



## Evaluating Writing

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### Focus Your Commenting Energy

No matter how much you want to improve student writing, remember that students can only take in so much information about a paper at one time. Particularly because writing is such an egocentric activity, writers tend to feel overloaded quickly by excessively detailed feedback about their writing.

Moreover, because most writing can be considered work in progress (because students will continue to think about the content and presentation of their papers even if they don't actively revise), commenting exhaustively on every feature of a draft is counter-productive. Too many comments can make student writers feel as if the teacher is taking control of the paper and cutting off productive avenues for revision.

Focusing your energy when commenting achieves two main goals:

- It leaves students in control of their writing so that they can consider revising--or at least learning from the experience of having written the paper.
- It gives teachers a sense of tackling the most important elements of a paper rather than getting bogged down in detail that might just get ignored by the student.

Typically, we recommend that teachers comment discursively on the one or two most important features of a paper, determined either by your criteria for the assignment or by the seriousness of the effect on a reader of a given paper.

### Handling Grammar

If you assign write-to-learn tasks, you won't want to mark any grammatical flaws because the writing is designed to be impromptu and informal. If you assign more polished pieces, especially those that adhere to disciplinary conventions, then we suggest putting the burden of proofreading squarely where it belongs--on the writer.

You don't need to be an expert in grammar to assign and respond effectively to writing assignments.

### Don't Edit Write to Learn Responses

Editing write-to-learn (WTL) responses is counterproductive. This kind of writing must be informal for students to reap the benefits of thinking through ideas and questioning what they understand and what confuses them. Moreover, most WTL activities are impromptu. By asking students to summarize a key point in the three minutes at the end of class, you get students to focus on ideas. They don't need to edit for spelling and sentence punctuation, and if you mark those errors on their WTL writing, students shift their focus from ideas to form. In other words, marking errors on WTL pieces distracts students from the main goal--learning.

### Make Students Responsible for Polishing their Papers

Formal papers do need to be edited, but not necessarily by the teacher. The most efficient way to make sure students edit for as many grammatical and stylistic flaws as they can find is to base a large portion of the grade on how easy the paper is to read. If you get a badly edited piece, you can just hand it back



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and tell the student you'll grade it when the errors are gone. Or you can take 20-30% off the content grade. Students get the message very quickly and turn in remarkably clean writing.

If a student continues to have problems editing a paper, you can suggest visiting the Writing Center to get some one-on-one help with a writing consultant.

### **Think of Yourself First as a Reader**

Some teachers think that basing 20-30% of the grade on grammatical and stylistic matters is unfair unless they mark all the flaws. We approach this issue from the perspective of readers. If you review a textbook and find editing mistakes, you don't label each one and send the text back to the publisher. No, you just stop reading and don't adopt the textbook. Readers who are not teachers just don't keep reading is a text that is too confusing or if errors are too distracting. Readers who are teachers are perfectly justified in simply noting with an X in the margin where a sentence gets too confusing or where mistaken punctuation leads the reader astray. Students are resourceful (they can get help from our on-campus writing center) and will figure out the problem once a reader points out where the text stumbles. That's really all it takes.

### **Use Peer Editing**

Perhaps the most helpful tool in getting clean, readable papers from students is the peer editing session. Most students are better editors of someone else's paper than proofreaders of their own, so having students exchange papers and look for flaws helps them find many more glitches than they'll find on their own.

The logistics of peer review are generally simple, but they do require some forethought. If you want students to read papers in a round-robin exercise or to exchange papers with one other student, you don't need to require any photocopying. But if you want each student to read three other papers, make sure you remind students to bring three copies of their papers to class on the day of the exchange.

You can let students pick their own peer-review partners or group members, but you might also consider assigning peer reviewers based on your knowledge of students' writing and editing skills.

If you hold in-class peer-review sessions, circulate during the session to make sure students are on track and to intervene as necessary. Also, save a few minutes at the end of the session to discussion common problems with the class as a whole.

### **Specify tasks for the peer review.**

Even if you decide to let students do an "open" review (in which they imagine themselves as members of the target audience and give "reader response" reactions), make that task clear as you set up the peer-review session.

If you want to have students review particular features of a paper, make sure that those tasks are clear and precise. Although you can list tasks on the board, students often prefer a worksheet that notes specific tasks. If students can write their commentary on a word processor, they are likely to write more extensive comments, so take advantage of computer supports whenever possible.

### **Model how to use the workshop sheet or criteria list before peer review**



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Although most students will have had experience with peer review in writing classes in high school and freshman composition, students can still benefit from understanding each teacher's expectations of the peer-review session. One of the most effective techniques is to provide a sample student paper (either as a handout or on overhead transparencies) and to elicit class comments on each point on your workshop sheet. Teachers can then elaborate on points students bring up or clarify what writing skills the points on the workshop sheet are designed to help students review.

### **Consider sequencing the peer-review tasks in multiple workshops**

If you want students to look for particular features of a paper, try having them do so in a step-by-step fashion. Students often feel most comfortable moving through a sequence from simply identifying a feature, to evaluating it, to suggesting revisions. Particularly if you give students multiple peer-review opportunities, keep this sequence in mind. Create each workshop sheet so that it builds upon the prior one. And as you design these worksheets, label each level of task clearly so that students know if they are to identify or suggest revisions as part of a given peer-review session.

### **Provide adequate time for students to conduct thorough peer review of drafts**

The longer the paper or the more complex the criteria, the longer students will take to complete a thorough peer review. If you assign shorter papers, you can easily devote a part of a class to peer review or ask students to complete the peer review outside of class. But if you assign long, complex papers, consider breaking the peer review into several short chunks. For instance, students might complete one peer reading looking just for problems with focus, another for weaknesses in organization and development, and still another on graphics. Finally, students might have one or two additional peer-review sessions devoted exclusively to mechanics.

### **Helping Students Make Effective Comments**

The least helpful comment to receive from a peer reviewer is "It looks OK to me." We want students to find strengths or positive features in a draft, but we need to encourage them to be as specific as possible, both about strengths and weaknesses.

### **Model Effective Commenting**

As you model how to give effective commentary in peer review, remind students of the following points:

- Always point out strengths as well as elements that need more work.
- Try to attend to larger issues first (audience, purpose, organization, detail, etc.). Talk about sentences, word choices, punctuation only late in the peer-review process.
- Be specific. Point to particular places in the paper where revision will be helpful.
- Don't hesitate to respond as a reader, especially early in the review process, for example,
  - I got confused here.
  - I saw your point clearly here.



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- I was convinced by your example or analogy or argument.
- If you disagree with the comments of another peer reviewer, say so. Not all readers react the same ways, and divergent points of view can help writers see options for revising.
- Make comments in spirit of helpfulness. Take comments in spirit of helpfulness.

### **Build in incentives for helpful comments**

If students don't see the value of peer review, they are unlikely to spend much time reviewing others' papers or to take peer advice seriously. The most effective way to encourage students to take peer review seriously, both as the reviewer and as the writer, is to include effective peer review as part of the overall grade for the paper. Skimming peer review comments will take just a few minutes (even for multiple reviews of complex papers), and you'll quickly see which students provided the most helpful commentary. Alternatively, you can ask students to rank their peer reviewers and base the peer review part of grade on peer ratings.

If you're uncomfortable weighing the quality of peer reviewing in the paper grade, consider dividing the course grade to include a separate class participation or peer-reviewing grade.

Remind students that they are responsible for the final drafts they submit to you, but that they should carefully weigh each comment they receive from a peer reviewer. Comments that suggest radically different revisions of the same part of a paper generally help writers see various ways to revise but may confuse students about what to do. Students need not choose one of the suggested revisions, but they should note that multiple suggestions pointed at the same part of a paper typically highlight a place where some revision is necessary for readers.

### **Use a grading sheet**

Grading comment sheets or checksheets give teachers and students two advantages over free-form grading:

- Grading sheets of some sort assure that teachers will give students feedback about all the major criteria they set out on the assignment sheet. Even if you decide to use a simple checksheet that ranks students' performance on each criterion on a 1-10 scale, students will be able to see quickly where their strengths and weaknesses are as writers for this assignment.
- Grading sheets, particularly checksheets, typically save teachers time. Even composition teachers don't comment exhaustively about each criterion for each assignment; so, too, disciplinary teachers should be aware that they can comment at some length on just one or two points (typically the major strength and the major weakness) and then rely on the checksheet to fill in for less crucial areas of the paper. If students are concerned about getting more feedback than the checksheet provides, you can encourage them to come to your office hours or send you an e-mail query.



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