



Tired of Grading Poor Papers? Help Students Understand How to Revise

Are your students getting the greatest possible benefit from peer reviews or from your comments?

What can I do so that written comments on papers will not be ignored or misunderstood?

If You Comment on Student Drafts

Use Praise to Guide Students

- Praise successful parts of papers. Instead of pointing out all the areas where students did not do well, praise an area where students did well and encourage them to revise the rest of the paper to incorporate the same good features.
- Do not comment on everything that is wrong or that could be improved. Research shows that students are often overwhelmed by voluminous comments and thus miss an instructor’s main suggestions. If you can, first emphasize the strengths of a student’s writing (praise is a great motivator), and then identify and explain only the one or two main ways in which the writing could be improved.
- Share and discuss some successful drafts.

Communicate with Students About your Feedback

- Develop rubrics or an evaluation checklist of what matters most in an assignment.
- Make both your praise and your criticisms as specific and clear as possible. Beware of the potential for miscommunication when you use abstract or unspecified terms in your comments, terms that your students may not understand (e.g., “flow” and “focus” may not mean the same thing to your students as they do to you; and what specifically makes a section “good” needs to be clear to the student-writer).
- If you make notes in the margin (e.g., “awk” for “awkward phrasing”), give students an explanatory list of the marks you often make so they may decode.

Other Advice

- Resist the temptation to edit or rewrite a student’s paper.
- Encourage the student to meet with an FHSS Writing Lab student advisor for more help.
- Do not waste time responding to minimal efforts.

(Brad Hughes Writing Across the Curriculum)

Encourage Students to Improve Drafts

- First drafts are almost always poor because we are still trying to figure out what our claim is and what we can contribute to the ongoing conversation on this topic. (This is true for both instructors and students!)
- “Nine-tenths of all writing is re-writing” (Trimble, J. R. 2011. *Writing with style: Conversations on the art of writing*. Prentice Hall, p. 8).
- The reader should be able to understand your claim, evidence, and evaluation after reading it only once.
- “Don’t write something that you don’t understand or can’t explain” (Baldwin, S. A. [2018]. *Writing your psychology paper*. American Psychological Association, p. 80.)
- Eliminate excessive wordiness, unnecessary jargon, and redundancy.
- Read the paper out loud.
- Let the paper stand overnight or longer (incubation).

What Do Others Say About Revising Drafts?

“In composing, as a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written; you have no idea what vigor it will give your style” (Sydney Smith, as cited in Trimble, p. 48).

In an interview of Ernest Hemingway by the *Paris Review*:

Interviewer: How much rewriting do you do?

Hemingway: It depends. I rewrote the ending of *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.

Interviewer: Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had you stumped?

Hemingway: Getting the words right” (as cited in Trimble, p. 117).

“Rewriting is the essence of writing well . . . That idea is hard to accept. We all have an emotional equity in our first draft; we can’t believe that it wasn’t born perfect. But the odds are close to 100 percent that it wasn’t. Most writers don’t initially say what they want to say, or say it as well as they could. The newly hatched sentence almost always has something wrong with it. It’s not clear. It’s not logical. It’s verbose. It’s klunky. It’s pretentious. It’s boring. It’s full of clutter. It’s full of clichés. . . . The point is that clear writing is the result of a of tinkering” (pp. 83-84) (Zinsser, W. [2006]. *On writing well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction*. Collins.)

The more proficient your students are when revising --- the less time you spend grading papers!!

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