Commenting Effectively on Student Writing

Three Things to Avoid

1. Don't comment in order to justify the grade: If we are honest, we'll admit that we sometimes find ourselves doing just that. Comments are best understood as a concise and useful list of things to keep in mind while revising. If your students won't be revising this paper, consider writing fewer comments, and also consider ways to bring these comments to mind when the next essay rolls around.

2. Don't comment on every paper: Your syllabus should include plenty of writing that you will not comment on (or will comment on only briefly). Short assignments, assignments that get peer-reviewed, assignments that get self-reviewed, assignments that you trust are valuable for students to do as a stepping stone to a subsequent assignment or a class discussion – these need not, as a rule, receive your comments.

3. Don't feel obliged to note every error or comment on every idea. If there is one lesson to be learned from all the research on writing pedagogy, it is that less is more. It is counterproductive to provide exhaustive comments on student papers.

Three Best Practices

1. First, identify and affirm what is already there, what's working, what can be built on: Research shows that positive feedback is vital in order for students to feel motivated to continue working on this and subsequent writing assignments. Furthermore, students will learn from such comments to repeat these successes later. Don't assume the strengths are clear to the author; highlight them, using language that reinforces their importance.

2. Limit your comments to 2-3 main areas for revision: Research and ample anecdotal evidence makes it clear that students struggle when they are given too many things to focus on. More importantly, by articulating what the priority is for the next draft, you are at the same time teaching the art of prioritizing. Focus on higher order concerns first, such as thesis, structure, argument, and evidence. Again, if your students won't be revising this draft, think twice before spending too much time commenting on it unless you have a clear strategy for them to hearken back to this paper when they are writing the next one. (For example, you might have them free write about what they learned from this paper when they are in the middle of writing their next paper.)

3. Ask for a cover letter: Have students write a short note alongside their essay, in which they explain what their thesis is, how they supported it, what they think is strong, and what they would have done if they had more time. (In advanced classes, you might pose different questions.) This provides a great place to begin your comments, while also reinforcing to each student the kinds of things that ought to dominate their thinking as they complete an essay. These letters are best done in class, right before handing in the paper.

Dealing with Issues of Grammar

Use minimal marking when dealing with grammar and other surface issues on final papers, and virtually ignore grammar in drafts. This does *not* mean lowering our standards; rather, it means focusing on grammar (and thus teaching students to focus on grammar) at the appropriate time. The research is unambiguous: students do not learn when we copy-edit their texts or circle their errors. Many studies also show that students can find the majority of their own errors if sufficiently motivated. The best way to deal gracefully and efficiently with surface errors is (1) to have explicit and unambiguous expectations about the quality of "finished" written work, and (2) to place the burden fully on the student. In practice, this can take different forms:

- When students complete a first draft, the next step is almost always to attend to matters of thesis, argument, and support. It is the thinking behind the writing that we want students to focus on. As such, this is not the time to worry about grammar and other surface issues. We should make it abundantly clear that we have high standards for *finished work* (what some call 'presentation copies.') A draft needs re-thinking, re-organizing, re-writing, and re-developing.
- When the time comes to assess the quality of the writing, a simple note that the student must attend to the many surface errors is all you need: "The grade has been lowered by one full letter grade due to the many surface errors (grammar mistakes, typos, etc.) If you submit a corrected version within 2 days, I will consider raising the grade." Alternately, some professors return the paper to the student if/when they come to the 3rd or 5th such error, saying they will grade it once the surface errors are taken care of. Having done this on one round of essays, you can make it clear that there will be no second chances on the next essay: students will be expected to meet the high standards on their own.
- A more engaged way of dealing with surface errors is to respond selectively. You might copy edit one paragraph, just to give an idea of the kinds of things you want the student to look for. Or you might pick one error and mark just that error for a page or so; rather than overwhelming a student with too many new rules, the idea here is to teach one thing and teach it well. Finally, you might put an 'x' in the margin each time you notice a mistake, whether for a page or more, and require students to proofread. This, too, puts the burden on the student to do the work, and it works especially well on a first essay, when students are still learning what your expectations are.
- An excellent way of teaching students to value grammar while also modeling a way that they can address it themselves is to put students into groups in class on the day a paper is due. With either online or print resources, have them proofread each other's papers; tricky issues and questions can be brought back to the entire class for discussion. A fully corrected rewrite is then due in 24 hours. Do this once in class, and then require it outside of class on subsequent essays, with the high standards (and grading criteria) ever in place. Ask students to sign off on the papers they proofread.

Again, the point is not to lower standards. We should have explicit and high expectations for finished work, and our grading should reflect this. To that end, minimal marking is a way of teaching not simply about grammar or proofreading but about what is expected in a final draft. There may well be times when you find occasion to teach the semicolon rule or how to fix comma splices, but generally, it is far

more important to make it clear to students that each writer is responsible for producing final drafts that are truly ready to be read and evaluated. Among the many positive reports from faculty who have adopted minimal marking in recent years at Bard, perhaps the most telling regards professorial happiness: if copy-editing induces stress, even anger, on the part of some readers, minimal marking promises immediate stress reduction.

Three Considerations

1. Well-designed and well-written assignments are easier to grade, especially if they lay out the standards by which the papers will be judged. Whether this is a rubric or a list of criteria, the clearer it is, the better. Giving it to students will help them write better papers, and having it in hand when you read will give you an easy way to explain what you mean. More generally, any handout you give students can be referred to in your comments, saving you the time of re-explaining everything. Developing a few good handouts might thus be a good investment of time. If your students consistently struggle with thesis statements or with incorporating quotations into their arguments, you can say it once in a handout and then refer to it forever.

2. In the interests of time, many of us comment as we read an essay. But sometimes we find things later in the paper that complicate our commenting decisions; furthermore, we may not really see the main problems in a paper until we reach the end. (You may think there is no thesis, only to find it in the conclusion.) I advocate taking quick notes alongside the essay, and then (1) drafting an endnote with 2-3 main revision ideas, and (2) returning to the spots you've noted to illustrate or anchor your endnote in the text. A few things you intended to note will probably no longer seem essential.

3. It goes without saying that there is no excuse for mean, impatient, or snide remarks. Few if any of us make such comments intentionally, but there are ample examples that result from exhaustion or frustration. As a rule of thumb, trust that each paper is the student's best work, and set out to coach them toward a better performance next time, not by fixing their mistakes but by guiding them to do it themselves.

Comments on Commenting

"From the teacher's standpoint, commenting to prompt revision, as opposed to justifying a grade or pointing out errors, may also change one's whole orientation toward reading student writing. You begin looking for the promise of a draft rather than its mistakes. You begin seeing yourself as *responding to* rather than *correcting* a set of papers. You think of limiting your comments to two or three things that the writer should work on for the next draft rather than commenting copiously on everything. You think of reading for ideas rather than for errors. In short, you think of coaching rather than judging." (John Bean)

"Instead of attacking that which is easiest – those annoying surface errors – we must commit ourselves to feedback that dovetails with our grading criteria and goals." (Harry Denny)

"The first finding from our research [of Harvard first-year writers] is that teachers' comments can take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers' purpose in commenting…. This appropriation of the text by the teacher happens particularly when teachers identify errors in usage, diction, and style in a first draft and ask students to correct these errors when they revise; such comments give the student an impression of the importance of these errors that is all out of proportion to how they should view these errors at this point in the process." (Nancy Sommers)

"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." (Alfie Guy)

"The specific lesson I preach is that 'less is more' in response to student writing. Over the years, I've shifted my emphasis from an intensive, extensive, one-on-one relationship with individual students in my response comments to the creation of an environment in which students can work on their writing intensively, with my comments as only one of the forces that help create their texts. I try to structure good readings, make good assignments, set up good student-student interaction, have good one-on-one time with students myself (especially outside the classroom), and generally keep everybody on track through the many, many drafts that are produced at various paces. Most of all, I try to set it all up and then get out of the way, dipping in now and then with minimal response." (Clyde Moneyhun)

"When you grade Platonically, you assume that the ideas in your students' papers are merely shadows of the real ideas that dwell 'behind' or 'beyond' the writing, perhaps in your students' minds. Consequently, you read 'through' the writing to see that idea, which can take considerable time and effort. To say it another way, a way that comes from the research on teaching and learning, when you grade Platonically, you treat the students as though they were experts, experts who have expert – though imperfectly expressed – ideas, rather that treating students as what they are: novices [….]Teaching novices means reading their work from the perspective of an expert-as-novice and asking, How can I respond to this paper so the student can take the next step toward expertise in my discipline?" (Eric LeMay)

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Philip Pardi
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