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It's clear that students learn from doing extensive writing. It's not clear that they learn from our comments on their writing. Extensive research has shown that when students read our comments, they frequently misunderstand what we have written. We have reason then to be humble in our commenting--and also to try to be as strategic as we can: to try to figure out how to spend our efforts in ways most likely to be of use--and least likely to be a waste of time. - Peter Elbow

Key Terms and Types of Feedback

Revision: "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes" (Adrienne Rich). Typically entails broad reconsideration of purpose, genre, organization, development, audience.

Editing: Re-writing with a focus on style (correctness, clarity, appropriateness to context) following revision.

Summative Assessment: Grading a piece of writing as a final product. Comments focus on fixing the value of a text, that is, justifying a grade on a finished text.

Formative Assessment: Response to a piece of writing in process to support the writing in progress. Comments help a writer develop a piece of writing as it's being written. This kind of assessment focuses on learning as a process. This is the kind of response teachers or graders use when replying to student drafts.

Instructive Assessment: Students can better learn to respond effectively to formative or summative assessment if they have experience understanding it. Brian Huot writes, "Instructive assessment involves the student in the process of evaluation, making her aware of what it is she is trying to create and how well her current draft matches the linguistic and rhetorical targets she has set for herself, targets that have come from her understanding of the context, audience, purpose and other rhetorical features of a specific piece of writing." (69). In talking to students about their grades or your comments on their papers, you're offering them instruction on how to understand comments or grades to apply to a future situation or revised draft.

Grading Time Management Principles and Strategies

Ways to Confront the Pile of Essays Before You
- **Get a Sense of Average**. Quickly scan some of your essays to get an idea about what most of the work looks like.
- **Review the Assignment and Evaluative Criteria.**
- **Take Breaks**. Some people aim to grade all of their essays at once thinking that it will make them more consistent, but taking a break often means that the work at the end gets the same attention as the work at the beginning.
- **Go Back to the Beginning**. When you're half way through grading, go back and review your first essays to make sure that your standards and expectations haven't changed.
- **Use Pencil or Type Your Comments**. If you make it easy to change your comments, you won't have to self-edit as much as you go.
- **Set a Timer**. Let the timer remind you not to spend an hour on each project.
- **Decide How Much to Mark**. Before you begin, think about how you want to mark these papers. Are you going to correct all of the grammar? Are you going to make only summary comments at the end? It might vary some between students, but it is best to try to decide what kinds of comments your situation requires.
- **Record Grades at the End.** If you record the grades as you go, you might get caught up in thinking about how many students got A's, B's, F's etc.
- **Trade Off**. Trade one or two essays with another teacher and ask for his/her assessment of the work. This can be most useful when you feel stuck or unsure about whether you are being too easy or too hard.

What to respond to? Laying Out an Order of Concerns and Prioritizing Your Feedback

You don't have much time, and students don't either. Plus, "students seldom benefit from criticism of more than two or three problems" (Elbow). Prioritizing big-picture issues (responsiveness to the assignment, having a main point/thesis) over smaller, local concerns (formatting, syntax) helps students work and learn more efficiently, and ensures that students focus on the most substantial issues in their writing.
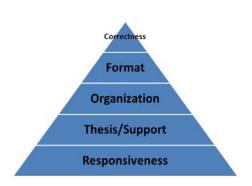
Some examples:
- Mentioning the split infinitive on page three might not be worth it if the essay doesn't compare and contrast like it's supposed to.
- If a student needs to re-think a whole paragraph (or section), don't waste time commenting on an awkward sentence.
- Telling a student to organize a poorly organized section that also goes off on a tangent doesn't help as much as telling her that the section goes off on a tangent.

If your feedback is formative, prioritizing big picture concerns sends the message that you expect real revision and not just "cleaning-up." You'll helps students resist the temptation to nit-pick at sentences when they should be figuring out what they want their papers to be about.

If the feedback is summative, focusing on big-picture issues ensures that students don't think they could have received a dramatically better grade by "fixing a couple of mistakes," which is rarely the case.

The two systems below illustrate the relationship between global issues and more local concerns in a piece of writing. Systems like these can help you clarify and communicate your priorities to yourself and to your students.

This diagram shows how global problems (e.g., lack of a thesis) can sabotage a well-formatted, proofread paper. (A weak foundation will crumble under a beautifully finished house.) By contrast, a paper that responds to the assignment with a supported thesis can endure some problems with organization, format, and correctness. (It might need some paint, but back then they knew how to build them.)

AFOSP*

In order of priority:

A-Assignment
> The writing demonstrates an understanding of the expectations and requirements of the assignment.

F-Focus
> The writing consistently serves a main point or arguable thesis.

O-Organization
> The writing should have sections that function as a beginning, middle, and end. While not all types of writing have an introduction and conclusion, sections should build on previous information and continually return to the main points of the paper.

S-Support
> The writing contains evidence that supports the main point and any argumentative claims. Some examples of support are personal anecdote, verifiable research, and logical reasoning.

P-Proofreading
> The writing is "polished" and free of surface-level errors.

*Adapted from WSU's Hierarchy of Values for Responding to Writing

Comments should be shaped by what you (the reader, judge, and guide) want to communicate to your audience (the student writer) and for what purpose. How you deliver prioritized feedback impacts both how well the writer understands your comments and how seriously he/she takes them. Ask yourself: How do I prefer guidance to be delivered to me as a writer?

STRATEGIES FOR FOCUSING AND DELIVERING MARGINAL AND FINAL COMMENTS

- **Understand Your Role.** As a guide, offer one reader's perspective, not annotations that outline an idealized text. Identify big-picture problems that arise for you as a reader, and offer encouragement and suggestions for improvement so that the student retains control over and responsibility for the direction of the paper. Respond; don't just correct.
- **Attend to Your Tone and Language.** Remain respectful and helpful even when fatigued. The goal is to be encouraging, not curt or harsh, and to be clear, not vague or cryptic.
- **Be Clear and Specific.** Avoid unexplained symbols and vague, unclear comments. Generic, brief comments such as "awkward," "need more evidence," "good," and "well done" may be meaningful for you, but are meaningless for the writer who may not understand how to interpret them and who may see them as insincere and as an indication that you've read hastily. Communicate in full statements as often as possible.
- **Offer Criticism on Key Weaknesses.** When offering criticism, focus on only a few prioritized concerns. For each, outline what you think the student is trying to do/say and where it is not working for you as a reader. For example, instead of "This paper fails to make an argument," try "I can see you are trying to argue that…, but I don't understand how your evidence supports these claims."
- **Offer Suggestions.** Try to word your guidance as suggestions, not as commands. This can help the student retain responsibility for his/her choices as a writer.
- **Praise and Note Strengths.** Don't forget to praise what the writer does well. Be specific about these strengths so that the writer can build a repertoire of strategies for future use.
- **Ask Questions.** Ask specific questions from the perspective of a reader. For example, "How did you get to this idea from the previous paragraph?" or "Can you explain how your reached this particular conclusion?"

ADDITIONAL MARGINALIA TIPS

Your marginal comments act as a catalog of strengths and weaknesses as experienced by one reader. As such, they help a student to understand the relationship between your assessment and the particulars that substantiate it.
- Show your perspective as a reader experiencing the text.
- Don't do too much. Focus on repetitive patterns of strengths and weaknesses.
- Identify problematic parts and their causes.
- Provide suggestions for addressing specific problematic sections.
- Read the paper before you comment to avoid wasting time on "spasms of irritation" (Elbow).

ADDITIONAL FINAL COMMENT TIPS

The final comment should offer students guidance to see their papers critically enough to understand how to improve it. It should provide an overall assessment that is directly related to your text-based marginal comments.
- Demonstrate that you take the writing seriously – acknowledge what the writer has tried to do and make suggestions for how to do it more effectively.
- Prioritize your suggestions for improvement – what problematic issues are most important for the writer to attend to?
- Follow a rough template: acknowledge what the student has tried to do, praise specific strengths, comment on the most problematic prioritized issues, and offer suggestions that address these issues.

Dealing with Typical Problem Papers

A full understanding of a paper's problems and possibilities precedes effective commenting. This chart outlines a few typical problem papers (focused on big-picture issues) and how to diagnose and treat them.[*]

Paper Type	Symptoms	Diagnosis	Treatment
The Museum Tour/ Laundry List	Lists reasons, components, proofs, or examples rather than exploring a question or developing an argument. Catalogues items without apparent connections or purposeful organization.	The apparent problem is an unpredictable structure; the actual problem is a descriptive rather than argumentative thesis or the lack of a unifying concept under which ideas could be organized.	The writer should ask a provocative question and posit a good answer about one coherent issue or theme. The writer should ask how each item contributes to this coherent issue or theme.
The Confusing Paper	Typically the product of a student writer who doesn't know either how to develop a thesis that drives a paper's structure or how to organize ideas. Feels elliptical, making ideas hard to follow.	The apparent problem is an unpredictable structure; the actual problem may have to do with the thesis. Writing may be writer-based (reader can't see what the writer sees) rather than reader-based.	If the paper lacks an arguable central claim, the writer will require assistance to discover a better one. If the paper has such a claim, the writer needs concrete advice about how to argue for it logically using developed ideas.
The Unpersuasive Paper	Falls into two main types, in which: (1) the claims are based on a misreading or a preconception, (2) the claims are sound but insufficiently substantiated; if provided, the evidence is insufficiently analyzed.	Unpersuasive papers play fast and loose with evidence and/or fail to analyze the evidence sufficiently, i.e. connect it to the claim. Evidence provided may not be relevant.	The writer needs to re-examine both claims and evidence by asking: where's the evidence to support my claim? How do I account for the counter-evidence? Have I analyzed the evidence such that my reader can see what I see?
The Hard-to-Read Paper	Usually exhibits the symptoms of one or more of the above paper types, but also has hard-to-read sentences – either highly abstract and contorted or simplistic, choppy, and inert.	Conceptual problems are compounded by problems with style and audience. The contorted writers believe that academic writing is inflated; the simplistic writers have little writing experience in an academic context. Also, unclear thinking may appear as unclear writing.	Contorted writers profit form hearing their writing read aloud and making written sentences as clear as spoken ones. Simplistic writers profit from patterning their sentences after good models. Engage a paper's ideas to promote clear thinking and clear writing.

[*] Chart adapted from The President and Fellows of Harvard College's "Responding to Student Writing" in the *Harvard Writing Project Bulletin* (2002).

Useful Resources

1. Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
2. Huot, Brian. *(Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* Logan, UT: Utah State Press, 2002.
3. Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 33.2 (1982): 148–156.