

Tips for Commenting on Student Writing

1. Practice “feedforward” over “feedback.”

Focus your comments on what you would like students to do differently to make their drafts stronger instead of on what they have not done well.

- Set out to respond to the student's ideas, grasp of content, or presentation of information over simply noting the “problems.” Even just one “global” comment (for instance, about how the students has or has not fulfilled the criteria of the assignment) can coach the student toward stronger work.
- Ask open-ended questions that will ask the student to think more deeply or to include new information in a draft.
- Offer suggestions for how the student might solve a particular problem in a draft or draw stronger connections in their work. (e.g. “As a reader, I felt you need a little more explanation of X.” Or, “I don't see you using the ideas we discussed in class here, how might you use the discussion we had on X to extend this paragraph.”)

2. Engagement, Encouragement, and Mentoring

Students are often quickly overwhelmed by instructor comments on their papers—especially if those comments are overwhelmingly negative.

- See the learner behind the effort. Students are more likely to read comments that engage their ideas, their processes, or their development as writers.
- Be sure to say “good job!” if you see that the student has been successful. (This, in fact, may be as important to improving student writing as pointing out where a student is having difficulty.)
- Many students find our responses to their writing confusing, unclear, and ominous. When we note where/how they have succeeded and offer specific comments (keyed to very explicit/accessible criteria) we can help them to build on their strengths as problem solvers.

3. Less is more. (You need not comment on everything.)

Key your comments to particular pre-selected criteria closely related to your course or assignment goals. There are two potential benefits with this approach: 1) it may help you cut down on the time it takes to comment on papers; 2) students are often overwhelmed by all of the variables involved in effective writing and appreciate your instructional focus or particular areas of concern.

This approach begins with effective assignment design and some foresight:

- design assignments that reflect a few of your most pressing goals for student writers;
- clearly state your expectations for your students' writing;
- be guided by those expectations/values as you evaluate student work.

4. Avoid "Editing" Student Work

Scholars of student writing development have suggested that a focus on sentence-level error may be counterproductive for the struggling student writer. (And, a focus on error may misdirect your attention away from what a student is communicating.)

- Use a system like Haswell's "minimal marking" to send the message to students that effective writing includes attention to surface-level presentation, and that they are responsible for learning about the errors they make and how to polish their own drafts. (For many students this attention to detail does take years of practice.) You can find adaptations of Haswell's approach online.
- Point out one or two sentence-level issues in an early paragraph of a draft; ask the student to find other examples of this issue in later paragraphs. Students might also create an "error log" early in the semester, keeping a list of the most common sentence-level struggles they encounter and preparing themselves to look for those issues before they submit a draft.
- Build in time for revisions, multiple drafts, peer review/response, or a trip to the writing center for higher stakes assignments. Even strong writers benefit from slowing down, talking with others, and workshopping their works-in-progress.

5. Rubrics focus your time and attention.

A rubric is a basic scoring guide (usually in the form of a grid) that can help any writing instructor evaluate a student's performance based on a select set of criteria. (There are numerous examples of writing rubrics online.)

- A rubric can reflect both the broader course goals and your values as an instructor.
- Using a rubric can simplify your responses—some of your responses can be in the form of a number, a checkmark, or a boilerplate.
- Discuss the rubric in class to increase your students' understandings of your evaluation process.

6. Explore alternatives to traditional teacher comments.

Discussions about drafts-in-process and effective models may be as helpful as written feedback.

- You might ask students to meet with you in one-on-one conferences or in small groups; these often take less time than sitting down with each paper individually;
- Class discussions of the goals for writers in your field can help students understand why and how their writing matters;
- Models and examples are often very helpful for students and can save you time by establishing what you value and comment upon. You can refer back to that paper in your comments, as well.

7. "Low stakes" and "writing to learn" exercises do not require extensive feedback

- You can assign these a simple rating (such as a "check plus/check/check minus.")
- One brief comment at the end often reiterates what you most value.