

Chapter 5

Responding to Students' Writing



Showcased in this Chapter are:

- Reasons for making comments on papers
- A discussion of the difference between editing-oriented vs. revision-oriented comments
- An explanation of the difference between macro vs. micro comments
- A discussion of how minimal marking can help some students learn
- Examples of how sequenced (or staged) writing assignments make commenting more valuable and less time consuming
- Pointers on responding to ESL students' papers
- Teachers' action points on reading and writing



For more information see Bean (1996) Chapter 4: "Dealing with Issues of Grammar and Correctness, Chapter 13: "Coaching the Writing Process and Handling the Paperload", and Chapter 14: "Writing Comments on Students' Papers"

If you have found WAC techniques to be useful for getting students to engage in writing-to-learn exercises that can then lead to a more formal paper, it is worthwhile to consider what is the most efficient way to respond to their writing, whether it is formal or informal. Figuring out in advance your strategy for commenting will save you time when you review the papers once they are in, and it will result in comments that are more likely to move students on in their writing process.

In this chapter we will look at the value of writing brief, targeted comments; the role of comments in sequenced (or staged) assignments; different types of comments; and using the writing center. At the end of the chapter, we have included some reflections and action points that address how your approach to students as readers can help make students more confident, self-motivated writers, whether or not English is their first language.

Why We Comment on Papers

When commenting on formal papers, the types of comments professors make often depends on whether they have the students write in drafts (or revisions), or whether the formal paper is a one-shot affair, usually due at the end of the semester. Comments on papers that are produced without a series of drafts may aim at clarifying strong and weak aspects of the paper, but they almost certainly also serve to justify the instructor's grade. This secondary motive increases the time spent on writing comments, and, for all its effort, is unlikely to improve the students' writing substantially.

Editing-oriented vs. Revision-oriented comments. Bean (1996, pp. 67-69) discusses two different approaches professors tend to take when commenting on formal papers. The first is an *editing-oriented* approach, which focuses mainly on sentence-level errors (such as grammar and spelling). While this approach might alert students to issues having to do with the form of their writing, it will not provide them with guidance in addressing the content of the paper. The second approach, on the other hand, is *revision-oriented*, which focuses on the writer's ideas. Under a revision-oriented approach, the professor's comments engage the content in a way that encourages the student to rethink and expand his or her initial ideas. In responding to student writing in this way, your role quickly assumes more the character of a coach, rather than of a judge. Through this process, comments become a way to carry on a written conversation with the student: this method is more likely to prompt revisions and to keep the writing-thinking process in motion for the student.

Commenting on exploratory writing:

As professors, we may feel instantly obligated to comment on every piece of writing that students produce. Since the goal of exploratory writing is to give students an opportunity to think freely on paper, it is not strictly necessary to comment on (or even grade) this type of writing. A simple, non-judgmental comment will suffice. If students feel they are not being judged, they may feel encouraged to take changes and truly explore the course material.

Sequence Your Assignments

We strongly suggest that you have students work in drafts or through sequenced (or staged) assignments. If you have students work in stages, you can then make comments on each draft, thus helping students to work on a limited number of specific issues. (As they work through a series of drafts, the papers improve, and the time you spend reading and marking typically decreases.) This helps clarify for students what exactly your expectations are: what kind of writing you're looking for (a description of something observed in lab, a report on an article or book in your field, a coherent essay with a thesis and solid organization, a personal response to a text or film or to something you've presented in class) and what level of stylistic sophistication is acceptable to you.



See what happens when you try this exercise in reading without commenting.

- Read a student's paper once through without writing any comments at all.
- Reflect first on what worked in the writing, how it was successful despite whatever errors it contained. Try to think of at least two successes in the paper.
- Now write your comments on the paper.
- On a separate piece of paper—or in your own journal—write out your reflections on this exercise. How did it *feel* to read a student's paper without pen in hand? Did taking time between reading the paper and writing the comments alter your view of the quality of the writing? Did the pause have any effect on the quality and kind of your comments?

Having students work in stages also establishes a conversational or dialogic exchange that allows you to expand on or specify your initial prompt and gives the students a forum to clarify their understanding of the assignment and to explore their own ideas further with the benefit of your guidance. Professor and student are then engaged in a mutually empowering process of writing and learning.

Sequencing:

- lets you give feedback on students' writing early, so they can, with your guidance, improve through the semester;
- allows you to integrate informal or exploratory assignments into more formal assignments;
- makes the workload more manageable for the students and for you;
- may reduce the likelihood of plagiarism.

For more ideas on the value of sequencing and how to implement it, see Chapter 2: Informal & Formal Writing Assignments, and Chapter 3: Tackling the Research Paper.



It's a wise professor who collects writing from students as early in the semester as possible.

Why? It

- establishes a rapport between you and the student, introducing a dialogic process that encourages critical thinking;
- lets you familiarize yourself with the students;
- lets you see the types of errors students are making so you can have them focus on eliminating them during the semester;
- may reduce the likelihood of plagiarism.

Macro vs. Micro Comments

One strategy for responding to your students' writing is to break your comments into two types: macro and micro. **Macro comments** address higher-order concerns such as overall organization of the paper; the quality of the ideas; and the development of loosely knit ideas into arguments. Macro comments are concerned with whether the student has followed the assignment and whether there is a clear thesis and support for that thesis. You can reduce the need for macro comments by making sure the terms you use in your assignment are clear to the student. For example, what exactly are you looking for when you ask a student to "explain" the factors that led to the colonial revolt against the British? Does *explain* mean "enumerate reasons"; "look for connections between incidents"; "analyze the personalities involved"; "discuss the merits of congressional representation as distinguished from a monarchical system"; or "examine critically misperceptions on both sides of the conflict"? If you can spell out exactly what kind of writing you want your students to produce, you are far more likely to be satisfied with the quality of writing your students present you with.

Some examples of macro comments:

- "I like the way your introductory paragraph leads into your thesis and transitions smoothly to specific supporting examples."
- "These are all good points. Now how does this third paragraph fit into your overall argument that the American Revolution was unnecessary?"

Micro comments deal with grammatical matters, e.g., sentence correctness, style, mechanics, and spelling. Both micro and macro comments can be brief, especially if you have students work in drafts or revisions. In fact when providing micro comments, some teachers use the technique of **minimal marking**. This entails either placing an "x" in the margin next to a line that contains a micro-level (grammatical) error, or circling the error. The student then identifies the error

Some examples of micro comments

- "Check subject-verb agreement"
- "Read this sentence aloud to see if you can improve how it flows."

herself, using a writing handbook as support. This strategy works well for students whose command of English is strong because it relies on an “intuitive” knowledge of internalized grammar. But it can cause trouble and confusion for many diligent students whose first language is not English and who are therefore less likely to have the passive command of the language that this technique presupposes. (For more information on working with ESL students, see the next section of this chapter.)

Whether you have students work in drafts or approach the paper strictly as a final product, a good rule of thumb for writing end comments is to keep them brief and specific, and to maintain a positive tone. Bean (2001, pp. 251–3) suggests the following formula for end-of-paper comments: (1) Identify the paper’s strengths; then (2) discuss the major problems; and finally (3) make constructive recommendations for how to proceed to the next draft or revision. Specific feedback is more likely to produce more satisfying results than enthusiastic praise or corrections.

Setting the Stage

A few ideas to reflect on as you sit down for a grading session.

- Make the environment you're grading in comfortable, as if you were having a conversation with someone who has something important to tell you. You might be modest about how much you expect yourself to get done in a single session.
- Try reading each paper through the first time **without commenting**. Get an overview before you put your grading wheels in motion. See what works in the writing, then begin to comment.
- When you do write, remember that writing comments or conferencing with students is an opportunity for interchange and dialogue. What you express in such sessions doesn't have to take on a judgmental or corrective tone. It can be more useful for you and the student to view your written comment as one more stage in the process of writing.
- In writing your comments focus on giving feedback that will improve the student's next draft. Many corrections that seem urgent to make now may actually take care of themselves in course of the drafting process. Before you commit words to the page, ask yourself, "What can I say that will help produce a better paper next draft or next paper?"
- Assure the student that he's not writing to a void. You can enhance a student's sense of audience awareness by focusing your comments on the **effect** their writing has on you as a reader. This maintains the conversational or dialogic relationship you set up when you sat down to grade.
- A writer faces many decisions—which word to use, how to connect disparate ideas, how to finish the assignment on time, how to manage it in English, etc.—and these decisions have an effect on how the writing

(sentence, passage, paper) reads. If you attune your comments to the effects some of these decisions have on you as a reader, you strengthen the student's sense of audience and increase the chances for an improved next draft. Instead of saying, "This sentence is awkward," you could ask, "Do you think this sentence flows well?" or "How does this sentence fit in with the rest of the paragraph?"

- The most effective comments tend to be specific in nature. Rather than saying "good intro", state why you felt it was an effective paragraph.
- Be supportive, but you need not heap on the praise, even if it's earned. "Brilliant work!" is easy to write and feels good for the student, but it's hard to say how it leads to a better next draft. Concentrate instead on which writing decisions and organizational or argumentative strategies a student used that led to this brilliance and write them down. Like this: "This example supports two of your five contentions and leads smoothly into your discussion of the other three. In your next draft you can focus on finding fitting examples for your other three claims."

Working with the Writing Center

It is difficult for busy professors to provide unlimited, individualized attention to a student's writing skills, so encourage your students to visit tutors at the Writing Center. There, they will be able to get additional, one-on-one help with their writing. The tutors there do not, however, simply provide a proofreading service. They work one-on-one with students on brainstorming, organization, and grammar. Consider giving "extra credit" points as an incentive to your students if they visit tutors at the Writing Center, or attend one of the Center's weekly seminars. For more information on the Writing Center, consult the BCC website.

When you send students to the Writing Center or to a Writing Fellow, we suggest that you use a referral form of some kind. This increases the likelihood that they will visit the Writing Center. It also facilitates clear, targeted communication between you and the tutor with regard to what specifically you want the student to work on. And it provides a template for the student to focus his efforts on issues that matter most to you. You may devise your own referral form or use the one on the next page.

Referral Form



Bronx Community College of the City University of New York Referral for Tutoring at the Writing Center

Date: _____

Dear _____,

In order to improve your writing you should seek assistance from a tutor at the BCC Writing Center. Make an appointment with a tutor at the Writing Center. Be sure to take this form with you for your meeting and give it to your tutor.

After you have finished the tutoring session, return to me both the form and the writing you worked on with the tutor.

The Writing Center is located in the basement of **Philosophy Hall**; its telephone number is **718-289-5279**.

Instructor

To the tutor:

The student named above is enrolled in _____ and needs help
(course, section number)

in the following area(s):

- coherence of sentences
- organization of argument and paragraph development
- outlining and essay planning
- formulating a thesis
- ESL
- irregular verbs
- verb tense (including -ed endings)
- subject-verb agreement
- pronoun agreement
- plurals
- spelling
- punctuation
- sentence structure (avoiding fragments, comma splices, run-ons)
- other (please indicate): _____

Please sign and date this form, then return it to the student, explaining that it is to be returned to the instructor.
Thank you!

Tutor: _____ Date seen: _____

Considerations in Responding to ESL Writing

The kinds of challenges students face in writing may vary depending on where they are in the process of making the written language their own. In this section we look briefly at the range of students' writing and speaking proficiencies and conclude by presenting some considerations and strategies you might find useful to keep in mind as you provide feedback to *all* of your students.

The term “ESL student” is used in common parlance—often imprecisely—to refer to students with a broad range of proficiency levels in English. Typically we think of an ESL student as someone struggling to bring their new language, English, to a proficiency level suitable for academic work. The term “ESL student” can also be used to refer to students who demonstrate a fluent command of spoken English but have trouble writing standard edited English. In the context of this handbook, we use this term to refer to anyone who seems to be facing particular difficulties writing in English that may be due to interference from other languages.

It is useful to bear in mind the difficulties these students face. For example, it is often very difficult for ESL students to learn how to control syntax and word choice. It is also important to realize that organizational structures may differ, based on the language and cultural background of the student. Writers from some cultures value indirectness in writing. In such cultures it is considered rude to tell the reader too directly what he or she should think, since it could be seen as an insult. Readers are given the responsibility to construct meaning from what they read, and writers are expected to leave room for interpretation. Another organizational difference is to begin with a narrative, and then to draw a conclusion at the end. Finally, in academic writing in other languages there is more freedom to develop ancillary points than in English.

When responding to the writings of students who are not native English speakers, it is useful to make a distinction between “local” and “global” errors. “Local” errors usually do not interfere with understanding what the student

means; whereas “global” errors interfere with the reader’s ability to understand what the writer is trying to say.

The challenges faced by ESL students when they write are many and complex. We offer the following considerations and strategies, organized into groups, to help you in more effectively responding to the needs of all of your students. Some of these points are especially applicable to students still trying to master academic English. We would like to acknowledge Professor Trudy Smoke, WAC Co-coordinator at Hunter College, for her generosity in sharing these ideas.

Considerations and Strategies by Prof. Trudy Smoke

Considerations and Strategies: Reading

- Reading is more than translating one language into another. Some ESL students translate huge blocks of text word for word without understanding the passage.
- Students need to develop the ability to use context clues.
- Students need to move beyond summarization to “transforming” the reading so that it’s useful for their particular writing project. To do this they should use their notes and summaries to devise their own purpose and plan for their writing.
- Students should work in small study groups.
- Students should keep reading journals in which they
 - (1) summarize the reading,
 - (2) note difficulties they encountered with the reading,
 - (3) write out their favorite ideas or sentences in quotation form,
 - (4) note new vocabulary, and
 - (5) connect the reading to other readings and ideas they have.

Considerations and Strategies: Content

- Start troubleshooting content problems by reviewing the wording of your assignment instructions (or prompt). Does it specify what you are looking for? Are you sure that what the instructions state is clear to the students. It's a good idea to look over your assignments and whenever possible have students brainstorm in class about approaches to the assignment before they write.
- Think about the words you use in the assignment prompt. What do words like "discuss," "argue," "critique," and "explain" mean in the context of the assignment? Try to make your expectations as clear as possible in your prompt.
- ESL writing may seem disconnected because it often is. Students may need direct help such as modeling in learning to use transition devices. You might distribute a handout of transition devices (e.g., "furthermore," "conversely," "on the other hand," etc.).
- Provide students with some models for attributing paraphrased or quoted materials. For example, "As Shamese Pearson argues, . . ." or "According to Robert Green . . ."
- Show examples of papers that satisfy the assignment.

Considerations and Strategies: Grammar

- Students should read through their work again *before* you conference with them. This helps them to see that reading and writing are inextricably connected. Both reading and writing require lots of practice.
- Read a student's work through at least once before responding to it. Focus on what in it *does* work.
- Concentrate on **one or two types** of errors that occur in a student's writing. Explain the correct usage and provide examples of how the rule or concept works.

- In conference ask the student to read the paper aloud. Let the student make corrections, if possible, without your help. Then if you still need to, point out problem areas.
- Tell students to keep a **log of errors** and to refer to it in the editing process.
- Keep in mind that languages take time to learn. It takes approximately **five to seven years** for a non-native speaker to develop full written and spoken proficiency in academic English.

Considerations and Strategies: Plagiarism

- Reading and negotiating the transition from reading to writing involves multiple proficiencies that take lots of practice to perfect over time. You can expect some awkwardness in citations at first. Be patient.
- Explain when to quote, when to paraphrase, when to summarize, and **model** all of these reading-writing activities. Require practice exercises, either as independent assignments, as part of a reading journal, or as part of a sequenced project. Provide students with set phrases to practice using in their writing. For example, "According to Stanley Crouch, . . ." or "Sanchez has pointed out that . . ." or "Yamada found out . . ." or "Unlike Gotha, Marx maintains . . ."
- Check out this website: [What Prevents ESL/EFL Writers from Avoiding Plagiarism?: Analyses of 10 North American College Websites](#). This gives insights into what students are told about plagiarism, paraphrasing, and using documentation in college websites.

 **Your Writing Fellow can help to:** 

- Suggest ideas for how to design your assignment in stages so that students have the opportunity to act on your comments;
- Work with students as they try to use your comments to produce their next draft;
- Identify strategies for commenting on student papers;
- Nip some common writing problems in the bud by offering workshops on plagiarism or editing/proofreading.

