

## Nice Work! Giving Effective Written Feedback

Teachers spent a lot of time giving students feedback on written assignments, and most would agree that the main goal of giving this feedback is to help students improve their writing. Below, I share some tips on how to give feedback that helps students understand what they did poorly and what they did well on writing assignments, and that helps them to carry these skills forward to future assignments.

A first rule of thumb is to avoid over-commenting. Instructors might be tempted to write a lot of comments on students' papers because they think it conveys an interest in helping the students to improve their writing. But when there are a lot of comments, students can have trouble absorbing all of the information and lose sight on what they can do based on these comments to improve their writing on the next draft or paper. So there is value in writing a few longer, more meaningful comments (perhaps as a summary at the end of a paper) rather than dotting a paper with too much red ink.

How can you make sure that the comments you do make have the most impact? Here are two strategies for designing effective feedback.

### **Principle #1 for effective feedback: Use questions!**

Phrasing feedback as questions ensures that comments do not feel too directive. Questions encourage students to think more deeply about their writing rather than doing the thinking for them. Making students responsible for coming up with solutions helps them to develop their writing skills, while they may not really absorb what exactly they could have done better if the teacher merely corrects

their work. So, if the end of a paragraph hurtles into a new topic without an adequate transition, avoid the temptation to rewrite the paragraph to provide a clear transition for the student. Instead, try writing a question next to the problem spot on the paper to identify the issue. Use this question to prompt the student to come up with her or his own solution to the problem. A question such as “Can you point me to a specific part of the text that led you to that conclusion?” can help students develop skills such as providing evidence for their claims and walk them through the kind of thought processes in which they should be engaging as they are writing.

**Principle #2 for effective feedback: Make your feedback as precise as possible.**

“Mysterious” feedback may unintentionally seem harsh, and doesn’t identify what students have done well or poorly. What do I mean by mysterious feedback? Let’s walk through some common examples and discuss how we can improve on those examples.

**As a general rule:** Avoid using one word phrases and provide feedback with more concrete details – be more specific about what the student can do with regard to this comment.

**Example #1:** *More discussion!*

**More effective feedback:** Can you provide additional examples [from the course] to support your argument that... ?

**Example #2:** *References?*

**More effective feedback:** You should use appropriate citations here to back up your claims.

**Example #3:** *This is vague* [We write such comments because we need student to clarify language.]

**More effective feedback:**

I don't understand what you mean here. Can you rephrase your writing to clarify?

**Example #4:** *What?*

**More effective feedback:**

I'm a bit confused by this paragraph. It seems to conflict with what you said earlier in your essay.

And then, there's positive comments – these are important to focus on as well because pointing out things that were done well can be meaningful and help to improve writing!

**Example #5:** *Good!* or *Nice point!*

**More effective feedback:** This example really helped me to understand how your argument differs from the readings we discussed in class.