

How can I give students useful feedback on their writing (without spending all my time grading!)?

Most instructors know that effective feedback is essential to the development of students' thinking and writing skills, but responding carefully to student work can often feel overwhelming. That exhaustion can be compounded by frustration when students don't seem to use feedback to improve their writing—or when they simply flip past all the comments on their papers and just look at the grades. The good news is that there are strategies that can help instructors give feedback that is more helpful for students *in less time*. The key is focusing our attention and energy on what is most important in our students' writing. This article draws ideas from research on teaching writing and outlines a new way of thinking about giving feedback that students can use.

What does effective feedback look like?

Principles to guide feedback on student writing

- Receiving too much feedback at once does not help students improve their writing.
- Feedback should focus students' attention where their writing needs the most work.
- Students need feedback throughout the writing process, not just on final drafts.
- Students need guidance to use the feedback they receive.

Putting these principles into action

- **Limit the amount of feedback you provide so that students can use it effectively.** Research shows that student writers become easily overwhelmed by too many comments and have difficulty categorizing and prioritizing them, especially when those comments point to several different kinds of issues in their writing. Students can only attend to so much feedback on any given piece of writing, and when we point out problems with thesis development, use of evidence, sentence style, punctuation, and citation style—all on the same page—they struggle to filter through all that feedback in a helpful way (Stern & Solomon, 2006; Underwood & Tregidgo, 2005). This is particularly true for very inexperienced writers, who can't tell the difference between major and minor concerns. When we give students too much feedback—and feedback that points in multiple directions—they simply cannot process and make use of it all. In order to help focus their attention and make our feedback useful, we need to limit our comments to no more than two to three essential areas of concern that directly relate to the primary objectives of the writing assignment. This means liberating ourselves from the idea that we are the only ones who will ever tell students what they're doing wrong (and, in turn, liberating ourselves from the responsibility to point out all their errors). Essentially, we need to sort the signal from the noise for ourselves first, and then we can do the same for our students. This process begins as soon as we pick up a student's paper.
- **Before you comment, analyze the work as a whole so that you can decide where to focus your feedback.** When we begin marking or commenting on students' writing as soon as we begin reading it, we can easily fall into the role of editor—marking every

error, underlining every point of confusion, and pointing out every poorly rendered phrase. Instead of providing focused commentary to guide their development, we find ourselves simply commenting on every problem or error we notice. While this approach might work for us when we are editing our own work, it is not a useful strategy for giving feedback that helps students learn to write more effectively (Sommers, 1982). The first step in an effective feedback strategy is to read through a student's entire assignment before you make any comments—put the pen down until you have a big-picture view of the work. Use this first read to assess where the most important issues lie so that you can focus your feedback (and students' attention). The questions below can be a useful way of guiding this analysis and helping you determine the level of feedback each student writer needs.

- ***Is the right kind of thinking evident?*** Does the writing thoroughly respond to the task at hand? Does the writing demonstrate effective conceptual thinking and fluency with the content? *If the answer to these questions is no, focus your comments here.* If a student is struggling with the work of the assignment on a conceptual level, this is where your feedback should focus. Marking surface-level errors on these students' papers will actually direct their attention away from the more important conceptual thinking issues that need work (Perrault, 2011). Instead, comments on a paper of this kind should identify places where the student's thinking is well-developed and well-focused, identify places where there is evidence of misguided or poorly developed thinking, and provide two concrete suggestions for how students can improve their conceptual thinking. Your comments should also direct them to identify and commit to one or two key areas of improvement for the next assignment.
- ***Is the organization of ideas clear?*** Is there a connective logic and order to the writing? Are there explicit cues to help readers navigate the paper? *If the answer to these questions is no, focus your comments here.* If a student is struggling to make clear the connections across ideas in their writing, this is where your feedback should focus. Marking surface-level errors on these students' papers will actually direct their attention away from the more important issues of organization that need work. Instead, comments on a paper of this kind should first acknowledge the effectiveness of the thinking demonstrated. Then move to identifying effective set-ups in the introduction or the lack thereof; identifying successful connections between ideas, or lack thereof; describing what the student is doing well in terms of the conceptual thinking the assignment requires; and providing two concrete suggestions for how students can communicate the organization of their ideas more effectively. Your comments should also direct them to identify and commit to one or two key areas of improvement for the next assignment.
- ***Is the written expression effective?*** Does the language communicate effectively given the discipline, situation, audience, etc.? *Only when students are no longer struggling with thinking and organization should we turn our attention to*

commenting on or marking errors in style, grammar, syntax, spelling, and punctuation. Comments on a paper of this kind should first acknowledge the effectiveness of the conceptual and organizational work. Then you are ready to move on to focusing students' attention on errors that interfere with effective communication rather than stylistic choices, noting patterns of errors rather than careless typos. It's important, also, that you mark errors but require students to do the work of correcting them (Haswell, 1983) by directing them to a source that will give them guidance on the areas where they are struggling and having them turn in corrected text at a later date. For papers with many errors throughout, you might carefully mark one paragraph of the paper and ask students to continue the work of correcting the rest of the assignment. Your comments should also direct them to identify and commit to one or two key areas of improvement for the next assignment.

Initially it may seem that this approach will take longer, and you *will* have to invest some time to learn how to assess and respond to students' writing in these new ways. But in the long run, this analytical strategy will actually save you time: when you start with a broad assessment of students' work as a first step, you will find yourself less tempted to comment on every minor error you see. Most importantly, it means that you give less feedback but students can do more with it because you are focusing your attention on what they need and can work with.

- **Provide students with opportunities to practice the kind of writing an assignment requires—and receive feedback from you—before the final draft is due.** Students are most likely to pay careful attention to our feedback when they know they will be able to act on it (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). That means that spending hours writing voluminous comments on graded papers is unlikely to help them. However, having students do significant preparatory work leading up to an assignment allows you to give feedback that helps guide them toward improvements on final drafts. Giving small amounts of focused feedback throughout the work students do as they're preparing an assignment means you don't have to give as much feedback at the end. This feedback is also more useful for students because they are receiving it in smaller, more digestible chunks that they can process. When you grade the final draft, your final comments can be shorter and more focused because they are part of ongoing dialogue with students about their writing.
- **Require students to reflect on the feedback they receive and plan for how they will use it to improve their writing.** Often students experience all the comments we laboriously write on their work as an attempt to justify the grade they received. (And often, it is!) Viewed this way, our feedback is a response to a past event, something that they can no longer change. In contrast, when we use feedback as a way to open a dialogue with students about their writing, we can give them a much more active role in determining how to act on the feedback they receive. It's important to realize, though, that students won't take on this role if we don't give them the structure to do so. So instead of simply giving feedback to accompany a grade and then moving on, require

students to read your feedback throughout the writing process, reflect on it, and plan for how they will use it to guide their approach to upcoming work.

Examples of questions to guide student reflection on feedback

Questions to help assess student understanding of the feedback they received

- Based on the feedback you received, what were the strongest aspects of your (rough or final) draft?
- Based on the feedback you received, what were the weakest aspects of your (rough or final) draft?
- Where did your assessment of your work align with or differ from the feedback you received on your (rough or final) draft?
- Did you receive any feedback on this work that you found confusing or frustrating? Are there places where you need clarification or greater specificity to help you use the feedback you received?

Questions to help students plan to use feedback

- For a rough draft: Based on the feedback you received, where do you plan to focus your attention as you continue to revise toward the final draft of this assignment? What are three things you will do to act on this feedback as you prepare your final draft?
- For a final draft: Based on the feedback you received, where do you plan to focus your attention as you write and revise the next paper? What are three things you will do to act on this feedback as you work on the next assignment?
- For a rough or final draft: Consider the list of writing and revising strategies below. You may have begun using some of these already in your work on this paper, but some of them may be new to you. Explain two new strategies (from this list or others) that you will use to help guide your writing and revising process as you work on the next draft (or the next assignment).
 - Spend some time freewriting to discover and clarify your thinking about the subject or problem addressed in your paper.
 - Create and continually revise an outline to guide your work and help track revisions.
 - Read your work aloud to someone else so that you can hear yourself verbalize your thinking.
 - Write in small chunks of time (15-20 minutes a day) to stay engaged in the thinking the paper requires and gain distance from your work so you can revise more effectively.

Resources about giving effective feedback on student writing

Haswell, R. (1983). Minimal marking. *College English*, 45a(6), 600-604.

Perrault, S. T. (2011). Cognition and error in student writing. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 22(3), 47-73.

Sommers, N. (1982). Responding to student writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 33(2), 148-156.

Stern, L.A. & Solomon, A. (2006). Effective faculty feedback: The road less traveled. *Assessing Writing* 11(2006): 22-41.

Underwood, J.S. & Tregidgo, A.P. (2005). Improving student writing through effective feedback: Best practices and recommendations. *Journal of Teaching Writing* 22(2): 73-97.

Walvoord, B.E. & Anderson, V.J. (1998). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

If you'd like to learn more about spending less time to give more effective feedback on student writing, please feel free to [request a consultation](#).