



Do Your Comments Correlate with Your Prompt?

It is that time of the semester again – Grading papers!!

Do you wonder if you are making appropriate comments on student papers? It may be helpful to review your prompt and grade rubric. What was your goal for assigning student writing?

- Learn to write in your discipline?
- Gain a writing skill that will help students?
- Provide a broad overview of a topic relevant to your course?
- Learn to narrow a topic much more so the student can research in depth?
- Help students locate scholarly material?

Using the criteria from the prompt and the rubric can guide you in what comments to make on student papers. I would be surprised if any of us gave a writing assignment that demands that students have an error-free paper even if their topic is not relevant, too shallow, underdeveloped, . . . Therefore, we should NOT make excessive comments about grammar & mechanics.

Simply inform the student that the errors made it difficult to understand the claim in the paper and deduct the appropriate number of points. Use comments to talk about the global features of the paper – not proofreading comments.

Do not Overwhelm Students With Excessive Comments

Do not overwhelm the student with your comments. Limit comments to about 2 main issues and 1 minor one. “If you are going to make a comment, make it well. Rather than spray the paper with various notes and abbreviations, take your time, select which areas of writing are most important for this student, at this time, and write out more fully each of the comments you do make” (Beth L. Hewitt. [2015]. *Reading to Learn and Writing to Teach: Literacy Strategies for Online Writing Instruction*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, p. 274).

“Do not overburden students with more commentary than they can handle, and find positive and encouraging ways to suggest improvements. . . . limit response to a few marginal comments per page, supplemented with an end comment synthesizing a holistic reader response to the paper that provides direct goals for revision” (Edward M. White & Cassie A. Wright. (2016). *Assigning, responding, evaluating: A writing teacher’s guide*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, p. 58).

It is often a good idea to read through the paper quickly before making any comments. Too often I felt that I could save some time by marking the paper as I read – only to discover that I should not have made any comments yet because there were much bigger issues to address.

Choose a Commenting Style That Would Be Most Helpful for Your Students

Helpful Commenting Styles	
Open Questions	Is this the thesis? Who is your audience?
Interpretive	So you are claiming that you are smarter than your brother.
Reader-Response	I am lost here. I cannot figure out the single main claim in this paragraph.
Instructional	When you are combining two complete sentences and you wish to use a colon, you should capitalize the first word of the second sentence.
Specific Praise	Good analysis of your sources. This is a good way to structure your introduction.
Unhelpful Commenting Styles	
Criticism	Emphasis on problems: Awkward sentence. Not enough support. Comma splice.
Correction	Crosses out or inserts words: The responsibility of effectuating transformational leadership through Using group motivation can be stressful.
Indirect Criticism with no recommendations	This paragraph seems out of place. This argument is weak. Awkward.
Commands	Delete this paragraph. Don't use "I." Add evidence.
Advice	Try to find a better title. Consider dropping the first two lines.
Closed Questions	Present tense? Right word? Missing thesis?

R. Straub. (2000). *The practice of response: Strategies for commenting on student writing*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

“Remember that students can absorb only so much constructive criticism in one shot. Focus your comments on one or two major problems and perhaps one minor one (e.g., a grammatical problem) and accept the fact that you cannot cover all the bases in your response to one assignment.” Limit comments to 3 or 4 marginal comments per page. (C. Glenn, M. A. Goldthwaite, & R. Connors. (2003). *The St. Martin's guide to teaching writing*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, p. 147.)

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