



Commenting on Student Papers: Focus on Higher Order Concerns

Although we understand the different levels of importance in the comments we make on student papers, students may not make that distinction. For example, if I note several comma splices in the paper, the student may concentrate on fixing those instead of adding an overarching thesis for the paper, if I only make a single comment on the missing thesis.

Limit Comments on Student Papers

“Research has clearly shown that too much feedback tends to overwhelm students. They can’t be sure what to do first (or second, or third), and it’s challenging to identify what’s most important. It’s likely, too, that students will focus on what’s easiest—often, mechanical errors or punctuation—rather than higher-order concerns” (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2022, pp. 93-94).

“Do not overburden students with more commentary than they can handle and find positive and encouraging ways to suggest improvements” (White & Wright, 2016, p. 58). “Focus written comments on papers to a few main points, raising questions rather than proposing solutions and locating some passages for praise” (p. 70).

Most of us are “inclined to give people too much feedback at once . . . this can result in reduced performance.” “Develop the self-discipline to focus on fewer things . . . tell the [student] about only the most important *and hold off on everything else*” (Lemov et al., 2012, pp. 126-127).

Do Not Tell Students How to Revise Papers ---- Unless You Allow Them to Revise

Do not waste time making comments that would “help a student write a better paper for your class” if the student will not have an opportunity to implement your suggestions. Instead, talk to them about their writing; point out areas that work well and explain why, as well as one or two problem patterns. Do NOT correct grammar.

“Move from ‘don’t’ statements that tell [students] what not to do to ‘what to do’ statements that tell them how to succeed. Make sure your guidance is specific and actionable” (Lemov et al., 2012, p. 133). “Good feedback describes the solution—in concrete, actionable terms—rather than the problem” (p. 130). For example, instead of “Do not use large quotations,” use something like “Help the reader understand your analysis of claims by synthesizing multiple sources and add your commentary.”

If I Do Not Comment on Grammar Errors – What Should My Comments Focus On?

Focus on *higher order* concerns, such as “Does the student paper fit the prompt? Does it appropriately address research questions, claims, lines of argument, evidence, and organization?” Although syntax and punctuation are important, you should not correct them: **“After all: a perfectly punctuated paper that says nothing isn’t going to be very good”** (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2022, pp. 93-94). Simply deduct points with a

single comment such as, “Unfortunately, the errors distracted the reader from your main points.” **Students acquire grammar skills “by making corrections, not reading them”** (Hudd et al., 2013, p. 41).

Instead of emphasizing grammar errors, we can keep in mind that students need “thoughtful commentary to show [them] when [they] have communicated [their] ideas and when not, raising questions from a reader’s point of view that may not have occurred to [them] as writers” (Nancy Sommers, as cited in Straub, 2006, p. 287). Did the students’ writing communicate the meaning they intended? “Talk” to the student in your comments rather than simply making critical observations on their papers (p. 336).

Teachers’ comments on student papers are often unproductive – students may not even read them. When they do read the comments, they may not understand them or know how to use them and the final results may not lead to more effective student writing (Knoblauch, C. H., & Brannon, L. 1982 as cited in Straub, 2006, p. 70).

How Will I Know If Students Read My Comments?

Reflecting on the writing and research process may help students be more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Consider requiring students to write reflective memos after they receive their graded final papers. This is done more successfully when the papers are due before the final exam. The memos can be submitted with the final exam.

Have students respond to each of your comments by explaining what changes were made for each comment, similar to the way you respond to comments from the people who review articles you submit for publication. Have students explain how the paper could be improved if they were permitted to revise and resubmit.

How Can I Determine If My Comments Are Useful?

One insightful way to evaluate the value of your comments on student papers is to invite peers or other students to read the comments you make on student papers; what would they say?

- Incomplete – I do not understand what you want the student to do
- Over emphasis on errors
- Cryptic sarcastic tone
- Lack of praise for what was done well
- Relevance of the comments to the assignment is missing

Return student papers in a timely way: “The time between what the learner produces and the feedback that you give is crucial. The longer the period between task and feedback, the smaller the effect of the feedback” (Neelen & Kirschner, 2020, p. 201). Compare giving feedback on a student paper to learning the piano: feedback is instant, precise, and clearly explains what the pianist needs to do.

Identify Areas in the Paper Where Students Did a Good Job

I planned to point you to faculty in the college who were doing significant work in making comments on student papers. To identify some of you (and I know there are many), I talked to several students about noteworthy comments that had been on their returned papers.

I was shocked! One student will graduate in April, and she said she has never had a single positive comment on any of her papers! Another student explained that she had never had a paper read by a faculty member – only by TA's. She said the TA's did an excellent job in using the rubric to identify the problems and the final grade, but there was never a comment on what she did well.

I realized after talking to several students that rubrics almost always simply identify problems. Whether you grade the student papers or you have TA's grade them, it is important to identify what the student author does well. It could be done by creating a "bank" of positive comments that TA's could use to identify positive traits and train TA's in using the positive comments when you norm the student papers with your TA's. Here are some examples:

- Your use of transitions made it easy for me to follow your ideas.
- Your clear explanations of how you used terms in the paper enabled me to understand your claims.
- Thank you for your concise writing – eliminating "fluff" and unnecessary words and phrases help me understand your main ideas.

Remember – it is NOT our job to show students every flaw in the paper to “justify the grade.”

Instead, our job is to identify what students are doing well and possibly suggest 2-3 areas for improvement!!!

References

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If you are interested, here are the questions I used to informally interview students about comments on their papers:

1. Reflect on comments you have received on past papers.
2. What comments were most useful & that you used for future papers? (none used them for future papers)
3. Which professors offered substantive positive feedback? (none)
4. What comments were least helpful (all of them said "grammar/punctuation comments" and some "did not understand what the instructor meant by the comment")
5. Did the comments seem to have the purpose of helping or of simply justifying your grade? (all students said comments were made to justify the grade)
6. Do you ever go back to the comments on your papers? (None of them re-read comments; several saved their papers on their computers, but only "clean" copies without the comments).