

Breaking Through the Criticism Barrier: Making Feedback Count

Nothing is more disconcerting than spending time writing comments on a student's paper or exam, and then watch the student glance at the grade without even looking at the comments. Written comments are time consuming, but often have limited impact.

Share Your Criteria for Success

Provide examples of good work.

Set a Positive Tone

Include positive feedback as well as corrective feedback. Start and end with a compliment. You might begin by noting something that you learned from the essay.

Remember the **hamburger rule**: When offering a critique, you begin by complimenting something the student does well (This is the fluffy bun part). You then get to the meat of the matter: the constructive criticism part. Finally, you end with another constructive compliment (i.e. the other half of the fluffy bun).

Use Affirming Language

"It might make sense to...."

Prioritize

Focus feedback on the most important issues.

Be Specific.

Don't talk in generalities.

Offer Continuing Support

Feedback should be an ongoing process, not a one time, hit-and-run event. Develop an action plan.

Effective Written Feedback

1. Remember, the primary purpose of your comments isn't to justify grades or to identify errors.

It is to help the student improve.

2. Avoid critical overload.

Focus on argument, content, and organization, not on syntax, grammar, and typos.

3. Create a dialogue with the student

- Ask for clarification: "What do you mean when you write..."
- Tell the student what you understood: "First you said X, so I thought you were arguing Y...."
- Pose possibilities: "How would this apply to....?"



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- Ask questions: “How do you think this theory would alter your interpretation?”

4. Provide advice to guide the student in improving the work rather than simply implementing your suggestions.

- How might you frame this topic as a problem? (E.g.: It is widely believed that X is the case. In fact, this belief is wrong or incomplete. This mistaken belief has had the following implications....).
- Give the student options. Suggest alternative ways that the argument or organization can be improved.

5. Give students opportunities for practice and revision.

Writing Advice

Most writing advice consists of platitudes

- Omit needless words
- Avoid clichés
- Choose words carefully.
- Revise often
- Use ordinary rather than fancy words.
- Write in the active voice.

Everyone knows the platitudes. The challenge is to put this advice into practice. If it were easy, we'd all do this already.

Writing Clearly

1. Focus on topic sentences
2. Make the problem clear
3. Lead with a clear subject, then follow immediately with a descriptive verb
Subjects and verbs should appear early and close to one another
4. Use conjunctions:
If, although, because, when, how, and why
5. Avoid “nominalizations” and transform them into active verbs
These are nouns that are derived from verbs; they end with –tion, -ment, or –ence
calculation (calculate), finding (find), dependent (depend), prediction (predict), tolerance (tolerate)
“Introduction” becomes “to introduce”; “development” becomes “to develop”

Identifying a Topic

1. Close a gap in the scholarship: There are gaps in the scholarship, and I will close them.
2. Debunk a myth: There is a "traditional" or popular interpretation of this issue that I will debunk.
3. Complicate a topic: The existing interpretation of this topic is far too simple
4. Take sides in a debate: There is a debate on this topic, and I will demonstrate that one side is right and the other wrong.

5. Recast a debate: There is a debate on this topic, and I will demonstrate that the debate must be recast, because previous scholars have asked the wrong questions, or viewed the topic in the wrong way.

6. Refine or rebut a generalization: I will use a case study to refine or rebut a generalization.

Making a Compelling Argument

1. Translate your topic into a problem

Then ask yourself: Why should the reader care? “So what?”

2. Offer a solution to the problem

3. Offer evidence to support your solution

4. Identify alternatives or objections to your solution.

“To be sure...”

“Admittedly....”

“Some have claimed...”

Follow with a rebuttal:

“But...”

“However...”

“On the other hand...”

5. Show the value of your solution