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Basic Vocabulary and Advice on Commenting on Student Writing

Commenting on Essays: A Short Guide

There are several things to consider when commenting on student writing. One of the most important criteria is where your students are in the writing process. While the writing process may be very different for each individual student (which should be accounted for), it is fair to have much higher expectations of a final draft than early drafts. Therefore, comments might change significantly from draft to draft—moving from whole essay issues (organization and development for example) to more detail issues (sentence construction and clarity). As such, you may not want to correct every minor issue on early drafts of essays if students are planning to revise content significantly.

Comments should reflect how students are doing according to the criteria/goals of the class or specific assignment. Some students may write excellent essays in their first draft while others may not be able to produce a successful writing sample until they have struggled through several rewritings. Below is some basic vocabulary to help you think about different ways to make comments to help students revise and improve.

Marginal vs. Terminal

Marginal Comments are comments you put in the margins of student drafts. These allow an immediate and specific conversation with the text. These are used to comment on more detailed aspects of writing. Marginal comments should be used to ask students questions about certain parts of the essay: push them to develop, analyze their evidence, synthesize ideas, etc.

Terminal Comments are located at the end of an essay. These comments are used to discuss global issues or to revisit or emphasize points made in marginal comments. A good rule of thumb is to look for *patterns* in student work that you find either work well or that you think need to be improved. Normally three clear and specific terminal comments are enough to engage a student in productive revision.

Facilitative vs. Directive

Facilitative Comments work more directly with a writer's objective(s). A facilitative comment might be something like *"If this is your main point, you might want to use an example to back it up"* or *"I think this section works well, but I don't think you have enough to convince your readers"* or even *"I'm not sure what you mean by this."* Facilitative comments try to engage the author in conversation.

Directive Comments more directly tell students what changes to make. Directive comments instruct students to make specific changes: *"Move this sentence to the beginning of the paragraph," "You need to add a semi-colon here, or this is a run-on"* or *"Delete this section."*

For the most part, students engage more metacognitively and rhetorically with their writing when instructors use facilitative comments rather than directive ones. Facilitative comments present a tone where the ideas in students' essays and choice of revision are under the control of the student. They ask students to rethink what they have written. Directive comments tend to take over the text; that is—usurp control from the author. While directive comments are certainly necessary at times, they don't necessarily engage the author in rethinking what they have written. They can help students produce more correct writing but can do so at the expense of student understanding.

Structural (conventional) vs. Conceptual (rhetorical)

Conventional Comments are comments that address how a text is functioning practically. While instructors should always keep an open mind to how a text is working rhetorically, writing teachers also need to keep basic writing convention in mind. These include things like sentence boundaries “*This isn’t a complete sentence*” or “*Remember, do not separate the main subject and verb with a comma;*” paragraph boundaries “*I think you have multiple ideas in this paragraph; consider separating them or clarifying how they go together;*” or organization “*Consider switching paragraphs 4 and 5. Your essay may flow better.*”

Rhetorical Comments focus more on how the writer is getting ideas across. Are ideas developed enough? Is there sufficient evidence to support their claims? Is the writer sticking to his or her main idea? Is the writing accurately synthesizing other’s ideas? Here questions might be something like “*I’m not sure how you got to this conclusion from the evidence you cited above. I don’t see the connections you do. Try to clarify*” or “*You need to contextualize this before you make this statement*” or “*I don’t think you have fairly represented the other side of this argument.*”

Grammar

Grammar is difficult to teach. It is easy to edit for incorrect usage of grammar and punctuation; it is much more difficult to get students to understand *why* what they have written is incorrect. When commenting on grammar, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, find ways get students to understand their mistakes—do not simply correct mistakes for them. Students need to understand *in what way* their sentences are incorrect. Second, grammar is best learned in context—in students’ own writing. Third, as with other types of responses, look for patterns. Students have 15 weeks to complete class; don’t feel like every grammar/punctuation mistake needs to be corrected on every draft. Fourth, grammar is learned best when students are given feedback that is reinforced through modeling and repetition.

Dos and Don’ts: A Top Ten

1. **Don’t** overwhelm students with comments. Remember, writing is a process. Too many revisions to deal with in a single draft can frustrate students (not to mention take significantly more time for you). If students feel too overwhelmed by comments, their revision may suffer as a result. Pace yourself.
2. **Don’t** simply correct mistakes. Find ways to educate students about why things are not correct or otherwise not acceptable rhetorically or conventionally in academic or professional writing.
3. **Don’t** forget that there is a student at the end of the essay who will eventually be reading your comments.
4. **Don’t** let yourself get bogged down by your own pet peeves.
5. **Don’t** begin commenting without a plan. Have your criteria clearly spelled out. Having a rubric really helps even if you only use it for reference.
6. **Do** try to keep a balance of praising vs. correcting comments.
7. **Do** make your comments appropriate to where students are in the writing process. Comments on early drafts are generally reserved for larger structural issues while comments on later drafts focus more on smaller details.
8. **Do** look for patterns in writing. While it will be impossible to change how you comment on essays for each student, you should be able to tailor comments somewhat to students’ individual needs.

9. **Do** have clear goals for your assignments that guide your comments, and share these goals with your students. Create a dialogue with students that ensures they understand your goals and comments.
10. **Do** be specific. Remember, we are experts at what we do. When we write things like “develop” on our students’ essays, we have several years of experience to contextualize what that means. Many of our students don’t.

Remember, it takes time to become proficient at making comments. One of the best ways to figure out if your comments are helping students is to ask them. Have them assess your skills as a responder.