Effective draft comments

Effective draft comment do two things well:
- balance assessment, encouragement, and critique, and
- pitch themselves to the right level for the student's current development.

Each of these two elements must be designed anew for every draft and student, but the following basic format for an endnote works well for the vast majority of drafts.

(1) <u>Assess what's there</u>. Begin by copying out and/or restating the essay's thesis. 75% of the drafts you read will need a better thesis, and comments on every other feature should usually be tied to how that element supports the thesis, so it's always a good idea to begin with a restatement. After the thesis, you might describe the major sources of evidence and the essay's general structure.

(2) <u>Praise what works</u>. Not only as a spoonful of sugar—appropriate praise also reinforces those elements of an essay that are successful. Keep your tone measured, so that students aren't confused by subsequent critique, but be sure to reflect back some of the essay's accomplishments.

(3) <u>Critique what needs revision</u>—but focus only on two or three major elements. Try to write comments that do the most work in the fewest *categories*, and name the categories so that students can transfer what they learn to other writing projects.

(4) <u>Limit marginal comments to 2-3 elements of the draft</u>. Most marginal comments should reinforce the issues you raise in the endnote. Otherwise, students have too many directions to consider while revising. Some people make comments as they read a paper, essentially taking notes on their analysis. Most of the time, however, we discover a paper's major strengths and weaknesses only after reading a substantial portion of the draft. As you're learning to write more focused comments, you may want to hold off on writing marginal comments until *after* you've written the endnote.

This call for focus applies, too, to elements of style and grammar. It is entirely appropriate to give comments on sentence-level issues, but proofreading or copyediting every error is worse than a waste of time—it is generally detrimental to learning. If a student needs help with diction, syntax, or correctness, you should select a pattern to focus on and mark only instances of that particular problem. ESL texts may test your patience the most in this regard, but once again you must resist the urge to mark and or clean up every mistake. Students will not internalize more than 1 or 2 new rules during a given revision. Calling attention to more than this just generates noise.

(5) <u>Be respectful</u>. Try to write comments in the tone in which you'd like to receive them from your editor. (If you're very thick-skinned, then write them in the tone in which you would write *to* your editor.) 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. I recommend addressing comments to students by name, signing your name to the bottom, and not using a red pen.

Commenting on Student Papers —