

Strategies for Commenting on Student Writing

Planning and Preparation

1. As you are planning writing assignments consider how the assignments are connected to the learning objective for the course.
"For example, if you want them to learn how to summarize and respond to primary literature or to present and support an argument, design assignments that explicitly require the skills that are necessary to accomplish these objectives."*
2. Determine the sequence of writing assignments so that students can build and demonstrate skills incrementally, i.e., begin with short/simple writing and move towards to longer/more complex assignments.
3. Reflect on your own writing process. Share and model a variety of writing and revising techniques, including your own, for students.
4. Decide ahead of time which aspects of the writing you will focus on with each assignment and **communicate to students as part of the assignment description which aspects of the writing will be the focus of your comments.**
"For example, you may decide to focus your comments on the first assignment on the writing of the thesis statement, then focus comments on later papers on the success with which the students deal with counter-arguments. Sequencing your comments can help make the commenting process more efficient. "*
5. Develop and communicate clear grading criteria for each writing assignment. Utilize grading rubrics and share them with your students. Rubrics are particularly helpful when co-teaching or within TA grading groups.
6. Avoid rewriting the same comments repeatedly; create a 'bank' of comments for those issues that are common across students.
7. Offer comments that give students an understanding of how well they have or have not achieved the course's learning objectives.
"Students should be able to see a clear correlation among 1) written comments on a paper, 2) the grading criteria for the assignment, and 3) the learning objectives for the course. Thus, before you start reading and commenting on a stack of papers, remind yourself of the grading criteria, the learning objectives, and which aspects of the writing you want to focus on in your response."*
8. Encourage students to utilize the Writing Center (<http://writingcenter.nd.edu/>). Consider making a Writing Center visit part of your syllabus. Many instructors require that students make at least one visit to the Writing Center as part of their course work. This introduces students to the Writing Center, if they have not visited already, and gives them an opportunity to discuss their written work before they submit it to you.

* Source: *The Teaching Center of Washington University in St. Louis, Teaching Tips: Tips for Commenting on Student Writing*. Available at: <http://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/tips-commenting-student-writing>

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Responding to Non-native Speakers of English

Although all students have issues with academic writing, non-native speakers may have problems that are quite different than their classmates. Instructor may need to approach commenting on international student's writing differently as well.

"It is sometimes difficult to determine if the student is simply a weak writer, or if too little time has been spent on the draft, or if the kinds of mistakes stem from a lack of knowledge and experience of U.S. academic writing standards."*

1. Include clear **written** organizational expectations and guidelines in assignment descriptions.

2. Utilize straightforward instructive comments on papers.

"Few non-native speakers [have said] that they were overwhelmed when they saw all the comments. Many, however, [have said] that the comments were too brief and not instructional enough. Remember that most non-native speakers have not had years of American-style writing instruction and need to have more direction."*

3. Initially, as much as possible, focus on the content of the writing and overlook grammatical or idiomatic errors.

"Decide what is a tolerable 'writing accent'—ideas are understandable though the paper still contains minor errors such as singular/plural agreement problems and article errors."*

4. If grammatical or idiomatic errors truly interfere with an audience's understanding of the text offer comments about both the grammar and the organization. **Avoid simply correcting the grammar, identify 2-4 main areas of concern and ask the student to review those grammatical structures.**

5. Comments about organization and/or rhetorical style and should be made in clear, direct statements.

"Although there is a place in papers for comments given in the form of questions, when it comes to thesis statements and logical development, questions like 'Does this belong here?' can be more confusing than 'This statement would be clearer if stated at the beginning of the paragraph (for an American audience).'"*

6. Offer a clear statement on plagiarism and the academic honor code in your syllabus. Not all international students will have the same understanding of what constitutes plagiarism.

"Be a suspicious reader—not with the intention of punishing the student, but with the intention of addressing plagiarism before the student writes papers for another class and is reported for scholastic misconduct."

7. Encourage international students to utilize both the Writing Center (<http://writingcenter.nd.edu/>) and English for Academic Purposes Program (<http://cslc.nd.edu/eap/>). The English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Program offers a variety of language support and enhancement resources to help international students succeed.

Source: Holt, S. Teaching Resources: Responding to Non-native Speakers of English. The Center for Writing at the University of Minnesota, Available at: <http://writing.umn.edu/tww/responding/non-native.html>