

Scenario 1:

You teach a one-hour tutorial for a second-year course with weekly short writing assignments asking students to support an opinion with evidence. Your students have complained frequently all term about your “unfair” and “harsh” grading. You are frustrated because you have been consistent in giving low scores for using weak evidence, yet students continue to do it and then blame you for their poor mark!

What is the problem in this situation?

- students have no evidence of what a good paper would look like.
- because students have an emotional attachment to their idea, sometimes it's difficult for them to see the critique being towards the structure rather than the idea

What can be done by you, the TA or TM, to improve it?

- Give a sample paper – this is what good evidence looks like
- need to communicate expectations before the assignment – can be done in tutorials if possible.
- give feedback individually and as a summary (here's the three things I'd like everyone to improve upon next time, here's an example of how to do it)
- consider developing your own concrete learning objectives

Scenario 2:

You teach a one-hour tutorial for a second-year course that has four 2-page essay assignments. First the first two essays, you meticulously correct every grammar mistake and write detailed comments about logic, structure and content. When marking the third assignment, you notice a drop in the quality of writing—it looks like many students haven't even tried! When you ask, students say things like they're just bad writers or they fixed all the spelling errors for the second essay but it didn't make a difference. You don't understand, why are the students so discouraged despite the huge effort you're making to help them become better writers?

What is the problem in this situation?

- miscommunication, perhaps, that it's about structure vs content?
- the TA may be over-marking, and this can be discouraging/demotivating to students

What can be done by you, the TA or TM, to improve it?

- clarification and emphasis of what the difference is between structure and content – discussion if possible.
- from the beginning, tell them that it is normal and good to see lots of comments on marked essays – and why we do this (goals of comments,
- humanize it – tell them that you yourself get lots of comments back on your own work now, and it's meant to be helpful rather than a harsh criticism
- TA should choose which are the types of things (and the number of things) that are worth criticizing.
- could decide, and be clear to students about, to mark superficial comments only in one paragraph (rather than the whole paper)
- underline grammar/spelling for a few paragraphs rather than correct for the whole paper

Scenario 3:

You teach a one-hour tutorial for a second-year course that has three 2-page essay assignments and a similar essay question on the final exam. Over the term, the graded essays are returned at the end of tutorial and you always tell students to be sure to read the comments and not just the score—the comments are what can help them become better writers. Despite this, many students seem to repeat the same mistakes on every essay, even the most basic ones. You don't understand—are they not reading the comments? Don't they realize how useful they are, especially for the final exam??

What is the problem in this situation?

- comments may not be in an easily-found place, or may be a confusing shorthand, or illegible

What can be done by you, the TA or TM, to improve it?

- invite them to come and look at the mark with you
- model that you value the feedback, to show that you want them to look at the feedback “this feedback is meant to be useful, and we require you to use it”
- require that they hand in their previous essay again, asking them to correct previous types of mistakes in their current paper
- follow up with the class
- also talk about what's right, and how they are improving!! (it never feels like you're improving, since you only ever see marks lost!)

In general, modeling the behaviour you expect and the way you act with respect to this type of thing, is very very educationally valuable.