



Provide Appropriate Feedback

It is that time of the Semester again – already! Commenting on Student Papers!

Begin by quickly reading the student paper before making comments:

- Students seldom benefit from correcting more than 3 problems. Before making comments on the paper, choose the 3 problem areas you will point out; ignore the rest, except for generic comments at the end.
- Place comments in the paper near the 2-3 problems and explain how to fix them
- “Highlight positive features, explain their merit, and suggest that the student do more of that” (Svinicki, Marilla, & McKeachie, Wilbert J. (2011). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers*. United States: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.) (e.g., “good transition from background to your argument”)

What Does Scholarly Research Say About Commenting on Student Papers?

- **Understandable:** Express comments in language that students will understand
- **Selective:** Comment on two or three problems that students can revise
- **Specific:** Point to examples in the student’s paper where the feedback applies
- **Timely:** Suggest how students might improve future assignments
- **Contextualized:** Relate to the learning outcomes and/or assessment criteria
- **Balanced:** Point out the positive as well as areas in need of improvement

(Ibid., p. 110)

Choose 2-3 problems you will comment on -- Emphasize Global Issues

“Focus your comments on one or two major problems and perhaps one minor one and accept the fact that you cannot cover all the bases in your response to one assignment.” (Glenn, C, Goldthwaite, M. A., & Connors, R. 2003. *The St. Martin’s guide to teaching writing*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin’s.)
Limit comments to 3 or 4 marginal comments per page.

Express interest in the writer’s unique view. Effective comments are “more than a mechanical recording of one’s reactions in the margins of pupils’ compositions. [They] should be highly selective, revealing only those reader-reactions which will be helpful to the writer at his [or her] present level of maturity and accomplishment” (William J. Dusel, Ibid., p. 214).

What About all of the Errors?

Richard Haswell says we should leave minor faults alone unless they are the only errors in an essay: "All surface mistakes in a student's paper [should be] left totally unmarked within the text. These [surface mistakes include] errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar" (Ibid., p. 147).

One unwanted outcome from pointing out errors in spelling, grammar, etc. is that students may not be able to distinguish between the value of a comment about grammar or punctuation versus a comment about a missing thesis. "The language of the comments makes it difficult for a student to sort out and decide what is most important and what is least important. . . . It quite often happens, that students follow every comment and fix their texts appropriately as requested, but their texts are not improved substantially, or, even worse, their revised drafts are inferior to their previous drafts" (Nancy Sommers, Ibid., p. 376). Students often do not understand our concerns.

Grammar & punctuation errors: It is NOT helpful for us to edit student papers for errors. Error is "not something that, once fixed in a simple and clean environment, will never emerge again. It is not a culture we can isolate and alter in a petri dish. What we must do, therefore, is carefully define and describe the kind of writing demanded of students in the academy . . . We cannot assume a simple skill transfers across broadly different discourse demands" (Mike Rose, p. 197 as cited in Straub, R. (Ed.) (2006). *Key works on teacher response: An anthology*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.)

Comments should not focus only on students' weakness. Avoid a "disproportionate emphasis on mechanics and mistakes." "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" (William J Dusel as cited in Glenn et al., 2003, p. 216). C, Goldthwaite, M. A., & Connors, R. (2003). *The St. Martin's guide to teaching writing*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's).

This same advice comes from Paul B. Diedrich (Ibid., p. 223): "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."

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