

# Commenting on High-Stakes Writing: Options for Using a Writing Process in your Course

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## Teaching and learning goals are better met when students draft and revise with teachers' feedback.

### It's better for students' learning:

- a) It gives them more chances to think through and make connections between ideas & to address parts of the assignment they may have missed.
- b) It gets them started early & helps them avoid procrastination.
- c) They will care about and focus on your feedback (useable, at the point of need) instead of on a grade.
- d) It gives them practice in processing & incorporating feedback, which will also improve their future writing.
- e) It reflects more closely how our own scholarly writing happens.

### It's better for teachers' teaching:

- a) We can frontload the commenting process and help students get on track. Final drafts will require fewer comments, and therefore less work on the part of the teacher.
- b) Drafts inform us how students are (mis)understanding the course material, so we can intervene and explain it differently.
- c) We can point out major problems on a draft without the stigma of a low grade.
- d) Commenting on intermediate drafts has a purpose and meaning—to improve the students' thinking and writing, NOT to justify our grade.
- e) We will receive more clearly thought-out final papers that respond to our assignments; our frustration and stress levels will be reduced.
- f) We avoid rewarding the small percentage of students who do produce on-target single-draft writing and penalizing the larger percentage who don't.

## Suggestions for lessening the burden of commenting on drafts

With some practice and an effective approach, commenting mainly on drafts rather than on final versions either saves you time or takes the same amount of time.

Plus, your students gain:

- More knowledge of the subject matter.
- More control over the writing process.

And both students and instructors are more satisfied at the end of the process.

### Managing the paper load:

- Give assignments that provide guidance on how the assignment can be approached.
- Comment on at most 3 major issues: e.g. assignment fulfillment, focus, ideas, argument, organization.
- Comment on error patterns rather than identifying every error. If focus is off, the content of the final draft will be different anyway.
- In class, give students models of what you consider to be good writing in your field.
- Use a cover sheet that asks students what their concerns with the draft are to initiate a dialogue. The students' expressed concerns help direct your commenting.
- Use guided peer response; have students read one another's papers in small groups to identify the major issues that need to be addressed.
- Use Writing Fellows whom you guide in commenting on the drafts.

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## Peer workshopping extends the benefits of drafting and commenting

### Benefits of peer workshopping:

- It utilizes student expertise in writing & in the course content.
- Peer critique may be less threatening & easier to swallow than a professor's.
- Students can articulate & discuss their ideas that later can be included in their revisions.
- It develops students' social skills & fosters cooperation rather than competition.
- Analysis of others' papers transfers to one's own work.
- Students see positive features in other students' work (e.g. a clear lead in and thesis, paragraphs with topic sentences, effective use of sources) & use them in their own.
- It expands the students' sense of audience by providing a more realistic audience—a community of peers and the teacher—rather than an audience of only one.
- It helps students understand the role of audience.

### How to use peer workshopping:

- Generate with your students a list of criteria for a good response to the assignment. And/or compose a workshopping sheet with the criteria for students to fill out for each draft they read.
- Distribute & read a draft written in a previous semester. Discuss what advice you would give the writer & how you would phrase it. Stress support/praise, encouragement, assignment fulfillment, expansion, clarification.
- Break students into mixed ability groups. Have them read and comment on one another's papers.

## Commenting basics

### Considerations when writing comments on a draft:

- The paper is an unfinished work-in-progress.
- Try to build on the students' strengths.
- Give clear suggestions about how the student can better fulfill the assignment.
- Pay more attention bigger issues like focus and ideas (vs. smaller issues like grammar).
- Prioritize the issues and your comments—don't overwhelm the student with critique.
- Write out your teaching and learning goals, and consult them while you make comments.

### Formatting your comments:

- A short letter identifies higher order (global) concerns and error patterns.
- Marginal comments would provide examples of those global concerns and error patterns.