feedback;

“Worked hard on getting the amendments done (with advice from my first and second supervisors). It was time-consuming, but a very worthwhile exercise and it was a learning curve for me as it was the first time I have written back to an editor with my

responses. For my sake (as well as the Journal's), I sent back one draft with all amendments, another showing all the track changes and a separate document detailing all our responses to the copy editor's comments. I am really excited about seeing my first publication in print and it is a vindication that my doctorate is worth doing."

The final twelve months of my doctorate was spent analyzing my data, revisiting, reviewing, and updating earlier chapters and writing up later chapters and my introduction. By now, I had begun to think of myself as a competent writer and this really struck home when I received feedback from my supervisors on my revised literature review chapters. In contrast to comments on my earlier work, they really didn't have much to say. My first supervisor responded only by email pointing out a few typos but was happy with the content and quality of my work. My second supervisor (the scary one) only made seven comments and most of these were for clarification. For the first time I didn't need to make any substantial changes or amendments in response to their feedback. I felt really good when my second supervisor told me in person that when he read my updated literature review chapters, he could see that 'I had got it'. This gave me a burst of confidence and a real spur to get on with writing up the remainder of the damn thing!

When I was ready to send the first full draft of my thesis to my supervisors, I still felt apprehensive about their feedback (that never completely went away), but I was also incredibly relieved that this day had finally come. Furthermore, because I had been sending them written work throughout the whole process, they had already seen and commented on much of it. I can't stress enough how important it had been to send work to my supervisors for feedback and comment, and as I said at the start of this chapter, I have done this from the beginning. However, every supervisor/supervisee relationship is different and unique and learning how to manage your supervisors, and nurture your relationship with them, are other skills you need to develop. I consider myself very fortunate to have had the supervisory team I did, but this relationship is two-way, and I was always ready to take their advice and act upon it.

After submitting my first full draft I was genuinely surprised by how quickly my supervisors came back to me, although I realize this may not be the case for all doctoral

students. Nevertheless, I do recommend asking your supervisors how long you can expect to wait for feedback on written work. On this occasion, I can honestly say I was pleasantly surprised by their feedback. Yes, I still had work to do, amendments, additions, and corrections to make, but their positive comments really gave me a lift. However, because this time the comments were few, and not in as much detail as I had been used to previously, I had several questions for my supervisors. I was no longer afraid to challenge them or ask for clarity or on the feedback they gave me. As I have mentioned previously, talking to supervisors about my concerns, feelings, and any difficulties I was having was essential. This also fostered mutual trust and respect within the supervisory relationship.

I responded to my supervisors' comments by email, carefully going through each of their points one by one, explaining my rationale and asking for more information and clarity on where needed. I also followed this up with telephone and Skype conversations, so I was absolutely clear about what it was my supervisors felt I must do. That was in July 2016, and I spent every spare moment of the summer (including my holidays – much to the disgust of my long-suffering family) making the necessary amendments and adjustments to my thesis. By early September my amended full draft was sent to my supervisors.

For the next few days, I waited with bated breath. I was due to see my second supervisor at a conference the following week and I knew he would want to discuss my latest attempt. He was full of smiles when I saw him and said, “*Have you read my email?*” I hadn’t, and for a split second I had a feeling of dread. This soon passed when he told me “*Well, in my view its ready to submit.*” I felt euphoric, six years’ work and I was nearly there! If you had told me I would be in this situation even one year ago, I would not have believed it. Every doctoral student experience is unique, but for me, much of my thesis came together in the final six months. This was a culmination of the preceding months and years of work and slog, combined with the unstinting support, guidance, and constructive criticism of my supervisors. I could not have done it without them and for that I will be eternally grateful. But, and there is always a ‘but’, it is *my* thesis and *I* had to do the work. This included sending regular drafts to my supervisors, accepting their feedback in the spirit in which it was offered, and acting on their advice. I always asked if I didn’t understand – and even

when I thought I did - as I knew they were driven by the desire to help me improve and enable me to craft my work to be the best it could be.

Lessons for keeping on track: dealing with feedback constructively

In this final section I present a list of Dos and Don'ts, based on my own experiences. I have listed the Don'ts first, as from my perspective these were some of the feelings I experienced when first receiving supervisor feedback. From discussions with other doctoral students, I now realize such feelings and reactions are normal, and you are not alone, but you can develop the resilience to face them.

DON'T:

- Take feedback personally, even though it is intensely personal to you. Your thesis is your creation, and it is a natural reaction to defend your work. Indeed, being able to defend your work is an important skill to develop.
- Ignore or dismiss supervisor feedback. Their comments are intended to help you hone your craft and develop as a researcher and writer.
- Use feedback as an excuse not to write.
- Use feedback to beat yourself up, or to think you are stupid, or not good enough. *You are not stupid, and you are good enough, but you have to learn how to do it.*

DO:

- Write down, or audio/video record how you feel and reflect on why you feel this way. This can really help to consolidate and make sense of the situation and the feedback.
- Talk to someone unconnected with your thesis. This could be a fellow student, colleague, friend, or family member. They will not be emotionally attached to your thesis in the way that you are.
- Sleep on it. Give yourself time to digest the feedback and go back to it a few days later. Make notes on the comments from your supervisor(s) and how you can address them.

- Arrange a meeting with your supervisor(s). Talk to them about their comments and your reactions to their feedback. Ask questions to clarify exactly what they mean and what you need to do.
- Once you are clear about what you need to do to improve your work, systematically work through each comment and make the necessary amendments. Make a note of the amendments you have made.
- Keep earlier versions of your work, clearly labeled by date and version.
- Agree a timescale with your supervisor(s) for submission of your written work and stick to it.
- Write everyday if you can - little and often soon mounts up. Some supervisors like to see small chunks of work on a regular basis, whilst others prefer complete chapters. Set the ground rules with your supervisor so you both know what is expected.
- After a few weeks (or months), go back and reflect on your initial thoughts and feelings. With the benefit of hindsight, you will appreciate how far you have come and how you have developed as a researcher.

References

Bothello, J., and Roulet, T.J. (2019). The Imposter Syndrome, or the Mis-Representation of Self in Academic Life. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(4): 854-861.