

Some “Hard and Fast” Rules for Commenting on Papers

Dilemma: In order to get the student writer to learn to apply your feedback to future writing tasks, there must be a dialogue between the instructor/reader and the beginning writer, one that will draw attention to the writer’s writing process. The beginning writer must develop self-awareness of his or her writing process or he or she will not be able to improve. However, the instructor is the evaluator rather than just a reader. It is a tricky business to evaluate in such a way as to empower students to improve, and to avoid making them feel either a) incompetent (“I’ll never be able to write so why bother”); or b) dependent on some “outside fix” for their improvement (“I need my instructor or the Writing Center Tutor to tell me what to do”). The ideal situation is to provide feedback on student drafts, but that is not always practical. Whether on drafts or graded essays, comments you write have the potential to make an impact, so here are some guidelines for writing effective comments:

- Write FEWER, more THOUGHTFUL COMMENTS (esp. related to thesis paragraph and at end of essay).
- Form them as QUESTIONS more often than EVALUATIONS.
- Offer SUBSTANTIVE END COMMENTS to help the writer consider the essay in its entirety instead of resorting to a “fix what was marked,” piecemeal approach to revision.
- Strive for a POSITIVE/NEGATIVE BALANCE in tone and phrasing of comments.

Less is More

A few comments in the margin combined with a substantial end comment should be enough; you’ll also want to mark some grammatical/diction errors, but should establish a policy with regard to these that does not require you to find and mark every error in a paper (perhaps mark only the first several paragraphs or first page, or require error assessment).

Reader not Policeman

Balancing *negative* with *positive* and asking leading questions rather than stating evaluations will stimulate a teacher/student dialogue conducive to student engagement in his or her writing. For instance when you write, “How does this fit in with your argument?” instead of “irrelevant;” “Do you mean . . .?” instead of “unclear;” “Can you find more support for this idea?” instead of “weak;” you’ve put the ball in the student’s court and conveyed your “criticisms” in a way that shows a concern for the student’s ideas.

NOTE: If you’re worried about having enough comments to “justify” a grade, consider using a rubric that assigns point values to various aspects of the writing, allowing you a more holistic approach for your marginal and end comments.