

Guidelines for Giving Effective Feedback on Students' Writing

The most effective way to learn and improve a skill such as writing is to 1) practice and 2) receive timely and targeted feedback. As a TA or TM, you provide the vital feedback students need to improve their writing skills (and often their understanding of course concepts).

There are ways to be effective and efficient when writing comments, and ways to be highly ineffective. Reflect back on your own writing experience and try to recall a time when you received constructive feedback and a time when you found feedback frustrating or unhelpful. What was the difference?

Below are some guidelines and literature resources to help you improve efficiency and effectiveness when responding to your students' writing. These tips focus on the process of writing comments on students' writing (whether on rough drafts or final drafts), rather than on the process of grading.

Important: These are general guidelines, meant to help focus and improve your feedback skills outside of a particular course or discipline context; courses you TA or TM for will vary in the control you have over the structure, timing, grading, etc. of assignments. Incorporate best practices as you can.

Before the students write

Make Your Expectations Exceedingly Clear in Writing

- Before the first writing assignment, provide for your students in writing and review with students your specific expectations for formatting, citations, and writing style. For all assignments, review any learning goals connected to the assignment, course, etc.
- For each new type of writing (short answer, essay, etc.), have students briefly evaluate examples of “good” and “poor” writing. You can do this as a class or have them work in pairs, etc. Ask questions that get students to evaluate the writing rather than tell them what is right or wrong: E.g., “Which sentence is more clear and why?” or “Which is more informative and why?”

Develop and communicate clear grading criteria for each assignment.

- This will be a consensus from the weekly prep meetings and your own expectations; be sure to explain your expectations to students.

Think about how you will write comments that give students a clear idea of whether they have or have not achieved the course's learning objectives (and with what degree of success).

- Students should be able to see a clear connection between 1) your written comments on their assignment, 2) your grading criteria, and 3) the relevant learning objectives for the tutorial/lab/course. Try to remind yourself of the grading criteria, the learning objectives, and which aspects of the writing you want to focus on before you start reading and commenting.

When writing comments on assignments

The first time you read through an assignment, try to refrain from writing comments.

- This can save time because you will avoid proof-reading edits and over-hasty judgments, which will allow you to focus your feedback on the most important strengths and weaknesses of the writing.

Avoid writing too much #1: Distinguish "higher-order" from "lower-order" issues and resist the temptation to proofread.

- Writing too many comments is exhaustive for you and overwhelms the students, which can cause them to miss your or de-prioritize your more important comments about concepts, logic, etc.
- Use your comments on a student's paper to highlight things the paper accomplishes well and a few *major* things that would *most* improve the paper.

- Correct at most 3–5 mechanical errors in a short assignment and 10 in an essay (general rule of thumb). You can help a student more by asking them to show you their corrections to a few errors rather than you fixing every error for them.

Avoid writing too much #2: Limit your comments to formative feedback.

- There are two types of comments: summative and formative. **Summative** comments are the more traditional and are used to explain an instructor’s judgment of a student’s performance. **Formative** comments are different because they give the student feedback in an ongoing process of learning and skill building. For example, telling a student both what to keep because it is (at least relatively) well done and what requires revision. Formative comments let the student know clearly how to revise and why.

Avoid writing too much #3: Establish editing short-hand for your students

- You can provide your students with a legend of your typical comments and the shorthand or abbreviations you use to indicate them, such as a ‘¶’ to indicate a new paragraph, etc.

Be specific (see next page for examples).

- Global negative statements tend to negatively affect a students’ self-image (“I’m a bad writer”) and can make your job harder by creating an attitudinal barrier to learning. Instead, you can give diplomatic but firm suggestions for improvement, like “The most strategic improvement you could make is...”.

After you hand back the assignment

Review common errors with the class

- Reviewing common errors, clarifying confusion or modeling what a “good” answer looks like saves you the time writing detailed comments for each student and can show students that they were not alone in making an error.

Review progress with the class

- Remember that all students acquire skills incrementally and that writing well is a difficult skill for anyone to learn. Once in a while over the term you can take a minute or two when handing back an assignment to highlight general progress your students have made.

Ask students to submit this week’s corrected assignment with the following week’s assignment

- This tip is especially useful for courses with multiple similar assignments over the term. You can tell students they will be expected to hand-in the copy of their previous graded assignment and that you expect them not to make the same general errors (formatting, style, etc.). You do not have to spend more time than a quick glance to see if they did avoid the same errors, and this shows students that you value the feedback and teaches them to as well.

Examples and suggestions for common corrections

Rather than "vague"

- "Which research finding are you referring to here?"
- "I don't understand your use of the underlined phrase. Can you rewrite this sentence?"
- "Can you provide specific details to show what you mean here?"

Instead of "confusing," "what?" or "???"

- "I lost the thread of your argument. Why is this information important? How is it related to your argument?"
- "You imply that this point supports your argument, but it actually contradicts your point in para. 3."

Rather than "good"

- "This excellent example moves your argument forward."
- "Wonderful transition that helped clarify the connection between the two studies you are summarizing."
"An apt metaphor that helped me understand your argument about this historical metaphor."

Examples from The Teaching Centre, Washington University in St. Louis ([Link](#))

Additional resources

Online Writing and Feedback Resources from University Teaching Centers:

1. Purdue Online Writing Lab: MANY resources for BOTH teachers and students ([link](#))
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/682/01/>
2. U. of California Berkeley Teaching Guide for Graduate Student Instructors ([link](#))
<http://gsi.berkeley.edu/teachingguide/grading/index.html>
 - UC Berkeley page, "Working with Non-Native English Speakers" ([link](#))
<http://gsi.berkeley.edu/teachingguide/writing/esl-writing.html>
 - UC Berkeley page, "Time Management Suggestions for Grading..." ([link](#))
<http://gsi.berkeley.edu/teachingguide/writing/time.html>
3. Washington University in St. Louis Teaching Centre "Tips for Commenting..."
<http://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/strategies/Pages/commenting-on-writing.aspx>
4. U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Teaching Centre, handouts for every possible situation
<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/>

Great teaching Books (sections on written feedback given):

1. Gross Davis, B. 2009. *Tools for Teaching*. John Wiley & Sons. (Ch. 35, 36 on designing, evaluating written assignments)
2. McKeachie, W. and Svinicki, M. 2006. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers*. Houghton Mifflin
3. Ambrose, S. Bridges M., Lovett, M. and Norman, M. *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. Jossey-Bass (Ch. 5, "What kinds of practice and feedback enhance learning?")

Primary Literature on Effectiveness of Writing Feedback:

Beason, L. 1993. Feedback and revision in Writing Across the Curriculum classes. *Research in the Teaching of English* **27**: 395–422. (analysis of typical feedback given by markers and effect on subsequent revisions by students in several courses with multiple graded writing assignments.) [Link](#)
<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/40171241?uid=3739400&uid=2&uid=3737720&uid=4&sid=21103317004273>

Chandler, J. 2003. The efficacy of various kinds of error feedback for improvement in the accuracy and fluency of L2 student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing* **12**: 267–296 (Data on best practices for correcting grammatical and lexical errors for ESL students) [Link](#)
<http://faculty.uscupstate.edu/dmarlow/718/Error Correction - Chandler.pdf>

Cho, K. and MacArthur, C. 2010. Student revision with peer and expert reviewing. *Learning and Instruction* **20**: 328–338 (data and further reading about effectiveness of peer vs. expert feedback) [Link](#)
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959475209000747>

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Ferris, D. and Roberts, B. 2001. Error feedback in L2 writing classes: How explicit does it need to be? *Journal of Second Language Writing* **10**: 161–184. (A second study of ESL students, found simple underlining or short-hand codes for common error categories similarly effective at improving student accuracy and writing quality over time.) [Link](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S106037430100039X)
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S106037430100039X>

Underwood, J. and Tregidgo, A. Improving student writing through effective feedback: Best practices and recommendations. 2006. *Journal of Teaching Writing* **22**: 73–97. (Detailed review of best practices for giving writing feedback as determined from a separate meta-analysis paper.) [Link](https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/teachingwriting/article/view/1346/1295) <https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/teachingwriting/article/view/1346/1295>