BioTAP October 2015

**Providing Feedback**

Students typically put considerable effort into preparing work that you will be marking. They crave feedback and will take your comments seriously. You have their attention, so consider this an opportunity to help students learn how to present their understanding effectively. Students often need guidance in following instructions, preparing a logical progression of ideas or in general, appreciating the standards of university work.

Leaving comments on student work can require a complex balancing act. Taking the time to make extensive comments can slow the marking process to a crawl, while generic comments may not be appreciated. Writing comments on student papers is something of an art: it requires a little thought and practice for the comments to be effective--that is, both read and attended to. Excellent comments provide encouragement and guidance, demonstrating to students how to improve their writing for the future.

The following recommendations about making comments can be applied to any written assignment.

**1. Remember that students have put effort into their work.** Students at universityhave been successful and achieved top grades previously. Their self-image is often tied to the evaluation of their work. Be careful in your comments not to overly critical of a student’s work. Ensure students that the marks you make are intended to help students to improve their work.

**2. Be clear by your use of language that you are evaluating the work, not the person.** That is, don't say, "You haven’t explained clearly," or "You are grammatically very weak." Instead, say, "The explanation is not clear," or "The paper is grammatically very weak." It's okay to use "you" when saying good things, but direct criticisms to what the paper lacks, not what the student seems to lack.

**3. Avoid marking errors and comments in red.**Red ink looks like blood and is often related to inadequacy. Use pencil or neutral pen color like blue or green. Pencil also allows for erasures, in case you change your mind about a grade, marking, comment, or suggestion. If you use pencil make sure that all final numerical grades are in ink.

**4. Don't use comments merely to justify the grade.**That is, don't just summarize all the mistakes you've marked or point out all the deficiencies in the paper so that the student won't object to the grade you assign. If all the comments are negative, students will either not read them or be depressed by them. Remember that you want to increase their motivation to do better on future work.

**5. Be sure to point out some positive things about the work.**Most assignments have at least a few things that the student has done well. Good insights, analysis, good use of personal examples--these are a few items you might mention. Sometimes you will have to stretch a little, since some papers show little thought and are grammatical and stylistic messes.

Try to find something good--without being sarcastic: "Nice choice of font!" or "Excellent margins!" may seem funny to you at the time, but can demoralize a student. Students often misinterpret the comment as ridicule. You can usually claim to have found something "interesting" or perhaps "provocative" that the student has written.

Positive comments are not just encouraging, they also show students what works and what they should use again. Many students need to be told what they've done right, so that they can build on their strengths. As you read along, add positive comments in the margins: "good point," "well argued," "perceptive," "yes," "interesting," etc.

**6. Intermix positive and negative comments.** Comments should be interspersed throughout the work but students will pay the most attention to summary comments. It's usually best to begin with a positive comment about the work, then mention a criticism, then another positive, and so on. The intermixture helps the student accept the criticisms and shows a balanced response to the work.

**7. Focus on specific and meaningful feedback.** Comments should be specific to the topic, question, assignment criteria but the general comments listed can be modified for most student work.

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| --- | --- |
| Positive | Constructive criticism |
| A well written paperExplanations are clearYour explanation of X is well doneNice observationsGood use of examplesAn interesting explanationGood interpretation of resultsA complete and thorough discussionGood summary of ideasGood use of citations/referencesAn impressive list of referencesGood effort in XI was interested to read XThis is a strong draft in which you…Your evidence strongly supports your claim X. | You have included interesting ideas but need to be expressed more clearlyHow do you intend the reader to understand X?Can you think of another way to say this?"Can you make this point clearer"? / I am not surewhat you mean.The logic is difficult to followUse more formal scientific language Define this term“For example?” / Can you provide anotherexample?/ Why do you think so?Elaborate on X / Tell me more about XMissing information on X / Have you read what X says about this?Do you think this detail is necessary? Why or why not?Explain why the data are not consistent with your initial ideasConsider addressing X, Y, Z in your discussionIndicate why X is importantRemind the reader of the major ideasTake care to cite all information taken from othersources./ Cite?Be sure to list all references/literaturecited/incorporated in your work.Be sure to use appropriate academic references. |

Be prepared to meet with the student outside of class to further clarify your comments if they are not understood by the student.

*Adapted from “Responding To Response Papers” by Sue Lonoff and Michelle Schwartz, Research Associate, for the Teaching Assistant/Graduate Assistant Program, Learning & Teaching Office, http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/taga/index.html*

*Some example feedback taken from Williams, J. G. 2003. Providing Feedback on ESL Students’ Written Assignments. The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. IX (10). Retrieved October 13, 2015.* http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Williams-Feedback.html