

In *Engaging Ideas*, John Bean argues that instructors should comment on student writing using a hierarchical approach. This chart, summarizing Bean’s hierarchy, helps instructors set priorities in and better manage time spent on the commenting process.

This chart is divided by priority level. The bolded items listed for each level characterize a paper that is stuck in that particular level. When reading and commenting on a piece of writing, begin at Level 1 and proceed downward, level-by-level. Focus your comments only on two or three levels at most. While it’s of course possible that a Level 3 paper exhibits many errors in the levels that follow, address the issues of Level 3 before proceeding to the others.

LV. #	LEVEL FOCUS	CHARACTERISTICS OF A PAPER STUCK IN THIS LEVEL	WHAT TO ASK, WHAT TO SAY, WHAT TO DO
1	ASSIGNMENT FULFILLMENT	The draft does not meet the assignment criteria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instruct the writer to revisit the assignment. Do not comment, do not grade, do not mark or edit.
2	THESIS PRESENCE	<p>The assignment requires a thesis, but there is none.</p> <p>A thesis is present, but is hidden or revealed at an illogical place.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell the student that you do not see a thesis, and suggest they see you for help. Let the student know that their thesis is difficult to find. Suggest the student place the thesis at the head of the paper. If the thesis belongs later in the paper, mark where pre-thesis paragraphs should be adjusted to facilitate this.
3	STRENGTH OF ARGUMENT	<p>The argument is illogical, irrelevant, or unsubstantiated.</p> <p>The ideas are underdeveloped.</p> <p>Opposing views are unnoticed or ignored.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask the student about their reasoning, evidence, and interest in pursuing this argument—what about it do they find compelling? Focus marginals on complexity, insight and subtlety. Ask the writer to expand on or go more deeply into a topic. Address the presence of other arguments. Point out when it seems like they are ignoring or failing to examine opposing views.
4	MACRO ORGANIZATION	<p>The order of the paragraphs and flow of the paper seem unnatural.</p> <p>The work’s title and introduction fail to properly introduce the reader to its purpose, point, and structure.</p> <p>Transitions between sections and paragraphs are inadequate.</p> <p>Not all details are tied to points.</p> <p>Not all points are supported by details.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have the student outline or tree diagram the paper. Suggest moving and shifting paragraphs around to aid the progression of the argument. Remind the student that their title should reflect their thesis. Point out places in the intro that could be moved, went unaddressed in the body of the paper, or main ideas that are not previewed. Mark where transitions appear. Look for forward-and-backward-looking elements. Suggest the reader focus paragraphs by topic sentences. Explain what makes transitions unclear, and relay points of confusion for you as a reader. Look for items that seem interesting to the writer but don’t support the overall argument, and don’t explicitly connect with the thread of their discussion. Ask the reader which point the detail belongs to. Can they make the connection clearer? Note places where the writer seems to bring up an interesting point, but drops it. Ask the reader about their intentions for that point, and the basis for it. “How do you know this?” or “How did you get here?” or “Could you go more in-depth on this issue?”
5	MICRO ORGANIZATION	<p>Paragraphs are not all internally unified and coherent.</p> <p>Paragraphs do not support/develop the controlling idea.</p> <p>A topic sentence exists but the idea is not stated explicitly.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be aware of sentences that do not link together, or leap abruptly from one thought to another. Draw attention to paragraph length—repeatedly short paragraphs or repeatedly long paragraphs. Can you find the paragraph’s main point? If the paragraph makes multiple points but does not develop them all, suggest breaking into and fleshing out separate paragraphs. Explicitly note any places where a topic sentence is missing and its presence would be beneficial.
6	STYLISTIC ISSUES	The work is riddled with stylistic issues that irritate you.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make your pet peeves known. Know and clarify that style is dictated by choice rather than rule, but that there can be a practical reason to choose one style over another (excessive wordiness can confuse a reader into missing a writer's point, etc). Line-edit early occurrences, then ask the writer to do the same throughout.
7	GRAMMAR, SPELLING, PUNCT.	The draft contains errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenge the student to find errors and fix them to raise their grade. Mark the margin next to lines with rule-based mistakes. Fully line-edit one or two paragraphs, then ask the student to do the rest. Make sure to distinguish level 7 errors from level 6 errors. Note the most commonly repeated errors, and help the student learn how to overcome these with instruction and explanation.