

Providing Effective Written Feedback

Best Practices for Written Feedback

1. Create a Dialogue When Writing Responses:

The dialogue should foster critical thinking and set the stage for “an open-ended transaction with the student rather than [provide] a final pronouncement of merit on the student’s writing.”

Ask questions: “You suggest that eliminating redundancies would be a good strategy, but you don’t tie this to long term goals. What are the long term goals?”

Make observations: “I don’t understand how you are relating Goleman’s theories to this situation.”

Pose possibilities: “I agree that people should have concern for their communities, but if my neighbor does destructive things, including harming my loved ones, how would the principle of altruism allow me to deal with my neighbor?”

Ask for clarification: “What do you mean by previous interventions? Which interventions are you referring to in this paragraph?”

Tell the student what you heard: “First you said X, so I thought you would write about Y, but then you brought in Z, so I figured the paper would connect X and Z. When you brought in Q, I was confused.”

2. Point out Successes:

Let students know when something works: “Your second paragraph sets the stage for the arguments that follow.” “You’ve done a good job of organizing your key points.” A word of encouragement may motivate the student to see the value of revisions—something of value can be improved, but something of little value may not be worth the effort to add value.

3. Comment on Organization:

“Because you brought up A, I immediately thought of B as a counter argument. You’ll need to say something about B to balance your argument.”

4. Comment on References:

Communicate the role of references—from the selection of sources to the integration and synthesis of ideas into a coherent whole.

Are the references sufficiently varied and relevant?

Do the references give the student’s writing greater authority?

5. Be Specific:

Comments should be specific enough to guide students as they edit their work, but not so specific that they simply implement all of the instructor’s suggestions.

“A transition would help clarify the relationship here.” instead of “Insert although here.”

6. Refrain from Making Unprofessional Responses:

Avoid scorn, condescension, and flippancy:

“Who would say something like this?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

7. Summarize:

Summarize the gist of the marginal comments. Provide the students with specific directions for revising:

An instructor might recommend that a student consider doing X, Y, and Z to reorganize the paper, develop a particular point more fully and relate it to the other points in the paper, consider the relationship between parts A and B of the paper, and write a section that shows how the two relate, and so on. The terminal comment is a time when the instructor can summarize his or her response to the paper.

8. Construct a Hierarchy:

What is most essential?

What is of concern, but doesn’t fundamentally change or improve the assignment?

For example, faulty organization may make a paper’s meaning difficult to discern and thus be essential. Several comma errors may result in poorly formed sentences, but they will probably be less essential to a reader’s understanding of the paper.

9. Give Students Options:

“If you want to take direction X in revising your paper, then you might consider focusing on Y. However, if you want to take direction O in revising your paper, then you might consider focusing on P.”

10. Write Comments That Model Good Writing:

Make clear and cogent comments.

The substance of the comments should be models of effective communication.

11. Defer Assigning the Grade if Possible:

A grade ends the writing assignment—if possible, defer assigning a numerical or letter grade and provide descriptive and provisional information (acceptable, needs improvement etc.)

12. Comment on Errors:

Surface errors are important because they can be distracting, provide a reason for readers to criticize the writer’s competence, and cause ambiguity in communication. But over focusing on these errors can halt the writing process.

The amount of attention paid to errors should depend upon the stage of the writing process and the context of the assignment.

13. Some Thoughts about Feedback

Is the primary purpose of feedback to identify errors?

- Correcting errors may not have much to do with improving the substance of the writing assignment. Papers that are laden with surface errors generally also have errors in logic, sentence structure, and organization.
- Pointing out too many errors may discourage the student or give the impression that what really matters in writing is making no errors (discourages experimentation) or that correcting surface errors is all that matters.
- Students may benefit from having a peer editor read their work for errors.

Is the primary purpose of feedback to justify a grade?

- The grade is the terminal point in the writing process.
- The comments an instructor makes to justify a grade are evidence for the grade, not feedback for revision. The purpose of the writing process has shifted from meeting the goals of an assignment to revising for a specific grade.

References:

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Walvoord, B.E. & Anderson, V. J., (1998). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.