Motivating Students to Revise Through Effective Response

Some General Time-Saving Principles for Commenting on Student Writing

- Comment on late drafts rather than the final product (or permit students to rewrite).
- Make limited comments that direct students toward revisions, focusing on higher-order concerns.
- Avoid marking errors (or point out no more than 3 error patterns).
- Use a model of a good essay to discuss what constitutes an A-level paper, & discuss typical problems found in weaker papers.
- Write & distribute a "class response" that addresses features of A, B, & C-level papers.
- When time is limited, use an analytic scale, a scoring guide, or a criteria sheet instead of making comments.
- Put minimal comments on finished products that won’t be revised.

This handout is adapted from John Bean, Engaging Ideas (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996).

Higher Order Concerns: Identifying Priorities

Does the draft follow the assignment?
If the student hasn't followed the assignment, tell her to read it over. Return the draft unmarked and ungraded.

Is there a thesis that addresses an appropriate problem or question?
Provide comments on thesis and focus.
E.g.—I can't find a thesis here. What problem or question are you addressing?
—Your thesis gets clear at the end. In the revision, move it into the introduction.
—Could you give the reader (me!) a preview of your argument and how you're going to develop it?

If the paper has a thesis, what's the quality of the argument?
What are the strengths and weaknesses of ideas? Notice the logic of the argument. How is the argument appropriate to the discipline? How complex and developed are ideas. How relevant and sufficient is the use of evidence? How does the argument address opposing views?
E.g.—Interesting idea!
—Nice comparison of X to Y here.
—I hadn't thought of this point. Good!
—Why overlook what H says about this?
—I can't see how you came to this conclusion; give more explanation. An example?
—Here, you're moving from summary to analysis. Do the same in paragraph 3, p. 6.
—You need to anticipate the opposition here.
—What's your evidence for this assertion?

Is the draft effectively organized on the macro level?
Can the draft be outlined? What should be added or eliminated? What should be shifted around? Are there transitions between paragraphs and sections? How do details relate to points? How do the title and intro preview the purpose and structure of the paper?
E.g.—How does this part fit?
—The paragraph does a fine job of recapping and moving on to your next question!
—This sentence confused me. Where's it going?
—Now I know where you got your title. You really led up to it well.
—What's the point of this section?
—Your intro made me expect to read about X next, but this section is about Y.

Is the draft organized effectively on the micro level?
Notice how coherent paragraphs are, and how they are developed.
E.g.—Why so many short paragraphs?
—This paragraph wanders. What's its point?
—You have four important points here. Break into separate paragraphs and develop each?
—These sentences don’t link to each other as the ones in the previous paragraph.
—Many details, but no point! Topic sentence?
—Strong example of classification and division!
—Are you implying cause/effect here? Clarify.
—This paragraph at once defines your most important concept and makes a successful transition to its applications.
A Procedure for Responding to a Paper

The paper itself:

1. Read the whole paper quickly & check or underline parts that catch your attention.

2. Go through the draft again. If the essay lacks focus or a thesis statement and a plan for supporting its development, address that issue first, and don’t over-comment on paragraphs or sentence structure.

3. Whenever possible, identify strong points & praise them.

4. Praise good titles, subheadings, thesis statements, transitions, and so forth.

5. Use marginal comments to indicate where organization becomes confusing.

6. Note sentence-level problems that cause genuine unclarity with marginal comments, e.g. “tangled sentence,” or “This passage is garbled.”

7. Identify inappropriate or inaccurate use of key words, and compliment where the writer shows good command of terms or concepts.

8. Resist the urge to circle every stylistic problem, misspelling or punctuation error.

The end comment:

Provide a comment at the end of the paper that follows this formula: strengths—major problems—recommendations.

E.g. Fine draft, Sandy. Your problem and thesis are not developed yet, but you present some very interesting ideas. I especially liked the section on innovative treatments. You lost me in a number of places, however. For the next draft:

—Rewrite the introduction so you more clearly identify the problem you’re discussing.

—Work on organization. I eventually found your thesis, but many of your paragraphs aren’t clearly linked to it. As I noted in margins, you need to develop some of your ideas.

—Rethink your summary of Kane’s article. I think you misread her argument, especially in paragraph 2, p. 3.

Lower Order Concerns: Style and Grammar

Style involves rhetorical choices—matters of effectiveness and grace rather than right or wrong. E.g. wordiness, choppiness, excessive use of passive voice, expletives (It is... There are...), ambiguous pronoun reference (This proves that...). Identify 2 or 3 instances of stylistic choices that bother you, and ask for revisions.

E.g. Ching, on p. 2 paragraph 4, you say “There are four points I want discuss in relation to this case study.” Here’s an improvement: “I want to discuss four causes of prenatal problems.” Please find other place where you begin a sentence with “it is” or “there are” and revise. Do you also see how more specific language helps?

Grammar involves errors that are rule-based. E.g. correct use of their, there, they’re; it/it’s; spelling; punctuation, subject/verb agreement, pronoun/antecedent. Help students find error patterns—maybe even line-edit a paragraph—but require them to edit thoroughly.

E.g. Stuart, you have many grammatical errors here, but I see three types that you repeat often: 1. apostrophes with plurals rather than possessives; 2. “of” instead of “have” with conditional verbs such as “could” or “would”; 3. incorrect past perfect (e.g. “have went”) instead of (“have gone”). Make corrections for a better grade.

A Sample Criteria Sheet: Save Time and Clarify Expectations

Identify no more than 5 to 8 criteria, and attach the criteria sheet to the draft. Indicate “S”= strong, “OK,” “W”= weak, or “NC”= no credit, or assign point values. You can combine this sheet with your end comments:

1. You do what the assignment asks. _________

2. You state a thesis/problem/question and show how you will organize your discussion. _________

3. You use key terms and concepts accurately. _________

4. You cite, critique, and document your sources appropriately. _________

5. You defend your own ideas and explain how you have arrived at them. _________

6. You address other views, explaining their strengths and weaknesses. _________

7. You provide a convincing conclusion or recommendation. _________

8. You edit for style and correct grammar. _________