



“I spend hours providing students with comments and I’m not sure they even read them.”

Reframe your thinking: Feedback isn’t proofreading and it isn’t a justification for a grade—it’s the instruction you give a student for their next draft and to be useful, it has to arrive while they can still change something. If a comment doesn’t tell the student what to do next, it’s a waste of your precious time. Treat every comment as forward-looking instruction. You’re coaching *ideas* and meaning, not finding errors or showing students how to patch up their text—trust students to catch smaller errors on their own once the thinking underneath is clear.

John Bean and Dan Melzer are pioneers in this thinking, and this guide is adapted from Engaging Ideas 3rd edition (2021); we also draw on Nancy Sommers’ article ‘Responding to Student Writing’ (1982).

Prepare your students before the assignment. Feedback stops being a time-sink when you prepare your students to succeed. Start with well-designed built on scaffolded tasks (see Problem 1: Designing Effective Writing Assignments in this library). Require a short draft of writing early which you can use for individual or group writing conferences to develop ideas. Provide an opportunity for peer review (see Problem 4: Peer Review That Actually Works). Lastly, provide your written feedback on late-stage rough drafts, 1-2 weeks before the due date, to allow students time to process and act on your comments.

Focus on higher-order concerns. Fight the urge to become your student’s copyeditor. Before you touch grammar and syntax errors (‘lower-order concerns’), ask what idea the student is trying to convey and how they could structure their writing to communicate it better (‘higher-order concerns’). There is no point imposing sentence-level rules on a paragraph that a structural overhaul will delete.

First drafts are often ‘writer-based’ rather than ‘reader-based’ which means the draft may meander without a clear driving thesis until the end, where the student finally works out what they think and/or the position they’re taking. Once you’ve identified the buried thesis, name it for the student and provide a comment telling them to move it up to the end of the introduction (if that is what your discipline calls for—even if your discipline isn’t thesis-driven, a lab report, for example, will need restructuring if the actual findings are saved for the discussion section). Bean and Melzer suggest thinking through these questions to size up the organization of a draft:

- Do the title and introduction orientate the reader and forecast where the paper is going?
- Could the reader easily outline the draft or write a summary of the argument?
- Can the reader tell the purpose of each paragraph?
- If you get lost early, does the overall argument start getting clearer at the end (a sign that the writer is still exploring ideas and has started to clarify them)?
- Does each paragraph have a clear focus, or does the point drift and meander?
- Are there parts that should be added, deleted, or shifted around—and what’s missing?

Don’t ask for editing too early. Higher-order comes first because sentence-level errors often clear up on their own once students master the ideas. While the concepts are still muddy and unfamiliar, students can’t put them into precise language yet. Fumbling *is* learning. Asking for polished writing before students have grasped the ideas is akin to asking students to edit sentences they haven’t finished thinking.

Comment sparingly, even on the surface. When a paper’s structure has settled and it *is* ready to edit, a sentence-level error becomes a higher-stakes problem because errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar impede the reader’s reading experience and undermine good ideas. Even then, it’s not your job

to fix every error. Richard H. Haswell coined the term ‘minimal marking’ in 1983—it’s a technique where you write an X in the margin where there is a surface error and trust the student to find and fix it.

Contrary to what you might think, a paper littered with comments produces less revision, not more. Think about something you’ve been a beginner at—remember how it feels to be over-corrected? If a draft has too many surface errors to be worth marking (you decide how many—say, twelve), return the paper as not yet ready for feedback with a mitigating comment such as: ‘Benjamin, I haven’t yet given you a grade because sentence-level errors are getting in the way. Your good ideas are worth more careful editing.’ Ask them to revise before resubmitting, and to book a consultation at the Writing Center if some of the problems lie within characteristic patterns of errors (see Problem 5: Understanding the Purpose of the Writing Center). That makes the student responsible for their own editing—where the task should lie.

Lastly, if you have the time, helping students to identify patterns of errors such as a recurring their/there mix-up, capitalization errors, or an overuse of commas, can help a student learn the rule or principle and will often clear up many mistakes in one go.

Make your comments kind and direct. Direct comments explain precisely how to revise, while indirect comments are not useful and are often posed as disingenuous questions such as ‘have you considered XYZ’ or ‘what if you thought about ABC’—questions that *hint* at what you want changed, but don’t specify what confused you or how to fix it. Anchor all comments in the specifics of the student’s text.

The tone that you write your feedback in matters a lot to students. Telling a student ‘to be specific’ or ‘to elaborate’ are generic comments which, as Bean and Melzer found, elicit negative responses in students, frustrating them, making them mad at the instructor, and snuffing out their desire to try again because they have lost confidence in their writing. *We* know what we mean, but students don’t: students are processing your comments through their amygdala (the ‘fear center’ of their brain) and fear, anxiety, or anger blocks meaningful learning. On the other hand, positive and direct comments build confidence and make the writer want to try again. When you mix a positive statement with constructive criticism, it is called a ‘mitigating’ comment. These comments can simply tell students where you got confused (“I’m getting confused. I can’t see how this paragraph relates to what you said on the previous page”) without blaming students for their ‘failure’.

Write an end-comment that’s a plan, not your judgment. Students take the path of least resistance, so an assignment littered with typo corrections is an easy ‘win’ for the student and lets them ignore harder structural revision. Counter this with a Next Steps Plan—it’s a short, numbered list at the end of the paper, written in order of importance, that maps the revision for the next draft, and tells the student the exact revision moves that will shift the draft toward excellence. It is *not* a grade justification, and it isn’t a catalogue of all the things wrong. In one short paragraph, start with praising the strengths of the paper. In a second short paragraph, summarize the top one-to-three *most pressing* problems. Below, write the hierarchical list of the specific revision moves that the student needs to make to advance the quality of their paper. If sentence errors matter at this stage, they should be last on the list.

Remember that agency belongs to the writer. How many times has a student said, ‘I don’t understand how **you** want me to change this’ or ‘Tell me what **you** want me to do’? After feedback, the student’s attention shifts from what they want to say to what they think *you* want. It’s frustrating when a student doesn’t fix the things you know would make a paper better, but ultimately, they get to make that call. If they’ve made a deliberate choice about how to present their ideas, that’s their right as the writer. The same respect applies to how you read. Check your mindset as you sit down to grade: is your primary purpose to hunt for errors? Consider that what you perceive to be a mistake may be a deliberate stylistic choice—a question of rhetorical effectiveness, not a broken rule. Your job is to tell the two apart: you are the student’s guide to your discipline’s conventions, so convention-errors must be explained, but don’t mistake a writer’s choice for an error or laziness just because it isn’t the choice you’d personally make.