

# Revision-Oriented Feedback

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First, understand that your feedback is an important part of a dialog that you're having with your student. Together, you are working towards a satisfactory final draft. Rather than point out every mistake, we should seek to facilitate improvement, while doing so in a manner that's both manageable and effective.

When asked for responses to teacher's comments, students usually express confusion. Negative comments, no matter how well-intentioned, rarely lead to attempts at better revision. Make clear, legible comments that are focused on producing a better draft. Make sure to be specific and articulate. **Tell students exactly what they need to know in order to improve the paper. Gaps in logic, gaps in structure...**

When writing the assignment handout: think carefully about what, specifically, you want to grade (your assignment outcomes); make sure you communicate your outcomes; and focus mainly on those components when grading. (So... if you did not indicate that you're grading for grammar and mechanics, you may want to make a comment or two somewhere, or focus on one paragraph in particular where a student repeated the same errors, but don't spend a significant amount of time circling poor punctuation if you're not prepared to take the instruction any further or provide the student with the necessary resource/s they need to improve their punctuation.)

Make comments that help make students better editors of their own work.

As well, giving a student prepared handouts for Grammar/Mechanics issues (or photocopies or chapter suggestions from a Grammar/Mechanics handbook) will help save you time before you sit down with your student during your office hour, or help the save the time of a Writing Center tutor (which you should also lean on for a resource).

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## **Notes on Giving Feedback**

Making effective comments requires a plan and consistent philosophy. We propose the following hierarchy: higher order concerns, lower order concerns, and final comments.

### **Higher Order Concerns:**

Here, we are concerned with the quality of ideas, organization, development, and clarity of the paper. Here are five questions the grader should have in mind in order to address these issues.

- 1) *Does the draft follow the assignment?*
- 2) *Does the writer have a thesis that addresses an appropriate problem or question?*

Many students have difficulties coming up with a thesis. Other students may have a thesis, but it is unclear, buried, or addressed late in the essay. This happens when the student develops a thesis in the course of writing.

- 3) *If the draft has a thesis, what is the quality of the argument?*

With this question, we are concerned about the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas in the paper.

4) *Is the draft effectively organized at the macro level?*

This can be a challenge to students. The final product is usually quite different than the first draft, even with professional writers, and students usually require more guidance in this area. We break this question into smaller questions. **Can the paper be outlined** or tree diagrammed? What needs to be added or removed? Does the paper need to be reorganized? Are there adequate transitions? Here are some sample comments:

- a) How does this part fit?
- b) You lost me in that last sentence.
- c) What's the point of this section?
- d) How does the previous paragraph relate to this?
- e) Your introduction made me expect X, but this is about Y.
- f) You're bouncing all over; I need a road map.

5) *Is the draft organized effectively at the micro level?*

This questions deals with the organization of each paragraph. Tell-tale signs of problems here are short, choppy paragraphs, or for the other extreme, long paragraphs with a wandering focus. The question to ask here is whether the paragraphs are unified and coherent.

**Lower Order Concerns:**

These issues involve **grammatical errors, misspellings, punctuation mistakes, and awkwardness in style**. This is the cause of major annoyance among professors, and it frequently distracts them from the ideas in the paper. **We discourage line-editing- marking every mistake in the paper. This tends to shift the focus away from the ideas in the paper and does not seem to improve student writing.**

*When a student reads aloud his draft, he or she frequently corrects his mistakes, sometimes not even realizing the difference between what he wrote and what he said. Requiring a student to read aloud their draft will make them better editors. Other studies have shown that when students write about a familiar topic, something autobiographical for example, they write according to proper academic standards. But as the topics become more complicated and less familiar, their writing skills deteriorate. This study suggests that their mistakes are due to an incomplete understanding of the material they are expected to write about. To counter this phenomenon, teachers can employ scaffolding methods so that students are given a chance to build up their knowledge of material. This study also gives another justification of putting more focus on the ideas presented in the paper than on grammatical issues in the paper, and how a student can improve the explanation of their ideas. A better understanding of the material will reduce grammatical mistakes.*

With the above studies in mind, we propose a method aimed at putting the responsibility of editing on the student.

- 1) If the paper is riddled with grammatical errors so that it cannot be evaluated, withhold a grade or give a lowered grade with the comment that it won't be graded until the student corrects them. If the student requires help, mark the lines with a mistake by an "X" on the side of the paper.
- 2) If a mistake is being repeated, point it out. Even if you do not explain the rule, the student knows what to look for. A comment can look like this:
  - a) You have lots of sentence errors here, but many of them are of two types: (1) apostrophe errors- you tend to use apostrophes with plurals rather than possessives; (2) comma splices (remember those from English class?)

- 3) You may decide to line-edit one or two paragraphs, and have the student do the rest. Make sure to be clear when an edit is for stylistic reasons or for grammatical reasons.

*There are issues besides grammar that fall under the category of lower order concerns. Stylistic issues differ from grammar issues, in that grammar errors are in violation of standard edited English. Issues like wordiness, choppiness, use of the passive voice are not grammatical issues, but stylistic. How these issues are dealt with between disciplines can vary greatly. In some disciplines, the use of "I" is acceptable, while other disciplines frown upon the practice. It helps students when these distinctions are made clearly. We suggest creating a Top Three list of pet peeves you have and make them known to students.*

### **Final Comments:**

Many professors use final comments to justify the final grade of the paper. This tends to put the focus on the weaknesses of the paper. **The purpose of the comments should be to encourage improvement.** We recommend using a strengths/major problems approach: sum up the strengths, identify the problems that require attention, and make a few specific suggestions. Here is a sample comment:

When this essay is good, it is very, very good. I like very much your discussion of Diem's leadership and the rise of dissent in Vietnam. Your consideration of our fears of not being taken seriously by Diem is also strong. In these discussions, you set your ideas clearly and with strong evidence.

However there are other hills and valleys here as well. You need to focus the reader on your primary concerns in an introduction. You need to expand your consideration of the military and bring in more evidence toward the end. For your revision, pay particular attention to my marginal comments, where I note the places that need more expansion and development.