

TEACHING WITH WRITING
A Guide for Faculty and Graduate Students

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Your comments on student writing arguably constitute the most personal, serious, and lasting intervention you can make in a student's academic career. In addition to providing the student with an evaluation of a particular paper, comments perform several important functions. At their most basic level, comments illustrate to students that their papers are written to be read. This idea—that someone is actually going to take what they write seriously—is big news to many students and can transform them from dull, confusing, or oblivious scribblers into self-critical writers for whom the reader's interest and understanding are paramount. By communicating your expectations and explaining discipline-based methodologies and conventions, comments also shape the way students will formulate ideas and arguments in the future.

Writing good comments is challenging work, not least because it's time-consuming, hand-hurting, and at times (2:00 a.m., for instance) soul-defeating. The first paper in the stack is usually the hardest to get through; the last is equal parts exhilaration and exhaustion. But the pay-off for students is inestimable: a good comment can help them write with the knowledge that a real, live person, interested yet skeptical, is at the other end of the process.

Commenting typically involves reading each paper carefully while making marginal comments, then writing a final comment that sums up the paper's main strengths and weaknesses. You'll find suggestions for accomplishing each of these tasks below, along with strategies for establishing evaluation criteria and speeding up the process. Grading, which is much less agonizing when it takes place after commenting, is discussed in the next section of this guide.

BEFORE READING THE PAPERS

Perhaps the most crucial step you can take toward responding to student writing fairly, effectively, and efficiently is to decide on your evaluation criteria. As students so often put it: What are you looking for? Here are three ways to work out a useful answer to this all-important question:

- *Identify the qualities of the best writing in your field.* Luckily, this is easier to do than it sounds. Just take a look at Section 10, "A Language for Describing Writing": each term listed there corresponds to a quality that most faculty and graduate student instructors value in both professional and student writing. At the top of the list is "motive": the most exciting papers tend to be those that are compelled by a genuine issue, whether an anomaly in the text or data, or a hole or disagreement in the secondary

literature. See Section 10 for other typical qualities of good writing in both humanistic and scientific disciplines.

- *Take your cue from the assignment.* What do you expect will be the characteristics of the best responses? You should add these characteristics to your list of evaluation criteria. For example, if the assignment asks students to take a side on an issue, you'll be looking for an explicitly stated position. If the assignment asks students to interpret a text in light of a theory, you'll be looking for an explanation of the theory and a statement of how the theory provides a new understanding of the text.
- *Let the stack instruct you.* While it's entirely possible to receive only mediocre papers, not an exciting or fabulous one among them, some papers will nevertheless be better than others. You can learn from the better ones what relatively successful responses to the assignment look like, and add the qualities of these better papers to your list of evaluation criteria. In the process, you might also get a sense of how to revise the assignment for future courses.

In establishing your evaluation criteria, you're well advised to resist the simplistic distinction between "writing" and "content." As discussed in Section 10, "writing" in this context usually means "mechanics," whereas "content"—a large, undifferentiated category if there ever was one—presumably means everything else. A more careful articulation of the elements of academic writing will enable your students to improve particular aspects of their writing—for example, their ability to pose a compelling problem or question, or their analysis of texts or data.

MAKING COMMENTS IN THE MARGINS

One of the most significant conversations you can have with a student takes place not in office hours but in the margins of the student's paper. Marginal comments are by nature dialogic and multi-purpose: in them, you may give advice, pose questions, offer praise, express puzzlement, suggest new lines of inquiry, and provoke thought. Marginal comments not only show a student that you attentively read his or her paper, but also provide examples of the general observations you'll go on to make in your final comments. If you tell a student in the final comments that more analysis is needed, for example, the student should be able to locate one or more specific places in the text where you've indicated that analysis is lacking.

To students, it can sometimes seem as if marginal comments come in only two sizes: too few and too many. Comments that consist of scattered marks—?, !, ✓—

with the odd “good” or “vague” tossed in, are not only unhelpful; they leave student writers feeling cheated and angry, and wondering if their instructor read their paper closely or at all. On the other end of the scale are comments so numerous or lengthy that they literally obscure the student’s words on the page. Finding the middle ground between “not enough” and “too much” is one of the main challenges of marginal commenting. Below are suggestions for addressing this challenge, and for writing marginalia that respectfully guide and motivate student writers rather than “correct” them.

- *Comment primarily on patterns—representative strengths and weaknesses.* Noting patterns (and marking these only once or twice) will help you strike a balance between making students wonder whether anyone actually read their essay and overwhelming them with ink. The “pattern” principle applies to grammar and other sentence-level problems, too. Resist the temptation to copy-edit! To detect patterns more easily, read through the entire paper quickly before writing any comments.
- *Make some positive comments.* “Good point” and “great move here” mean a lot to students, as do fuller indications of your engagement with their writing. Students need to know what works in their writing if they’re to repeat successful strategies and make them a permanent part of their repertoire as writers. They’re also more likely to work hard to improve when given some positive feedback.
- *Write in complete sentences whenever possible.* Cryptic comments—e.g. “weak thesis,” “more analysis needed,” and “evidence?”—will be incompletely understood by most students, who will wonder, What makes the thesis weak? What does my professor or preceptor mean by “analysis”? What *about* my evidence? Symbols and abbreviations such as “awk” and “?” are likewise confusing. The more specific and concrete your comments, the more helpful they’ll be to student writers.
- *Ask questions.* Asking questions in the margins promotes a useful analytical technique while helping students anticipate future readers’ queries.
- *Write legibly (in any ink but red).* If students have to struggle to decipher a comment, they probably won’t bother. Red ink will make them feel as if their paper is being corrected rather than responded to.
- *Use a respectful tone.* Even in the face of fatigue and frustration, it’s important to address students respectfully, as the junior colleagues they are.

Here's an example of marginal comments that make use of this advice:

Associations unite people of similar interests, and are therefore an important component in a participatory government. Associations function ^{in Tocqueville's view} to teach citizens "the habits of acting together in the affairs of daily life" (514). In this way, citizens not only enjoy the benefits of sharing the common bond of living in a community, but they also prepare themselves through the experience for self-government.

Attribute quotations more clearly, like this

What happens to self-interested citizens in this scheme?

This is an excellent point. Here (as elsewhere) you could strengthen your argument by adding an example. Maybe the NAACP?

WRITING FINAL COMMENTS

Your response to most student papers is likely to be complicated, because most student papers are complicated, possessing a sometimes bewildering combination of qualities—some desirable, some less so. Final comments give you an important teaching opportunity: the chance to synthesize the many strands of your response into a coherent, constructive statement of the paper's main strengths and weaknesses. Ideally, this statement will not only help the student regard his or her paper more critically but also positively influence the student's future writing experiences.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the key to writing good final comments is the same as the key to writing good *anything*: a strong sense of the reader. And yet many comments seem intended merely to evaluate the paper rather than to teach the person who wrote it. An easy antidote is to write final comments that take the form of a letter to the student. Here's a possible structure for such a letter:

- *Open with a salutation.* By addressing the student directly ("Dear Pat"), you make a personal connection with the student and indicate that you have a stake in his or her intellectual welfare. You also signal that you're writing to the person, not to the paper.

- *Reflect back the paper's main point.* By stating your understanding of the paper's argument or main idea, you show students that you listened to what they were saying, that you took them seriously—perhaps the most important thing teachers can do for their students. A restatement in your own words will also help you ground your comment in the paper, providing a solid foundation for the rest of your discussion.
- *Discuss the paper's strengths.* Praise in the final comment, as in the margins, not only encourages writers but also helps them identify and develop their strengths. Even very good writers need to know what they're doing well so that they can do it again in the future. Specific examples make the praise believable.
- *Discuss the paper's weaknesses, focusing on large problems first.* You don't have to comment on every little thing that went wrong in a paper. Instead, choose three or four of the most important areas in which the student needs to improve, and present these in order of descending importance. You may find it useful to key these weaknesses to your grading criteria. Give specific examples to show the student what you're seeing. If possible, suggest practical solutions so that the student writer can address the problems in the next paper.
- *Type your final comments if possible.* If you handwrite them, write in a straight line (not on an angle or up the side of a page), and avoid writing on the reverse side; instead, append extra sheets as needed. The more readable your comments are, the more likely it is that students will read them and take them seriously.

This section closes with sample final comments:

Salutation →	Dear Pat,
Restatement of Main Point →	You argue with conviction that Murray's argument is wrong for a variety of reasons, including his reactionary misogyny, the primary burden of child rearing falling to women, and the underfunding of the AFDC.
Strengths →	The paper's impassioned tone is what I like best about it. I also think you have moments of analytical insight—for example, when you uncover Murray's assumptions about welfare on p. 2.

3 or 4 Main Weaknesses →

But the paper has some problems that detract from its persuasiveness. I've outlined these below:

(1) The paper is full of arguments against Murray, but instead of just listing complaints, you need to come up with a focused argument. The focus you suggest in your title—Murray's misogyny—would work well if you gave a coherent summary of Murray's article early on and then attacked what you see as his misogyny. Don't get side-tracked.

(2) The paragraph on orphanages (p. 3) gives the best analysis in the paper. Elsewhere—for example, the shotgun marriages paragraph on the same page—your evidence is way under-analyzed. You need to analyze Murray's arguments more using some of the tools and concepts we've discussed in class.

(3) You obviously have the ability to write clear prose, but mechanical errors obscure your meaning and reduce your credibility. Proofread more carefully next time.

Conclusion →

Let's talk about your next paper before you write it. Once you learn how to sustain a single focus and make sound economic arguments, you'll be able to write much stronger papers.

Signature →

—Professor Witherspoon

Grade →

Grade: C

Grades are seen by many students as random and subjective, a belief that rampant grade inflation at the college level has helped to reinforce. Yet grades have the potential to be among the most powerful of teaching tools. When standards are announced and consistently applied, grades provide a reasonably objective measure of achievement, signaling to students the extent to which they need to challenge familiar ways of thinking and writing. Grades also give written comments an edge they might not otherwise have.

As useful as grades are, assigning them can be a perplexing business for new and veteran teachers alike. This is especially so when the stack is high and the papers aren't easily categorizable: a smart, lively paper may lack a coherent argument; a misshapen wreck may yield up some breathtaking insights. Given the inherent difficulties of grading, how can it be accomplished in a fair, consistent, and efficient way?

For students to be motivated by grades, they need to believe the grades they get are fair, not arbitrary or idiosyncratic. Students must, in other words, trust their teacher's judgment. One way to encourage this trust is to provide students with grading criteria early on and to use the criteria when discussing or evaluating writing. When students are made aware of the widely shared qualities of good writing, and when their writing is measured against these criteria, they're better able to trace a disappointing grade back to the source—the paper, not the teacher—and to see how they can improve next time.

Most experienced readers agree that the primary hallmarks of excellent writing are an interesting, arguable thesis; the development of the thesis in a logical yet supple way; the substantiation of it and any sub-claims with incisively analyzed evidence; the engaging use of properly attributed sources when appropriate; and a clear, compelling style that conforms to standard usage. Many faculty create and distribute “grading rubrics” in which these qualities are used to describe A, B, C, D, and F papers.⁴

Grading with clear criteria in mind helps to ensure fairness and objectivity. So does another principle of grading: *Grade the paper and nothing but the paper*—not the person who wrote it, the effort that went into it, or the improvement it shows. This principle dramatically simplifies the task of evaluation by eliminating second guessing; it also guarantees that students are judged on an equal basis. “Grade the paper and nothing but the paper” means grading the *entire* paper, not just a part of it. Papers bend and swoop and turn, and grades need to be responsive to their sometimes erratic flight patterns. It means grading the *actual* paper as

⁴ The Princeton Writing Program's grading rubric is downloadable at <http://www.princeton.edu/writing/rubric.doc>.

well. Rather than assigning a grade based on what a paper seems at first glance to be, or what in hindsight it might have been, it's more fair—and more objective—to grade the paper as it actually is.

CONCRETE STRATEGIES FOR GRADING

If you wait to decide on the grade until after you've written your final comment, the grade you assign is likely to be more accurate and fair than would otherwise be true, and the decision-making process will be less agonizing. To determine the grade, try these three steps:

- *Re-read your final comment.* As you do this, think about the extent to which the paper has met your grading criteria. You might even compose, in your notes or in your mind, a brief description of the paper in terms of these criteria—for example, “Good research question, obvious enthusiasm for the topic, and clear writing, but driven by an observation, not a thesis; use of a listing structure; lack of evidence to ground generalizations; over-reliance on the opinions of secondary sources.”
- *Determine whether a paper falls above or below “the line.”* It's useful to think of papers as falling above or below an imaginary line in the grading scale—for example, B-/C+. A line set higher on the grading scale (say, at A-/B+) will result in higher grades. Whether a paper falls above or below the line most often depends on how effective the paper's thesis and structure are: a readable paper with a clear argument will usually receive an above-the-line grade; a paper that's difficult to read and doesn't have a clear argument will usually receive a below-the-line grade. The paper described above would most certainly fall below the line, no matter where the line is set.
- *Make fine distinctions.* Having determined whether a paper is above or below the line, consider why it should receive a particular grade, not something slightly higher or slightly lower. If the line is set at B-/C+, then the paper described above would probably earn a C, because its weaknesses make a C+ too generous, and its strengths make a C- or lower too harsh. If the line is set at A-/B+, the paper would probably get a B. As you can infer, disagreements over grades are often actually disagreements over where the line is set.

Although grading a piece of writing will never be an exact science, implementing the simple techniques discussed above can make the process less subjective and even less agonizing. Grading without a staircase may turn out to be not so difficult after all.

SPEEDING UP THE PROCESS

There's no doubt about it: responding to student writing is a time-consuming process. The strategies described in this section and the previous one—knowing what to look for, resisting the temptation to copy-edit, identifying in the final comment no more than three or four areas for improvement, deciding on the grade after writing the comment—can make the process more efficient and effective. Taking certain steps *before* the papers come in can also make a significant difference in the responding process. Four strategies in particular are worth trying out:

- *Design good writing assignments.* The motto of assignment design is: “You get what you ask for.” An unfocused, inexact writing assignment is likely to yield unfocused, inexact papers. By contrast, an assignment that creates an occasion for sustained argument has a good chance of actually producing it. See Sections 4 and 5, on assignment design.
- *Respond to proposals, outlines, and drafts.* Although responding to students' efforts at various stages in the writing process is itself time-consuming, the investment may be worth making: the five minutes it takes to read and critique a tentative thesis or outline via e-mail, or the 20 minutes spent with a student in office hours discussing a draft, can save significant time down the line; it can also mean the difference between getting an uninteresting, descriptive, or confusing paper and one that's refreshingly original and persuasively argued.
- *Organize students into writing groups.* By participating in a writing group of two or three people who are assigned to read and respond to each others' papers, students derive two main benefits: they start working on their papers earlier than they might otherwise have done, and they begin to realize that, for their writing to be effective, it must engage and persuade real readers. And although students can't necessarily provide one another with scholarly guidance (for example, the context for a debate or a list of relevant sources), they can learn to identify weaknesses in an argument and make concrete suggestions for revision, skills that they in turn can apply to their own writing. See Section 2, “Writing and the College Classroom.”
- *Ask for a cover letter.* Self-awareness in writing—knowing what works in a paper and what doesn't—is one of the keys to improvement. Students who are required to submit their papers with a cover letter attached become more self-conscious writers through the experience of reflecting on a paper's strengths and weaknesses. Cover letters also facilitate the commenting process by creating a dialogue between reader and writer: given

the chance to respond to a writer's specific concerns and questions, the instructor (or any reader) is better positioned to make comments that are more individualized and thus more useful. See Section 3, "The Writing Workshop," for sample cover letters and instructions.

Good writing is a pleasure to read. By implementing teaching techniques that encourage good writing, the sometimes onerous process of responding to student writing can be made not only more expedient but more enjoyable as well.

