

Formulating Written Comments in Response to Students' Writing

The written comments you make on a student's essay will often be the basis of your relationship with that student. It is important that you consider this relationship as you comment and grade and that your responses to students' writing be part of a respectful conversation. We expect students to respect our knowledge of the subject and our good intentions toward them; in return, we must respect their attempts to fulfill our expectations and to move forward in their learning.

--*St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*

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Decide Whether You Are Offering Formative or Summative Assessment

Formative assessment: Ongoing and pro-active feedback concerning strengths and weaknesses. Allows changes to be made on subsequent drafts and acknowledges writing and learning as a process.

Summative assessment: Fixed and retroactive evaluation that communicates final assessment and evaluates writing once it is completed. May judge knowledge of material or awareness of (and accountability to) an audience.

Consider that some assignments may be best suited to more formative, and others to more summative, assessments. It may not be necessary to give summative assessment on *every assignment*. In either assessment situation, you should always ask yourself, "What kind of response from me will help this student learn most effectively?" The form of assessment you have to give, in concert with the goals of the course and what you know of the individual student's prior work or learning challenges, will help you decide how best to formulate your comments.

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Distinguish Between Global and Local Concerns

As you evaluate students' written work, it is helpful to recognize that our responses as instructors generally fall into two broad categories—and that we may value these categories differently:

Global concerns: Higher order features—these center at the level of intellectual engagement with the topic or assignment and include the paper's ideas, content, and structure.

Local concerns: Lower order features—these center on the technical aspects of the written product, generally focusing on the sentence or word level of the paper.

If you want to encourage students' critical thinking in and through your writing assignments, be sure that your responses to their writing address and assign value to the global concerns of their written work. This does not mean you need to ignore the local concerns, but it does mean your students should recognize that, in your class, they must attend to the global concerns as much as (and before) the local ones.

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Aim to Guide and Motivate Students, But Don't Overwhelm!

A special issue of the *Harvard Writing Project Bulletin* on "Responding to Student Writing" urges college teachers to remember:

To give student writers appropriate direction, it's necessary to find a middle ground where students have enough comments to guide and motivate them, but not so many that they feel programmed and pushed around. In this middle ground, complaints ideally give way to gratitude: "My instructor helped me figure out what I wanted to say."

With this in mind the *HWP Bulletin* suggests:

1. Try to understand and appreciate what the student was attempting to do.
2. Stay in touch with what's good about a particular piece of writing.
3. Limit the number of critical points to three or four.

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Two Formulas for End Comments on Student Papers

Formative assessment

1. **Reflection:** a statement that describes the content of the paper
2. **Praise** /identification of key strengths
3. **Recommendations for improvement:** 2-4 ways the student could approach revision of this work

Summative assessment

1. **Reflection:** a statement that describes the content of the paper
2. **Praise** /identification of key strengths
3. **Future challenges:** 2-4 things to concentrate on for the next assignment

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Another Formula for End Comments on Student Papers

(Source: *Harvard Writing Project Bulletin*, "Responding to Student Writing" Special Issue)

1. Salutation ("Dear So-and-So")
2. Restatement of the paper's main point—this allows the student to see whether an audience member "got" what s/he attempted to do in the paper

3. Discussion of the paper's strengths
4. Discussion of the paper's weaknesses, focusing on the large problems first—work to limit these to 3-4; don't overwhelm or demoralize
5. Concluding remarks
6. Closing and signature ("Sincerely, So-and-So")—consider how this method of opening and closing emphasizes the personhood of both student and instructor.

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Best Practices for Marginal Comments

"Though there is much debate these days about the most effective methods of responding to student writing, there is a clear consensus about the least effective ways to handle student papers. Far too much of what teachers do with student writing is picky, arbitrary, unclear, or generally unhelpful."

—Edward M. White (2007)

To promote student writing as an act of communication, and not simply an exercise in meeting instructor expectations, read each essay as a *reader* first, and as a grader last.

Students value thoughtful feedback that engages them in dialogue with a reader making an effort to understand what they have to say.

Some of the most useful forms of commenting include (i) questions stimulating further thought, (ii) brief summaries of what the reader got out of the paper, and (iii) descriptions of difficulties the reader encountered.

Postpone writing marginal comments until you've read the essay and written your end comment. Then, insert selective marginal comments, questions, and praise to reinforce the end comment.

If you are commenting on style, grammar, or punctuation in your end comment, mark up only a single representative paragraph as an example of patterns found throughout the essay.

Reactive commenting and line editing result in fragmented and confusing feedback.