Giving Feedback on Student Writing

There are many ways to give feedback on student writing. The best approach for any particular instructor depends on your purpose for giving the feedback, the amount of time available to you, and your preferred communication style. For example, you could give your students feedback in writing, in person, or through video recordings. Two considerations to keep in mind are that students often have deep psychological investments in their written work even when we as instructors perceive them to have put little effort into producing it, and that providing clear feedback is actually an extremely demanding writing task: students often find it difficult to understand what their instructors’ comments mean, even when those comments seem quite straightforward to the instructors themselves (Hodges, 1997).

This handout offers an overview of some widely shared ideas about giving good feedback, followed by descriptions of a variety of possible ways to put those ideas into practice.

Background

While there are many ways to offer useful feedback to your students, research shows that it is helpful to take the following concerns into account, whatever method you choose.

Instructional Purpose: Formative vs. Summative Comments

Formative comments are intended to help students revise their work, while summative evaluate the quality of a “finished” product. Thus, formative comments usually include recommendations for revision and questions that might help students rethink weaker elements in their papers, along with comments about things that are currently working well that a student might build on.

Summative comments, too, should address the strengths and weaknesses in a paper, but they typically explain the connection between those strengths and weaknesses and the grade the paper has received. They typically do not include advice about how the student might revise this specific paper, though they might include advice about how the student might improve his or her work in the future.

Higher Order vs. Lower Order Concerns

Higher order concerns are typically conceptual and structural. Do the ideas in the paper make sense? Are claims supported with evidence? Do the paragraphs follow a logical order? Lower order concerns have less to do with meaning than with “correctness,” i.e., grammar, style, and formatting.

While both higher order and lower order concerns are important, instructors can inadvertently send
contradictory messages when they try to address both at the same time. For example, questions and comments that suggest that a paragraph needs to be entirely rethought and rewritten conflict with sentence-level markups that suggest that the sentences already present in the paragraphs will remain where they are once they are cleaned up (Sommers, 1982).

**Drawing Connections Between the “Big Picture” and the Details**

One common approach to commenting on student work is to offer praise, criticism, and questions in the margins of a paper, and to provide a more general overview of what the paper does well and what it does poorly. Ideally, this method should allow students to understand not only what the paper’s strengths and weaknesses are, but also where specific examples of these occur in the text. However, it can be surprisingly difficult for students to understand the connections between overview comments and marginal comments unless an instructor spells those connections out explicitly (Hodges, 1997). For example, an instructor might ask questions in the margins that indicate the need for evidence to support key claims, and might explain in his or her end comment that the paper’s greatest weakness is its failure to provide evidence. Yet, students who are less experienced in thinking about papers in terms of evidence and claims will not necessarily understand that marginal questions such as “Why do you think so?” indicate places where evidence needs to be provided. It can be extremely helpful for an instructor to include a sentence in his or her end comment that says something like, “In my marginal comments, I’ve tried to show you where your claims lacked sufficient evidence to support them by asking why you think the things you say are true.”

**Tone**

Students like to feel that their instructors are interested in what they say and how they say it. Cultivating a conversational tone and indicating that you understand and appreciate what the student attempted to accomplish—whether or not the student actually achieved his or her goals—can go a long way toward helping the student accept your feedback rather than responding defensively (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj, 2004; Harvard Writing Project Bulletin, 2000).

**Implementation**

There are many ways of offering students feedback that addresses all of the concerns above. A few possibilities that might suit instructors with a variety of different teaching styles are described below.

**Approach #1: End Comments (or Head Comments) and Marginal Comments**

As described above, one very common approach to commenting on student papers is to combine end comments that provide a “big picture” perspective with marginal comments that illustrate specific instances of the strengths and weaknesses described in the end comment (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj, 2004). You might also consider putting your overview comment first (using head comments instead of end comments) to provide the student with a roadmap for interpreting what follows. If your students have submitted hard copies, you can write a head comment on a separate page and staple it to the front of the paper. If you have collected electronic copies, you can type your head comment directly above
the beginning of the student’s paper.

This approach is likely to be most effective if:

- connections between end comments and marginal comments are made explicit
- the instructor prioritizes problems within the paper and helps the student to focus by addressing only the most important two or three higher order issues and one or two lower order issues, even when a larger number of problems is present
- priorities for revision or evaluation are made explicit; i.e., “The most important thing you need to work on in your revision is...”
- only a few samples of key lower order problems are corrected and explained—preferably those that represent patterns of error that occur throughout the paper; correcting each individual error can become visually overwhelming and does not allow the student to practice making further corrections him or herself.

**Approach #2: Commenting Forms**

Using a form that sorts your comments into explicit categories such as “what you are doing well” and “what needs work,” with subcategories such as “higher order concerns,” “sentence-level concerns,” and “X,” can help ensure that both you and your students take the time to think about not only the weaknesses but also the strengths in their writing. It can also simplify your commenting process by giving you a consistent list of concerns to pay attention to and write about. A sample of one such form is available in Supplement 1, “Feedback Form”.

**Approach #3: Face-to-Face Conversation**

Talking to students about their papers in person can be a remarkably efficient way to convey your thoughts about their work and be sure they understand what you’ve said, because you can speak more quickly than you can write, and because it provides your students with an immediate opportunity to ask you questions about what you say, reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation. Spending fifteen minutes with each of your students to give them feedback on their papers can actually take you less time than writing out formal comments on those papers—provided that you are able to spend enough time in your office to do this within what counts for you as a reasonable work week.

**Approach #4: Screencasting**

If you like the idea of speaking to your students rather than writing to them but are unable to meet with each of them in person, you might try conveying your comments via screencasts. Screencasts allow an instructor to “talk through” a paper with a student by creating a video that scrolls through the student’s paper online while recording the instructor’s audio comments about the paper. To see how this works, you can view this sample screencast. Like face-to-face meetings, screencasts let you speak to your students directly, which allows for greater speed in communicating ideas and clearer transmission of tone of voice, though it lacks the advantage of allowing the student an immediate opportunity to ask questions.
Approach #5: Helping Students Take a More Active Role in the Conversation

Students may take a more active role and become more interested in carrying on a conversation with you when you reply to questions they themselves ask. Whether you reply to your students’ work on paper, electronically, in person, or via video, you can invite them to insert questions and comments in their drafts using the “track changes” function in Word. (The same goal can be achieved by inviting them to hand write comments in the margins of hard copies of their work, or by requiring them to submit cover letters along with their papers.) You can then respond directly to their thoughts in addition to commenting on issues they don’t raise themselves. A PowerPoint presentation with findings from recent research on this approach is available online in “Marginal Comments: Helping Students Take a More Active Role in Getting Feedback on Their Writing,” and a sample of a student paper with inserted comments and reviewer feedback can be found in Supplement 2: “Sample of a Student Paper with Inserted Comments.”

Works Cited:


Thanks to instructors Paul Barron and Mika LaVaque-Manty for sharing sample documents.