

# Giving Feedback on Student Writing

## Overview

There are many ways to give feedback on student writing. The best approach for any particular instructor depends on your purpose for giving the feedback, the amount of time available to you, and your preferred communication style. For example, you could give your students feedback in writing, in person, or through video recordings. Keep in mind that students often have deep psychological investments in their written work even when we as instructors perceive them to have put little effort into producing it, and that providing clear feedback is actually an extremely demanding writing task: students often find it difficult to understand what their instructors' comments mean, even when those comments seem quite straightforward to the instructors themselves.

This handout offers an overview of some widely shared ideas about giving good feedback, followed by descriptions of a variety of possible ways to put those ideas into practice.

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## General Considerations

While there are many ways to offer useful feedback to your students, research shows that in order for assessment to be effective, and to help students develop the skill of self-evaluation, the criteria for success must be: fair, consistent, public, clear, and responsible. It will be helpful to take the following concerns into account, whatever feedback methods you choose.

**Instructional Purpose: Formative vs. Summative Feedback:** Formative feedback is intended to help students revise their work, typically before it's graded (or for a lower-stakes portion of a grade), while summative feedback evaluates the quality of a "finished" product. Thus, formative feedback usually includes recommendations for revision and questions that might help students rethink weaker elements in their current assignments, along with comments about things that are currently working well that a student might build on before they turn in a "final" version.

Summative feedback, too, should address the strengths and weaknesses in a paper, but they typically explain the connection between those strengths and weaknesses and the grade the paper has received. They generally do not include advice about how the student might revise this specific paper, though they might include advice about how the student might improve his or her work in the future based on their work in the current assignment.

**Higher Order vs. Lower Order Concerns:** Higher order concerns are typically conceptual and structural. Do the ideas in the paper make sense? Are claims supported with evidence? Do the paragraphs follow a logical order? Lower order concerns have less to do with meaning than with “correctness,” i.e., grammar, style, and formatting.

While both higher order and lower order concerns are important, instructors can inadvertently send contradictory messages when they try to address both at the same time. For example, questions and comments that suggest that a paragraph needs to be entirely rethought and rewritten conflict with sentence-level markups that suggest that the sentences already present in the paragraphs will remain where they are once they are cleaned up.

Lower order concerns may require special treatment for writers who use English as their second language (L2 writers.) For more information on responding to lower order concerns in the work of L2 writers, see the **“Providing Grades and Feedback to Multilingual Writers”** resource and its affiliated supplements.

**Drawing Connections Between the “Big Picture” and the Details:** One common approach to commenting on student work is to offer praise, criticism, and questions in the margins of a paper, and then to provide a more general overview of what the paper does well and what it does poorly in a head note or end note. Ideally, this method should allow students to understand not only what the paper’s strengths and weaknesses are, but also where specific examples of these occur in the text.

However, it can be surprisingly difficult for students to understand the connections between overview notes and marginal comments unless an instructor spells those connections out explicitly. For example, an instructor might ask questions in the margins that indicate the need for evidence to support key claims, and might explain in his or her overview note that the paper’s greatest weakness is its failure to provide evidence. Yet, students who are less experienced in thinking about papers in terms of evidence and claims will not necessarily understand that marginal questions such as “Why do you think so?” indicate places where evidence needs to be provided. It can be extremely helpful for an instructor to include a sentence in his or her end comment that says something like, “In my marginal comments, I’ve tried to show you where your claims lacked sufficient evidence to support them by asking why you think the things you say are true.”

**Tone:** Students like to feel that their instructors are interested in what they say and how they say it. Cultivating a conversational tone and indicating that you understand and appreciate what the student attempted to accomplish—whether or not the student actually achieved his or her goals—can go a long way toward helping the student accept your feedback rather than responding defensively.

**Implementation:** There are many ways of offering students feedback that address all of the concerns above. A few possibilities that might suit instructors with a variety of different teaching styles are described below.

### **Responding to Student Self-Disclosure of Trauma**

Often in personal writing (including journals, field notes, narrative essays, short stories, poems, etc.) students reveal traumatic events that they have lived or witnessed, and responding to writing of this kind calls for special care. You may be facing expectations from the student that differ from your intentions, so it’s important to prepare students ahead of time about your expectations for the assignment as well as to respond thoughtfully in the moment. For example, in some contexts (i.e.

creative writing classes or projects explicitly asking students to reflect on personal experience), students get the impression that disclosing traumatic events is a route to more appreciation of their work, or even higher grades. For this reason, it's crucial that you set clear guidelines about how you will assess their writing from the beginning, even including rubrics if you can.

Let them know in no uncertain terms what you prioritize. When you do receive writing about traumatic events, you have two responsibilities:

1. Recognize and acknowledge your students as complex human beings who are demonstrating trust in you by sharing the experience, and
2. Respond to the work through the lens of the guidelines you have laid out for the writing itself.

You can do this by using "I" statements thoughtfully, letting the student know how their work affects you and that you appreciate their trust in you, and by explicitly framing your writing-based feedback as growing out of a desire to help them tell the story they want told well, and in a manner appropriate to the assignment.

It's especially important that you avoid the impulse to take over their work. That is, it's not your job to shape their narrative into the story you would want told—it's your job to help them do their best work in their (assignment-appropriate) way. One way to avoid this kind of colonizing is to pose a question or two that helps them think about the connection between the disclosure and the assignment.

If what you read causes you to fear for the safety or well-being of your student or others, you can find advice on how to proceed at Michigan's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) <https://caps.umich.edu> If a student discloses trauma involving sexual assault, partner violence, stalking, or sexual harassment, you might offer to put them in touch with Michigan's Sexual Assault and Prevention Awareness Center (SAPAC) <https://sapac.umich.edu/>, or at least guide them to the site.

## Strategies for the Classroom

### Strategy #1: End Notes (or Head Notes) and Marginal Comments

As described above, one very common approach to commenting on student papers is to combine end notes that provide a "big picture" perspective with marginal comments that illustrate specific instances of the strengths and weaknesses described in the end notes. You might also consider putting your overview note first (using head notes instead of end notes) to provide the student with a roadmap for interpreting what follows. If your students have submitted hard copies, you can write head notes on a separate page and staple it to the front of the paper. If you have collected electronic copies, you can type your head notes directly above the beginning of the student's paper.

This approach is likely to be most effective if:

1. connections between end notes and marginal comments are made explicit;
2. the instructor prioritizes problems within the paper and helps the student to focus by addressing only the most important two or three higher order issues and one or two lower order issues in the end note, even when a larger number of problems is present. (**Providing Grades and Feedback to Multilingual Writers** and its affiliated supplements can help you determine how to classify and prioritize the lower order issues present in the work of L2

writers.)

3. priorities for revision or evaluation are made explicit; i.e., “The most important thing you need to work on in your revision is...;” and
4. only a few samples of key lower order problems are corrected and explained—preferably those that represent patterns of error that occur throughout the paper; correcting each individual error can become visually overwhelming and does not allow the student to practice making further corrections him or herself.
  - a. Note that this strategy may not work for certain L2 writers. L2 writers at certain stages of the language acquisition process may genuinely be unable to recognize certain errors in their use of the language. If this is the case, it would be helpful to call attention to each instance of one or two particular errors.
  - b. **“Providing Grades and Feedback for Multilingual Writers”** and its affiliated supplements offers guidance in determining whether and how to call attention to lower order concerns in the work of L2 writers.

### Strategy #2: Rubrics

A rubric serves two purposes in responding to student writing: it explicitly communicates performance expectations and criteria for success to your students as well as providing everyone with a shared language for measuring success on a given assignment. Well-developed rubrics allow you to avoid writing out the same comments over and over on multiple students’ work, while allowing you to mark each students’ success in relationship to the assignment criteria quickly and then tailor any additional written comments to individual needs.

There are two basic types of rubric: analytic and holistic. An analytic rubric divides student work into component parts—e.g., tasks that make up the whole, or individual criteria such as ideas, organization, voice, mechanics, etc.—with descriptions of what high-, mid-, and low-level quality work looks like for each component (see **“Sample Analytic Rubric”** supplement). This type of rubric often takes the form of a table, with the tasks/criterion being judged along the left column, and assessment numbers or language along the top row.

A holistic rubric provides guidelines for various levels of achievement in the work *overall*, rather than by categories, tasks, or component parts (see **“Sample Holistic Rubric”** supplement). Both kinds of rubrics can help you save time while improving the consistency and clarity of your feedback. A holistic rubric is often structured as a commenting form with sentence- or paragraph-length descriptions of different levels of competencies, rather than a table. Detailed advice for creating and implementing rubrics of both kinds is available in **Supplement 1: “Designing and Using Rubrics.”**

### Strategy #3: Commenting Forms

Using a form that sorts your comments into explicit categories such as “what you are doing well” and “what needs work,” with subcategories such as “higher order concerns” and “sentence-level concerns” can help ensure that both you and your students take the time to think not only about the weaknesses in their writing, but also its strengths. It can also simplify your commenting process by giving you a consistent list of concerns to pay attention to and write about. A sample of one such form is available in **Supplement 2, “Feedback Form.”**

#### Strategy #4: Face-to-Face Conversation

Talking to students about their papers in person can be a remarkably efficient way to convey your thoughts about their work and be sure they understand what you've said, because you can speak more quickly than you can write, and because it provides your students with an immediate opportunity to ask you questions about your feedback, reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation. Spending 15-30 minutes with each of your students to give them feedback on their papers can actually take you less time than writing out formal comments on those papers—provided that you are able to spend enough time in your office (or on Google Hangout, FaceTime, or Skype) to do this within what counts for you as a reasonable work week.

#### Strategy #5: Screencasting

If you like the idea of speaking to your students rather than writing to them but are unable to meet with each of them in person, you might try conveying your comments via screencasts. Screencasts allow an instructor to “talk through” a paper with a student by creating a video that scrolls through the student’s paper online while recording the instructor’s audio comments about the paper. To see how this works, you can view this sample screencast. Like face-to-face meetings, screencasts let you speak to your students directly, which allows for greater speed in communicating ideas and clearer transmission of tone of voice, though they lack the advantage of allowing the student an immediate opportunity to ask questions. Screencasts are also very useful when responding to new media projects, like a website or electronic portfolio, because they can capture your navigation between pages and other interactions with the medium.

#### Strategy #6: Helping Students Take a More Active Role in the Conversation

Students may take a more active role and become more interested in carrying on a conversation with you when you reply to questions they themselves ask. Whether you reply to your students’ work on paper, electronically, in person, or via video, you can invite them to insert questions and comments in their drafts using the “track changes” function in Word or the “comment” or “note” tools in pdf readers. (The same goal can be achieved by inviting students to hand write comments in the margins of hard copies of their work, or by requiring them to submit cover letters along with their papers.) You can then respond directly to their thoughts in addition to commenting on issues they don’t raise themselves. A PowerPoint presentation with findings from recent research on this approach is available online in “Marginal Comments: Helping Students Take a More Active Role in Getting Feedback on Their Writing,” and a sample of a student paper with inserted comments and reviewer feedback can be found in **Supplement 3: “Sample of a Student Paper with Inserted Comments.”**

Be mindful of the fact that many L2 writers who are asked to engage in this process may focus largely or exclusively on questions or comments about their use of language. For this reason, it might be a good idea to specify that students should focus on one type of questions or comments. If the L2 writers in your class are very concerned about language-use issues, you may want to offer them the option of submitting a “language-use” draft and commentary after content revisions have been made. This “language-use” draft and commentary can focus exclusively on students’ questions and concerns about language use.

## Further Reading

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