

“Write comments that *begin* conversations, not end them.”
— Jorge García*

“A good comment says keep going...it's in your grasp...you can be the writer you want to be.”
— Adam Zalt*

Response Styles

Reader-Based Response: “I’m lost here” or “I get the feeling you assume I know about X.”

Criterion-Based Response: “You need to move this paragraph” or “This section needs more evidence.”

Question-Based Response: “How do you think X would respond to this?” “How does this connect with Y?”

Descriptive Response: “I believe your thesis is here and that it argues X.”

Based on work by Chris Anson

What to Do About Errors

1. Avoid marking or editing all your students’ errors—aim for “minimal marking.”
2. If you see a pattern of error, mark an example or edit a single paragraph.
3. Point out a pattern of error in a marginal or end comment.
4. Make students responsible for finding and editing their own errors (“I can’t grade this yet due to the number of sentence-level errors”).
5. Have students keep an “error log.”
6. Address common problems as a class.
7. Refer students to resources: handbooks, handouts, the writing center.
8. Frame stylistic options in terms of meaning, audience, and genre.

Responding to Student Writing: General Principles

When commenting on student writing, *aim to promote revision*, which is one of the central ways learning happens. This is a good reason to comment more on work-in-progress than final drafts. Alternatively, you can allow one or more paper rewrites, which can help you make revision-focused, formative comments rather than summative or grade justifying comments. This can also make reading student writing more enjoyable as “you begin looking for the *promise* of a draft rather than its mistakes” and “you begin seeing yourself as *responding to* rather than *correcting* a set of papers” (Bean, 2011, p. 322).

Voice matters. Unmitigated criticism tends to shut student learning down. Cultivate a commenting voice and style that will encourage students to keep grappling with their writing and ideas instead of losing confidence. Be a coach, not a judge. Balance positive and negative comments and show interest in students’ ideas.

Begin with *higher-order before lower-order concerns*: (1) purpose, ideas, organization, development, evidence/support, before (2) style, grammar, and documentation. Do not worry about sentence-level concerns before the draft has reasonably addressed higher-order concerns. Resist the urge to mark all errors (see section on errors).

Write out feedback in full sentences, but avoid over-commenting. This can lead to cognitive overload for students and will wear you out and frustrate you. Remember, higher-order concerns first. Choose a few things for students to work on or learn about on a draft. Your aim is to foster learning, not justify a grade. If commenting on a final draft, remember that most learning has stopped unless you are allowing rewrites.

Tailor comments to the assignment. Avoid generic comments that could be applied to all writing. Teachers in different disciplines use the same language, but mean different things. Be specific about what you mean. Use more “templates” to give examples.

Use your *end comment* to summarize your assessment of the draft, balancing praise with constructive criticism. Show interest in the student’s ideas and growth. Think of your feedback as correspondence with the writer.

Timesaving Strategies

1. Build in individual or group conferences.
2. Scaffold assignments in pieces and comment on the pieces (prospectus, thesis).
3. Comment on early drafts to address high-order problems early.
4. Use audio or video feedback.
5. Use your assignment’s learning objectives to develop a rubric.
6. Build in peer response.
7. Address recurring writing problems that you see as a class. Or show the class a peer’s outstanding work.
8. Use models of the assignment.

Further Reference

Bean, J. C., & Weimer, M. (2011). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2 edition). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Across The Drafts: Students and Teachers Talk about Feedback. (2005). Cambridge, MA: Telequest. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbZnoFAZ9o>

*Sommers, N. (2012). *Beyond the Red Ink: Teachers’ Comments through Students’ Eyes*. Macmillan Learning. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKfLRz7h7gs>