

EFFECTIVE COMMENTING—PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES

Dr. Nicole B. Wallack, Director,
Columbia University Undergraduate Writing Program

Effective draft comments do two things well:

- balance assessment, encouragement, and critique, and
- pitch themselves to the right level for the student's current development.

Principles of effective commenting

Positives: It is essential that you notice positive elements of the draft. Not only a spoonful of sugar—appropriate praise will teach *the key skill* that will make students better writers. Your challenge is to learn how to recognize strengths in students' work so they can develop and build on them. If you just comment on deficits, you'll get what you ask for: formally correct but lackluster writing.

Selectivity: You can't say everything. You have to make decisions of emphasis, decisions about what you think students can hear. Make these decisions in light of the course's *goals*.

Concrete Work: Students need you give them actual work to do in subsequent drafts or papers. It's not enough to identify problems and say either "fix that" or "develop that" or "think about" X, Y, Z. Work should help the student do the next thing.

Length: Try to keep your comments to a single typed page. (ps: Typing is good, because it is legible, you can revise as you write, and you have a record for your reference.)

Tone: Try to write comments in the tone in which you'd like to receive them from your most influential readers. Don't comment negatively on the student's effort. Comment on every draft as if it is the very best work the student can possibly do. Addressing comments to students by name, sign your name to the bottom, and don't use a red pen.

How to write an effective end-comment

The beginning:

Observe & Diagnose: Include two complete sentences about specific aspects of the paper that are working well, and two more in which you bring to the student's attention one to three issues that they most need to address. Choose these issues in light of the *goals* of the assignment and the course. Students are more likely to address issues that are nearly within their grasp.

The middle:

Speculate or hypothesize about WHY the draft is as it is. Why do you think the student is doing certain things, or struggling in certain areas? What do you imagine to be the student's intent?

Prioritize & Design: Propose work the student might do, plans the student might follow, to address the issues you've raised about the draft. Ideally, the work will be concrete (something the student can actually *do*) and open-ended (able to lead to multiple positive outcomes; not mere prescription).

The end: Include one to two sentences to identify the relationship between the student's performances on the current assignment and what he or she will need to do in upcoming ones. Remind students of your policies on revision (if you have one). Encourage the student to seek additional help through a writing center or other resources, and to come to your office hours for clarification, if needed.