Tips for Commenting on Student Writing

Instructors who require their students to write papers dedicate many hours each semester to reading, commenting on, and grading student writing, and they often wonder if the time they have spent translates into improvements in their students' writing skills. For their part, students want constructive feedback on their writing and often express frustration when they find their instructors' comments on their papers to be mysterious, confusing, or simply too brief.

The following tips can help you improve the effectiveness and efficiency with which you respond to your students' writing. These tips focus on the process of writing comments on students' papers (whether on rough drafts or final drafts), rather than on the process of grading papers. Grading and commenting on papers are certainly interconnected processes. However, while instructors often think of writing comments on papers as simply a means to justify grades, that purpose should be secondary to helping your students improve their writing skills.

These tips are organized under four categories:
        Course Planning
        Writing Comments in the Margins
        Writing Final Comments
        What Else Can You Do?

Course Planning

Before the course begins, think about what kind of writing you will assign, and how you will respond to that writing.

1) Design each writing assignment so that it has a clear purpose connected to the learning objectives for the course.
Craft each assignment as an opportunity for students to practice and master writing skills that are central to their success in the course and to academic achievement in your discipline. For example, if you want them to learn how to summarize and respond to primary literature or to present and support an argument, design assignments that explicitly require the skills that are necessary to accomplish these objectives.

2) Sequence your writing assignments to help students acquire skills incrementally, beginning with shorter, simpler writing assignments to longer, more complex papers.
You might also find it helpful to develop a sequence for writing comments. In other words, decide ahead of time which aspects of the writing you will focus on with each assignment. For example, you may decide to focus your comments on the first assignment on the writing of the thesis statement, then focus comments on later papers on the success with which the students deal with counter-arguments. Sequencing your comments can help make the commenting process more efficient. However, it is essential to communicate to students before they turn in their papers which aspects of the writing you are going to focus on in your feedback at which points in the semester (and why).

3) Develop and communicate clear grading criteria for each writing assignment.
These criteria will help you be as consistent and fair as possible when evaluating a group of student papers. Developing and using criteria is especially important when co-teaching a course or when asking TAs to grade papers for the course. Distribute the grading criteria to students (or post the criteria on the course Web site) so that they will know how you will evaluate their work.

While there *are* shared criteria for "good writing" that apply across academic disciplines, each discipline also has certain standards and conventions that shape writing in the discipline. Do not expect that students will come into your class knowing how to write the kind of paper you will ask them to write. For example, a student who has learned how to write an excellent analytical paper in a literature course may not know how to write the kind of paper that is typically required for a history course. Give students a written list of discipline-specific standards and conventions, and explain these in class. Provide examples of the kind of writing they will need to produce in your course.

4) Develop a process for writing comments that will give students a clear idea of whether they have or have not achieved the course's learning objectives (and with what degree of success).
Students should be able to see a clear correlation among 1) written comments on a paper, 2) the grading criteria for the assignment, and 3) the learning objectives for the course. Thus, before you start reading and commenting on a stack of papers, remind yourself of the grading criteria, the learning objectives, and which aspects of the writing you want to focus on in your response.

Writing Comments in the Margins

1) The first time you read through a paper, try to hold off on writing comments.
Instead, take the time to read the paper in its entirety. If you need to take some notes, do so on another piece of paper. This strategy will prevent you from making over-hasty judgments, such as faulting a student for omitting evidence that actually appears later in the paper. (In such cases, it may be appropriate to tell the student that you expected that evidence to be presented earlier--and the reason why). While you may expect this strategy to take more time, it can actually save you time by allowing you to focus your feedback on the *most important* strengths and weaknesses you want to bring to the writers' attention (see "Writing Final Comments," below).

2) Respond as a reader, not as a writer.
Do not tell students how YOU would write the paper. Instead, tell them how you are responding to each part of the paper as you read it, pointing out gaps in logic or support and noting confusing language where it occurs. For example, if a sentence jumps abruptly to a new topic, do not rewrite the sentence to provide a clear transition or tell the student how to rewrite it. Instead, simply write a note in the margin to indicate the problem, then prompt the student to come up with a solution. This strategy is especially important to follow when a student asks you to respond to a draft before the final paper is due; in this case, your aim should be to help the student identify weaknesses that he or she should improve and NOT to do the student's thinking and writing for them. Of course, in some instances, it is necessary and appropriate to give the student explicit directions, such as when she or he seems to have missed something important about the assignment, misread a source, left out an essential piece of evidence, or failed to cite a source correctly.

3) Ask questions to help students revise and improve.
One way to ensure that your comments are not overly directive is to write **questions** in the margins, rather than instructions. For the most part, these questions should be "open" rather than "closed" (having only one correct answer.) Open questions can be a very effective way to prompt students to think more deeply about the topic, to provide needed evidence, or to clarify language. For ideas on how to phrase open questions, see [Asking Questions to Improve Learning](#).

4) Resist the temptation to edit. Instead, mark a few examples of repeated errors and direct students to attend to those errors.
Simply put, if you correct your students' writing at the sentence level, they will not learn how to do so themselves, and you will continue to see the same errors in paper after paper. Moreover, when you mark all mechanical errors, you may overwhelm your students with so many marks that they will have trouble determining what to focus on when writing the next draft or paper.

5) Be specific.
Comments in the margin such as "vague," "confusing," and "good" do not help students improve their writing. In fact, many students find these comments "vague" and "confusing"--and sometimes abrupt or harsh. Taking a little more time to write longer, and perhaps fewer, comments in the margin will help you identify for students exactly what they have done well or poorly. Information about both is crucial for helping them improve their writing. Here are some examples of specific comments:

- Rather than "vague"
    - "Which research finding are you referring to here?"
    - "I don't understand your use of the underlined phrase. Can you rewrite this sentence?"
    - "Can you provide specific details to show what you mean here?"

- Instead of of "confusing," "what?" or "???"
    - "I lost the thread of your argument. Why is this information important? How is it related to your argument?"
    - "You imply that this point supports your thesis, but it contradicts what you argued in paragraph 3."

- Rather than "good"
    - "This excellent example moves your argument forward."
    - "Wonderful transition that helped clarify the connection between the two studies you are summarizing."
    - "An apt metaphor that helped me understand your argument about this historical metaphor."

Writing Final Comments

1) Begin by making positive comments; when pointing out weaknesses, use a descriptive tone, rather than one that conveys disappointment or frustration.
Give an honest assessment, but do not overwhelm the writer with an overly harsh or negative reaction. For example, do not assume or suggest that if a paper is not well written, the writer did not devote a lot of time to the assignment. The writer may have in fact struggled through several drafts. Keep in mind that confusing language or a lack of organized paragraphs may be evidence not of a lack of effort, but rather of confused thinking. The writer may therefore benefit from a few, targeted questions or comments that help them clarify their thinking.

2) Limit and select your comments; do not try to cover everything.
Focus on the 3-4 *most important* aspects of the paper. Provide a brief summary of 1) what you understood from the paper and 2) any difficulties you encountered. Make sure that whatever you write addresses the grading criteria for the assignment, but also try to tailor your comments to the specific strengths and weaknesses shown by the individual student.

While you may think that writing lots of comments will convey your interest in helping the student improve, students--like all writers--can be overwhelmed by copious written comments on their work. They may therefore have trouble absorbing all the comments you have written, let alone trying to use those comments to improve their writing on the next draft or paper.

3) Distinguish "higher-order" from "lower-order" issues.
Typically, "higher-order" concerns include such aspects as the thesis and major supporting points, while "lower-order" concerns are grammatical or mechanical aspects of the writing. Whatever you see as "higher" in importance than other aspects should be clear in your grading criteria. Whatever you decide, write your comments in a way that will help students know which aspects of their writing they should focus on FIRST as they revise a paper or write the next paper. For example, if a paper lacks an argument or a main point in an assignment in which either an argument or main point is essential (as is usually the case), address that issue first in your comments before you note any grammatical errors that the student should attend to.

4) Refer students back to comments you wrote in the margins.

For example, you might comment, "Your argument loses focus in the fourth paragraph (see my questions in margin)." You might also note a frequent pattern of mechanical error, then point them to a specific paragraph that contains that type of error.

5) Model clear, concise writing.
Before you write final comments, take a moment to gather and order your thoughts.

What Else Can You Do?

1) Provide opportunities for revision.
If you want students to improve their writing, give them an opportunity to apply what they have learned from your comments to a new, revised draft. Note: You should decide *before the course begins* whether you will allow students to revise their papers and, if so, when such revisions must be turned in (e.g., one week after papers handed back) and how you will grade the revision (e.g., average the grade of the revision with the grade earned on the original paper). If you decide not to allow students to revise papers, consider rewarding improvement from one paper to the next (e.g., the grade on the second paper is worth a greater percentage of the final course grade than the grade on the first paper).

2) Suggest that students who are struggling with their writing meet with you during office hours.
Often, students who are struggling to write clearly are also struggling to clarify what they think about the course material. Ask questions that help them figure out what they think and how to put those thoughts into a well organized, effective paper.

3) Recommend that students seek tutorial help at The Writing Center.
At The Writing Center (http://artsci.wustl.edu/~writing/home.html), students can meet with writing tutors who will read their papers and provide feedback. Writing Center tutors are trained to provide students with feedback on the clarity of their writing in a general way and will not necessarily be familiar with the criteria you are using to grade papers, unless you or the student have shared those criteria. However, seeking such feedback can be very helpful to students as they learn to write for academic audiences.

Sources and Recommended Reading

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