

Responding to Student Writing – A Sample Commenting Protocol

Ideally, instructor comments should provide directive, thorough, but also focused advice to students regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their essays, and the means to improve them. The following protocol offers one approach to achieving these goals. It takes a “less is more” approach by identifying a few key elements (strengths and weaknesses) in an essay and structuring a head comment and marginal comment to highlight only those features. This approach is consistent with research that suggests students often become confused and overwhelmed when well-intentioned instructors try to “cover” everything, and also when they don’t fully explain why something is effective or correct or not or model ways of improving.

1. Read the essay through once, without marking it. It can be helpful to take a few notes while you read.
2. After you’ve done this, identify the two or three most important “higher order” things the student needs to work on within the parameters of the learning objectives of this particular assignment.

[*Note:* “higher order” concerns may include aspects of course content, conceptual understanding, argument, complexity, analysis, use of evidence, development of ideas, organization, understanding of audience, and sometimes diction and tone.]

3. Construct a head comment that does the following: 1) offers a brief but specific summation of general strengths, and 2) explains the two or three things to work on in a way that frames your remarks in terms of techniques and strategies to improve for subsequent drafts and assignments (e.g., “you’ve done an excellent job of..., but two central things to continue to work on are...”). This comment will probably be fairly detailed in presenting and discussing these two or three focus areas. It may be helpful to think of this head comment as a kind of “roadmap” to the marginal comments you will insert.
4. Finally, go back through the paper and, writing in full sentences, insert selective marginal comments and/or praise to reinforce and exemplify your head comment (e.g., “This point is unclear because...” or “You do a nice job here of...”). Give explanation and/or examples when you note both areas to improve and areas of strength.

It’s fine if the marginal comments reiterate points made in the head comment; indeed, they might specifically reference a moment in the head comment as a way of reinforcing it (“As I noted in my opening comment, here is a place where...”). Since your head comment will be fairly detailed, you will probably need relatively fewer marginal comments to highlight the relevant examples.

5. If you wish, additionally, to comment on “lower order” concerns (e.g., style, grammar, and/or punctuation), please focus on just one or two patterns encountered throughout the essay, explain these in a separate paragraph of your head comment, and mark up only a single representative paragraph in the essay to model corrections.