



Preparing to Evaluate Student Papers

Are you tired of the same old comments you use to grade student papers?

Do you need examples of fresh comments to make on student papers?

Using Fresh Comments:

You can find suggestions from the writing centers of several universities. Google “positive feedback for university student writing.”

You can often narrow a search even more by inserting your discipline in front of “student”: “positive feedback for university political science student writing.”

Verify that the responses come from universities or other reputable sources. For example, Harvard has a “Writing Project” that has many helps for teaching and evaluating student writing: <https://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/>

Tips for Cutting Back on Comments on Student Papers:

Do not begin making comments until you have read the whole paper. You will often spend far too much time making comments only to discover that the student has more serious problems.

Remember that students rarely use our comments to improve their overall writing. Rather, they often use the comments only if they want to challenge their grade.

- If you are simply grading student papers so they have a final grade – no opportunities to revise – minimize your comments.
- Use a good rubric and write a paragraph about the paper as a whole rather than marking throughout the paper.
- Begin the paragraph with positive acknowledgements of what the student did well.
- Mention the most global problem.
- End with advice to also edit thoroughly to be taken seriously as an author in your discipline.

Begin with positive comments:

Acknowledge what the student has done well. Perhaps his or her use of synthesizing has improved or maybe the argument clearly relates to the assignment and class discussions.

Keep in mind your purpose for the writing task:

- If the student will have an opportunity to revise and resubmit the paper, make comments to guide the student.
- If the paper is due on the last day of class, make a summary comment only and use a rubric.

What do composition experts say about responding to student papers?

William J. Dusel

- Show respect for the student writer
- Express interest in the writer's unique view
- The use of effective comments is "more than a mechanical recording of one's reactions in the margins of pupils' compositions. It should be highly selective, revealing only those reader-reactions which will be helpful to the writer at his present level of maturity and accomplishment" (p. 214). (Straub, R. [Ed.] [2006]. *Key works on teacher response: An anthology*. Boynton/Cook Pub.)
- "The most important point usually deserves the most lengthy and complete treatment; the least important point may be dismissed in a few words. . . . Many teachers attempt to remind the pupil of the value of content . . . But one such indication of the teacher's interest in the soundness, originality, and clarity of thought can hardly counterbalance the forty-nine reminders of the importance of mechanics." Are most of the comments on student papers based on a student's weakness? Avoid a "disproportionate emphasis on mechanics and mistakes." (Straub, 2006, p. 216)

Paul B. Diederich

"Find in each paper at least one thing, and preferably two or three things, that the student has done well, or better than before." Then find one to three global concerns to improve on. "As for the other ninety-nine errors that disfigure the paper and disgrace the school, simply ignore them. If you mark them all, or even half of them, the student learns nothing; he only advances one step further toward a settled conviction that he can't write and there is no use trying." (Straub, 2006, p. 223)

Lou LaBrant

"Corrections, suggestions for revision, and criticisms of content should be given in proportion to the ability of the student to use them. They are means to improvement, not penalties for being dull or inexperienced or incompetent." (Straub, 2006, p. 210)

C. H. Knoblauch & Lil Brannon

Teacher practices to assist student writers:

- (1) Facilitate with our comments – not "judge"
- (2) Require multiple-draft assignments so instructors can guide revision
- (3) Actually teach writing + re-writing (not just "editing")
- (4) Confirm that students understand our comments so they can revise (Straub, 2006, p. 75)

Edward M. White & Cassie A. Wright. (2016).

"Focus written comments on papers to a few main points, raising questions rather than proposing solutions" (p. 70). (*Assigning, responding, evaluating: A writing teacher's guide*. Bedford/ St. Martin's.)

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