

Effective & Efficient Commenting on Student Essays

1. General Matters of Tone

1. Write legibly (pencil advised). Or type end comments on word-processor and attach to the paper. (Recognize that red ink or pencil can evoke unwanted emotional response.)
2. Do not allow anger or sarcasm to come out in your comments.
3. Phrase your comments as if the student were going to have the chance to revise using your comments as guidelines. Your comments should aim to help the student understand the grade the paper will get, as well as guide the student to do better next time.
4. Address positive comments to the writer, negative comments to the paper. ("You do a good job of . . .," "The last paragraph lacks . . .") Avoid character judgments ("This shows you don't belong at UC Davis" or "You need to spend more time on this work").

2. Marginal Comments

1. Address local concerns (e.g., logic, clarity, accuracy, continuity).
2. Comment, do not lapse into wholesale correctio or editing.
3. Avoid debating about content.
4. Remember to offer compliments as well as critiques.

3. Grammar and Spelling

1. Prepare a list of the grading symbols and abbreviations you will use. (Distribute to the class, if feasible.)
2. Comment where sentence is not understandable or logical. If you can easily isolate a structural reason, articulate it quickly.
3. Avoid correcting all grammar and spelling errors. Instead, try
 - Marking the first few instances of a recurring error, then drawing attention to the type of error at the end, OR
 - Marking all errors in a paragraph as a sample, then mentioning at the end that there are many unmarked errors throughout, OR
 - Not marking any errors, but mentioning in end comment that the frequency and seriousness of errors are such that you recommend that the student get help--making it the student's responsibility to do so.
4. Consider preparing a handout addressing common sentence-level problems, and return this with essays.

4. End Comments

1. Address student by first name.
2. Start with positive comment(s) if at all possible. Support what the writer has done well. Note any improvement over previous assignments, if possible.
3. Try not to join opening positive comment to a negative comment with a "but" or "however." Let the positive comment stand on its own.

4. Concentrate on one or two major problems in the paper. Challenge the writer to think more deeply; suggest practical ways to improve on a revision or the next paper [even if it's hypothetical].
 5. Make specific reference to assignment sheet or grading criteria, especially .
- 5. Further Resources**
1. For students, you can recommend:
 - Learning Skills Center, 2-2013, Dutton Hall. ESL students, in particular, should arrive before 8 a.m. to make a same-day appointment with a writing specialist. Drop-in tutors also available. Be aware that LSC cannot possibly address all of our students' writing problems, and that shunting students to LSC is not a sustainable pedagogical solution.
 - 2. Disabilities Resource Center, 2-3184, if you think an undiagnosed learning disability may be a factor in a student's writing. (Proceed thoughtfully.)
 2. For TAs, readers, faculty: The University Writing Program's workshop program, for consultations (singly or in groups) about creating assignments, establishing grading criteria, time budgeting in grading papers, "norming" sessions for TAs assigned to the same course, or special problems with ESL papers.

For more information, contact the [Writing Across the Curriculum](#) program.