Reconsider the Way We Evaluate Student Papers

Scenario: You need Brain Surgery:

Your doctor is using a medical text that is 30 years old. This scenario will NOT have a happy ending!

Now, compare to responding to student papers – do NOT use the methods your own instructors used!!! For example, do NOT edit!! This does not mean you should quit requiring well-edited papers – but instead of pointing them out, simply include a statement such as "The number of punctuation errors interfered with my ability to understand your claims." Or "Grammatical errors distracted me from your argument." Then deduct points according to your rubric, but do NOT find and mark the errors.

Use Current Research to Guide the Way We Evaluate Student Papers

Like having a surgeon with outdated methods, we need to use the current research on making comments on student papers. "Far too much of what teachers do with student writing is picky, arbitrary, unclear, or generally unhelpful. Most of us model our teaching behavior on the instructors we have had in school, and more than likely they used negative responses, embodied in red ink, rather than what we now know to be much more effective patterns" (White & Wright, 2016, p. 49).

In the past, instructors often marked every error they found in a student paper – the task was time-consuming – but we believed that students benefitted from the marks on their papers. However, research has now confirmed that there is little or no value in marking errors which "rarely communicates anything of value to students" (B. Huot, as cited in James, 2017, p. 255). Students do not learn this way.

Did you know that "papers students submit for English classes consistently contain fewer mechanical errors than papers they submit for content courses"? (Mallonee & Breihan, 1985, as cited in Willingham, 1990, p. 12). Students use a different part of the brain to create content for a new disciplinary writing task than when they review mechanical errors, which often leads to cognitive overload (and results in more errors). We should not ignore errors, but we should not attempt to correct them. Instead, approach the global issues of the paper—praise what has been done well and ask questions about what has been done poorly.

What is a Good Process for Evaluating Student Papers?

Researchers working on the writing project at Harvard suggest the following strategies for evaluating student writing:

- Read each paper through quickly, before making comments, to identify major strengths and weaknesses.
- Use clear assessment criteria (rubrics) to evaluate thesis, organization, evidence, documentation style, etc.
- [Limit marginal comments to no more than 3 per page. Consider asking questions rather than offering corrective advice.]
- Identify three to four areas (include both weaknesses and strengths) in end comments (adapted from Olson et al., 2009).

Before Commenting on Student Papers, Deliberately Assess Your Attitude

Consider your perspective as you grade papers: are you focusing on student deficiencies instead of strengths? (James, 2017, p. 255). Instructors often "respond to student writing primarily by identifying and penalizing error" (Paul B. Diederich, as cited in Daiker, 1989, p. 104). However, "noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly" (p. 105). It may be helpful to do as Daiker suggests: "Allow myself nothing but positive comments during an initial reading of a student paper" (p. 107).

Do not make comments based on your reaction – make comments that will help the student resolve the problem. For example, a first-year graduate student received her paper back from her instructor who had written that she did not have "graduate level writing" (Powell & Driscoll. 2020, p. 43). In this case, the instructor "reacted," but did not guide the student to be able to reach graduate-level writing. As a result of the instructor's comment, the student changed her graduate program so she could "avoid the professor's future courses and critical comments" (p. 43).

Consider Your Goal for Commenting on Student Papers:

- To help students write better?
- To guide students so that they can revise this paper for your class?
- To justify the grade you give?

"Even the most thoughtful and articulate comments will have no influence on students if they don't understand how to use them. If students believe that the purpose of comments is to justify a grade or to correct their mistakes, they won't read their teachers' comments with any sense of agency or engagement" (Sommers, 2013, p. 9).

Why Do Students Review Our Comments?

- To understand their grade (& can they argue with any of the comments to get a higher score?)
- To get a higher grade on the next writing assignment in the same class
- To decide whether to revise and possibly raise the score
- **Note: their goal is NOT to learn to write better**

Limit the Comments on Student Papers

Limit the number of your comments and be sure to note the student's strengths. "Over-commenting does more harm than good" (Sommers, 2013, p. 4). "Teachers save time and students learn more when teachers target only a few matters in depth rather than superficially commenting on a range of problems" (p. 27).

Marginal Comments

- Marking grammar & punctuation errors is particularly counterproductive.

- Marginal comments should serve as a bridge between the paper and your end comments [and should be limited to a maximum of 3 comments per page].

On the following page, you will find a list of comments that you might use when evaluating student papers and the list of References.

FHSS Writing Lab

Comments on Structure
Good transitions between paragraphs.
Effective intro – it moves from broad to your narrow thesis claim.
Thesis is argumentative & lists the main headings in your paper.
This paragraph has excellent claims, evidence, and transitions – now do the same for the preceding paragraph.
Concise with elimination of excessive wordiness.
Thoughtful conclusion (plus recommend future research).
Each paragraph has a well-focused topic sentence which is tied to the thesis.
Sentences within each paragraph focus on the single topic introduced in the topic sentence.
Your thesis clearly states your claim and lists 3 types of evidence to support it. The next step will be to align the thesis claims with the headings and body of the paper.
You have done a good job of using a single main idea in each paragraph; now, help the reader by adding transitions to connect the paragraphs.
Engaging intro.
Paragraphs are clearly tied to thesis.
Compelling introduction which establishes the paper's topic.

Comments on Content
I appreciate the research you have done to support your claim – be sure to address counterclaims.
Your thesis makes an argumentative claim – now add scholarly evidence to support your claim.
I enjoyed reading the evidence for your claims, but I was surprised that counterclaims were not addressed. Do not avoid sources that disagree with you – face them and explain why your claim is a better option.
Consistent use of your documentation style.
Addresses opposing views & multiple perspectives.
Clearly defines how each variable is measured.
I enjoyed your passion about this topic.
Clear description of what is missing in the research and how your research can begin to fill that gap.
Maintains a consistent focus; no irrelevant material or unnecessary repetition.

Comments on Analysis & Synthesis
Your choices of evidence support your claims; now synthesize the sources and add your analysis of how the evidence supports your claim.
You cite relevant sources; now add the "So what?" Explain how the source is relevant to your claim.
This paragraph has excellent analysis & synthesis; apply this same structure for the following paragraph.
Good use of synthesis rather than simply summarizing scholarly sources.
Reflects solid understanding of your sources.
Good use of analysis for each source used.
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