

## Writing Comments on Students' Papers

Perhaps nothing involves us so directly in the messiness of teaching writing as our attempts to comment on our students' essays. Whenever I conduct workshops in the marking and grading of student writing, I like to quote a sentence from William Zinsser's *Writing to Learn* (1988): "The writing teacher's ministry is not just to the words but to the person who wrote the words" (p. 48). I value this quotation because all of us as teachers, late at night, having read whole stacks of student essays, sometimes forget the human being who wrote the words that currently frustrate us. We become harsh or sarcastic. We let our irritation show on the page. Even though we know how we ourselves feel when we ask a colleague to read one of our drafts (apologetic and vulnerable), we sometimes forget these feelings when we comment on students' papers. Sometimes we do not treat students' work in progress with the same sensitivity that we bring to our colleagues' work.

The best kind of commentary enhances the writer's feeling of dignity. The worst kind can be experienced as dehumanizing and insulting—often to the bewilderment of the teacher, whose intentions were kindly but whose techniques ignored the personal dimension of writing.

Imagine, for a moment, a beginning tennis class in which we ask George to give his first performance. In skill category 1, serving the tennis ball, poor George whacks the ball sideways into the fence. Here is the instructor's feedback: "You didn't hold the racquet properly, you didn't

toss the ball in the correct plane, you threw it too high, you didn't cock your wrist properly, and you looked awkward. Moreover, you hit the ball with the frame instead of the strings. Weren't you paying attention when I explained how to do it? I am going to have to place you in remedial tennis!"

Although we are far too enlightened (and kind) to teach tennis this way, the analogy is uncomfortably apt for the traditional way that writing teachers have taught writing. Ignoring the power of positive reinforcement, writing teachers have red-penciled students' errors with puritanical fervor. These teachers have of course aimed for the right goals—they want to produce skillful and joyful writers, just as the tennis instructor wants to produce skillful and joyful tennis players. But the techniques have been misguided.

## Students' Responses to Teachers' Comments

Part of the problem is that our comments on students' papers are necessarily short and therefore cryptic. We know what we mean, and we know the tone that we intend to convey. Often, however, students are bewildered by our comments, and they sometimes read into them a tone and a meaning entirely different from our intentions.

The extent to which students misread teachers' comments is revealed in Spandel and Stiggins's study (1990), in which the investigators interviewed students about their reactions to teachers' comments on their papers. Students were asked to describe their reactions to specific marginal comments that teachers placed on their essays—either what they thought the comments meant or how the comments made them feel (pp. 85–87). When a teacher wrote, "Needs to be more concise," students reacted this way:

*Confusing. I need to know what the teacher means specifically.*

*This is an obvious comment.*

*I'm not Einstein. I can't get every point right.*

*I muffed.*

*I thought you wanted details and support.*

*This frustrates me!*

*Define "concise."*

*Vague, vague.*

When a teacher wrote, "Be more specific," students reacted this way:

*You be more specific.*  
*I'm frustrated.*  
*I tried and it didn't pay off.*  
*It's going to be too long then.*  
*I feel mad—it really doesn't matter.*  
*I try, but I don't know every fact.*

When a teacher wrote, "You haven't really thought this through," students reacted this way:

*That is a mean reply.*  
*I guess I blew it!*  
*I'm upset.*  
*That makes me madder than you can imagine!*  
*How do you know what I thought?*

When a teacher wrote, "Try harder!" students reacted this way:

*I did try!*  
*You're a stupid jerk.*  
*Maybe I am trying as hard as I can.*  
*I feel like kicking the teacher.*  
*Baloney! You don't know how hard I tried.*  
*This kind of comment makes me feel really bad and I'm frustrated!*

The conclusions of this study are worth quoting:

*Negative comments, however well intentioned they are, tend to make students feel bewildered, hurt, or angry. They stifle further attempts at writing. It would seem on the face of it that one good way to help a budding writer would be to point out what he or she is doing wrong, but, in fact, it usually doesn't help; it hurts. Sometimes it hurts a lot.*

*What does help, however, is to point out what the writer is doing well. Positive comments build confidence and make the writer want to try again. However, there's a trick to writing good positive comments. They must be truthful, and they must be very specific [p. 87].*

Spandel and Stiggins's insights accord with current brain research, which reveals the importance of emotions to learning. Zull (2002) shows that positive emotions enhance cognition. In a section entitled "The Amygdala and the Teacher," Zull explains that "when we want to help

toss the ball in the correct plane, you threw it too high, you didn't cock your wrist properly, and you looked awkward. Moreover, you hit the ball with the frame instead of the strings. Weren't you paying attention when I explained how to do it? I am going to have to place you in remedial tennis!"

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someone learn, we should be aware that our learner will be quickly and subconsciously monitoring the situation through her amygdala [the primitive “fear center” or “danger center” of the brain]” (p. 59). Zull’s point is that fear, anxiety, or anger blocks meaningful learning, which is associated with pleasure. To promote meaningful learning, Zull argues, teachers should build on student successes, evoking feelings of hope and confidence rather than failure—the same point made by Spandel and Stiggins.

In a similar vein, composition researchers have explored the effect of direct versus “mitigating” comments on student papers. Mitigating comments frame criticism in a positive way in order to buffer students’ anger or mitigate feelings of inadequacy (Treglia, 2009; Weaver, 2006). In a study of marketing majors at a large Midwestern university, Smith (2008) showed students the following two examples of possible end comments for a paper—one presenting critical statements directly, with no attempt at mitigation, and the other including positive as well as negative statements:

[Direct criticism—no mitigation]: *Your paper has not fulfilled all of the assignment requirements because it is missing a conclusion discussing whether you are a good match for the company you researched. The writing needs proofreading, and several source citations are missing in the text of the paper. The paper could use more research on your employer.*

[Mitigated criticism—positive and negative elements]: *Your paper’s introduction was really excellent, as was your detailed information on salaries and the career path for this position. The stages of the recruitment process were well-covered and gave good direction. Your paper hasn’t fulfilled all of the assignment requirements because it is missing a conclusion discussing whether you are a good match for the company you researched. The writing needs proofreading, and several source citations are missing in the text of the paper. The paper could use more research on your employer [p. 330].*

The students in Smith’s study overwhelmingly preferred the mitigated version that mixed positive and negative elements. One person called the unmitigated end comment “mean”; another said it “only gives the bad and makes the student feel like a failure.” Still another said, “If I were a student who was going to rewrite this paper, I probably wouldn’t bother because the evaluation the professor wrote made it sound like he/she didn’t like it at all” (p. 328).

To improve our techniques for commenting on our students' papers, then, we need to remember our purpose, which is not to point out everything wrong with the paper but to facilitate improvement. When marking and grading papers, we should keep in mind that we have two quite distinct roles to play, depending on where our students are in the writing process. At the drafting stage, our role is coach. Our goal is to provide useful instruction, good advice, and warm encouragement. At the end of the writing process, when students submit final copy, our role is judge. At this stage, we uphold the standards of our profession, giving out high marks only to those essays that meet the criteria we have set. It is possible, of course, to do both simultaneously. In the marketing study mentioned in the previous paragraph, Smith (2008) shows that the most effective method of grading written products is to combine mitigated commentary (marginal and end comments that stress positive elements while also identifying weaknesses) with rubric scores revealing the teacher's criteria-based judgments.

## **The Purpose of Commenting: To Coach Revision**

When we comment on papers, the role we should play is that of a coach providing guidance for revision, for it is in the act of revising that our students learn most deeply what they want to say and what their readers need for ease of comprehension. Revising doesn't mean just editing; it means "re-visioning"—rethinking, reconceptualizing, "seeing again." It is through the hard work of revising that students learn how experienced writers really compose.

As mentioned briefly in Chapter Fifteen, you can best ensure that your comments will stimulate revision if you place your comments on a late-stage rough draft or if you allow rewrites. If you comment on drafts, you'll probably need to do so at least a week before students are to submit their finished papers. When using this strategy, I prefer to comment only on late-stage drafts, after the writers have gone through peer review.

The second strategy, which is my favorite method, is to allow rewrites after I return the "finished" papers. Because not all students will choose to rewrite, this method is less time-consuming for me, and the quality of the writing I initially receive is higher. By allowing rewrites, I can gear all my comments toward revision yet also feel comfortable applying rigorous grading standards, because I know that students can rewrite. Moreover, the opportunity to improve less-than-hoped-for grades inspires many students toward serious revision.

From a teacher's standpoint, commenting to prompt revision, as opposed to justifying a grade or pointing out errors, may also change one's whole orientation toward reading student writing. (Recall the difference between the revision-oriented and the editing-oriented commentary on the student paragraph in Chapter Five, pages 83–84.) You begin looking for the *promise* of a draft rather than its mistakes. You begin seeing yourself as *responding to* rather than *correcting* a set of papers. You think of limiting your comments to the two or three things that the writer should work on for the next draft rather than commenting copiously on everything. You think of reading for ideas rather than for errors. In short, you think of coaching rather than judging.

## **General Strategy for Commenting on Drafts: A Hierarchy of Questions**

Commenting effectively on drafts requires a consistent philosophy and a plan. Because your purpose is to stimulate meaningful revision, your best strategy is to limit your commentary to a few problems that you want the student to tackle when preparing the next draft. It thus helps to establish a hierarchy of concerns, descending from higher-order issues (ideas, organization, development, and overall clarity) to lower-order issues (sentence correctness, style, mechanics, spelling, and so forth). What follows is a sequence of questions arranged in descending order of concern. My recommendation is to limit your comments to only two or three of the questions and to proceed to lower-order concerns only after a draft is reasonably successful at the higher levels.

As you read through the following discussion, you may find it useful to have at hand one or two student papers that you are currently marking and to try out my suggestions, perhaps comparing them to your current practice. These questions assume an assignment calling for thesis-based academic writing. They also assume that your students are reasonably competent writers. Sometimes teachers across the curriculum encounter what writing teachers call “basic writers” or “developmental writers,” many of whom have severe problems producing grammatically coherent text. If you have such students in your class, I suggest that you seek advice from a writing professional such as the director of your writing center or the director of first-year composition on your campus.

### **Does the Draft Follow the Assignment?**

If the draft doesn't follow the assignment, there is no purpose in commenting further. Tell the writer that the draft is on the wrong track and that he or she needs to start over by rereading the assignment carefully and



perhaps seeking help from you. I generally return such a draft unmarked and ungraded.

### **Does the Draft Address a Problem/Question? Does It Have a Thesis?**

Once you see that a draft addresses the assignment, look next at its overall focus. Can you tell where the draft is headed? Does it wrestle with a real question or issue? Does the draft have a thesis? Is it stated at a place appropriate to the assigned genre and the reader's expectations?

Drafts exhibiting problems at this level may have no discernible problem-thesis structure; other drafts may have a thesis, but one that is not stated explicitly or is buried deep in the body of the paper, forcing you to wander about lost before finally seeing what the writer intends. Frequently drafts become clearer at the end than they were at the beginning—evidence that the writer has clarified his or her thinking during the act of composing. To use the language of Flower (1979), such a draft is “writer-based” rather than “reader-based”; that is, the draft follows the order of the writer's discovery process rather than a revised order that meets the reader's needs. Thus drafts that become clear only in the conclusion need to be revised globally. In some cases, you may wish to guide the writer toward a prototypical academic introduction that explains the problem to be addressed, states the thesis, and gives a brief overview of the whole argument. (See the discussion of academic introductions in Chapter Thirteen, pages 250–252.) Composing such an introduction forces the writer to imagine the argument from the reader's perspective. Typical end comments addressing thesis and focus include these:

*Serena, although I can see good ideas along the way, I can't find a thesis in this draft, nor is it clear what problem or question you are addressing. Please see me for help.*

*Diego, in the beginning you really captured your reader's interest, but then I started to get lost. By the end of the paper your argument became clear again. For the next draft, help your reader out by moving your thesis up to the end of the introduction. Also, the reader might need a preview map of your argument.*

### **What Is the Overall Quality of the Writer's Ideas/Argument?**

If a paper has a thesis that addresses a problem, you are ready to look at the quality of the argument itself. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the writer's ideas? How effective are the supporting reasons and

evidence? Are the ideas developed with sufficient complexity, subtlety, and insight? Is there adequate awareness of and attention to opposing views? The following are possible marginal comments for addressing these concerns:

*Interesting idea!*

*Nice comparison of X to Y here.*

*Good point—I hadn't thought of it in quite this way.*

*Expand and explain; could you give an example?*

*Aren't you overlooking X's point of view here?*

*I don't see how you got from X to Y. Argument is confusing.*

*This is too much a rehash of X. Move from summarizing to analyzing.*

*You have covered X well but haven't addressed Y or Z.*

*You need to anticipate and respond to opposing views here.*

*What's your evidence for this assertion?*

### **Is the Draft Effectively Organized?**

As writers, we all struggle with organization, often rethinking our first-draft structure significantly as we revise. Student writers have even greater problems with organization—not only with creating a logical and coherent structure but also with signaling that structure to readers.

To size up the organization of a student's draft, consider questions like these:

- Do the title and introduction orient the reader to the draft's purpose 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 or function of each paragraph?
- If you get temporarily lost, does the overall argument start getting clearer at the end (a sure sign that the writer is clarifying his or her ideas as she writes)?
- Are paragraphs unified and coherent? (Common problems include paragraphs that are short and choppy, that have no topic sentences, or that change direction midstream.)
- Do some parts of the draft need more development, especially with details and evidence?
- Are there parts that should be added or deleted? Are there parts that should be shifted or moved around?
- What's missing from the draft?

What follows are some commenting strategies that may help writers improve their structure as they revise.

### **Use Marginal Comments to Note Where You Get Lost or Confused**

A first rule of commenting is simply to tell students where you get confused. Consider “readerly” marginal notes such as the following:

*Whoa, you lost me.*

*How does this part relate to what you said on the previous page?*

*Can you clarify your point in the section that I have bracketed?*

*Your readers need a transition here.*

*These short, choppy paragraphs make it hard to tell what your main points are.*

*This paragraph wanders. What's its central idea?*

*You seem to be making several points here without developing them. Break into separate paragraphs and develop each?*

*Your introduction made me think you would do X next, but this is about Y.*

*You're bouncing all over. I need a road map of where we have been and where we are going.*

### **Comment on the Title and Introduction**

Readers pick up important clues about structure from the title and the introduction. Good titles often “nutshell” the writer’s argument (see discussion of titles in Chapter Thirteen, pages 251–252). Good introductions serve the same purpose. They should engage the reader’s attention and, in most academic writing, set forth the problem or question that the essay will address. Typically, the writer’s thesis comes at the end of the introduction (see discussion of introductions in Chapter Thirteen, pages 250–251). To help students understand why writers need to orient readers early on, I make it a regular practice to comment on titles and introductions. I praise strong titles and ask the student to revise weak ones. If the introduction sets up the problem well or has a good thesis, I praise it. If it doesn’t, this weakness becomes the primary focus of my end comment. In many academic papers, writers also need to provide a mapping passage that forecasts the structure of the paper. Asking students to add a forecasting passage can encourage them to solve structural problems as they revise.

### **Comment on Topic Sentences and Transitions**

When I help colleagues revise their article or book drafts for publication, I find that my most frequent comments focus on topic sentences of paragraphs. Drafts can often be improved dramatically if the opening sentence

of key paragraphs better states the writer's point. (Often a paragraph or a whole section needs to be revised once the topic sentence is clarified.) Also, transitions between paragraphs may need to be added or improved, either through use of transition words ("next," "therefore," "on the other hand," "moreover") or through backward-looking summaries and forward-looking forecasting ("In the previous section I have argued [X], but now a new question arises: Y"). I regularly praise good topic sentences or transitions as well as call attention to problem areas. My hope is that when I point out paragraphs without topic sentences or transitions, students can see models of "the right way" in their own drafts.

As an example of the kinds of paragraph-level revisions one hopes to promote, Exhibit 16.1 shows how a student in a first-year seminar revised a section of a draft in response to teacher commentary.

### **Does the Draft Effectively Manage Old and New Information?**

Cognitive psychology has shown that humans store new concepts in long-term memory by linking them to existing concepts. In other words, new information becomes meaningful only if it can be linked to old information (Willingham, 2009; Zull, 2002). Cognitive research applied to reading reveals that readers process information in a text by linking each new sentence to the meanings developed so far in those parts of the text already read (Colomb and Williams, 1985; Gopen and Swan, 1990). For prose to be cohesive (and hence easily understood), most of the sentences need to follow the "old/new contract": Old information comes at the beginning of a sentence—linking back to what has gone before—while new information comes later, often in the predicate, after the sentence has linked to the old. Once the reader assimilates a sentence's new information, that new information becomes old information, integrated into the unfolding meaning of the text. When writers consistently break this contract by beginning sentences with new information, the reader gets lost ("Hold on," says the reader. "I'm confused. You're dropping in stuff out of nowhere.") I illustrate this principle for students with the thought exercise in Exhibit 16.2.

Most students agree that Version 2 follows the old/new contract and is therefore easier to understand quickly. Each sentence opens with something old—either a repeated word from the previous sentence or a summarizing synonym for something earlier (for example, in sentence three "principle" stands for "old/new contract"). It is possible to understand Version 1, but it takes more "reader energy" to do so because it is harder to figure out how each sentence relates to the previous one.

**EXHIBIT 16.1****Student Revision of a Draft in Response to Teacher Commentary**

A problem is that nuclear power plants aren't safe. The Three Mile Island accident in 1979 and the disastrous Chernobyl meltdown in 1986 are examples of lack of safety.

An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* describes how a July 2007 magnitude 6.8 earthquake in Japan caused an indefinite shut down of a major nuclear plant and caused radioactive leaks into the air and the ocean ("No to Nukes").

While considering external shocks, opponents also want to remind us that nuclear plants are considered attractive terrorist targets, which raises the risk associated with nuclear technology. They point out that weapons proliferation is another problem. This is due to the fact that the process of reprocessing spent fuel requires the separation of plutonium from other materials to create new fuels (Editorial from the *Los Angeles Times*, 413).

Plutonium by itself is an excellent bomb material, which is probably the reason why 200 kilograms and 30 kilograms have gone missing in Japan and Britain respectively (Editorial from the *Los Angeles Times*, 413) ~~This is of great importance considering the fact that the bomb dropped on Nagasaki only contained six kilograms of Plutonium.~~

*Confusing. I thought you were supporting nuclear power.*

*Good transition — here you clarify that you are summarizing opponents.*

*Too many short paragraphs make it hard to follow your ideas.*

*What does "this" stand for?*

*Is this whole section a summary of opposing views?*

**Student's Revised Paragraph**

One of the reasons that people oppose nuclear power is their belief that it is unsafe. Opponents regularly cite the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 and the disastrous Chernobyl meltdown in 1986. A list of smaller nuclear accidents is provided by an editorial from the *Los Angeles Times*, which describes how a July 2007 magnitude 6.8 earthquake in Japan caused an indefinite shut down of a major nuclear plant and caused radioactive leaks into the air and the ocean ("No to Nukes"). Opponents also argue that nuclear plants are attractive terrorist targets. A properly placed explosive could spew radioactive material over densely populated areas. Nuclear power plants also provide opportunities for terrorists to steal plutonium for making their own nuclear weapons. According to the same *Los Angeles Times* editorial, 200 kilograms of plutonium have been reported missing in Japan and 30 kilograms in Britain. This number may seem small unless we consider that fact that the bomb dropped on Nagasaki contained only six kilograms of plutonium. These worries about safety and terrorism keep many people from considering the benefits of nuclear power.

When I give this example in class, I also show students how the old/new contract can clarify connections between paragraphs as well as between sentences. I ask them to reread the opening sentence of Version 2 ("Another principle for writing clear closed-form prose is the old/new contract") and then predict what the preceding paragraph was about. They see that the previous paragraph must have also concerned a principle for

**EXHIBIT 16.2****Thought Exercise on the Old/New Contract**

What follows are two explanations of the “old/new contract,” taken from Ramage, Bean, and Johnson, 2009, p. 477. One of these explanations follows the principle of old-before-new and the other doesn’t. Which one follows the old/new contract? Why?

**Version 1**

The old/new contract is another principle for writing clear closed-form prose. Beginning your sentences with something old—something that links back to what has gone before—and then ending your sentence with new information that advances the argument is what the old/new contract asks writers to do. An effect called *coherence*, which is closely related to *unity*, is created by following this principle. Whereas the clear relationship between the topic sentence and the body of the paragraph, between the parts and the whole, is what *unity* refers to, the clear relationship between one sentence and the next is what *coherence* relates to.

**Version 2**

Another principle for writing clear closed-form prose is the old/new contract. The old/new contract asks writers to begin sentences with something old—something that links back to what has gone before—and then to end sentences with new information that advances the argument. Following this principle creates an effect called *coherence*, which is closely related to *unity*. Whereas *unity* refers to the clear relationship between the body of a paragraph and its topic sentence, between the parts and the whole, *coherence* refers to the clear relationship between one sentence and the next, between part and part.

writing clear closed-form prose, but something other than the old/new contract. Perhaps the previous paragraph had a topic sentence like this: “One principle for writing clear closed-form prose is to state a paragraph’s point at the beginning of the paragraph.” The opening sentence of the next paragraph can then begin with a backward reference (“Another principle of writing clear closed-form prose”—something old) and then conclude with the new information (“is the old/new contract”). Once stated, the phrase “the old/new contract” shifts from new information to old information. The rest of the sentences in the paragraph can now begin with a reference to “old/new contract.”

The old/new contract also has explanatory power at the macro level. For example, it explains why a thesis statement typically comes at the *end* of the introduction. The thesis is the *new information* presented in the paper. The *old information* is the question that the thesis addresses. Before encountering the thesis, the reader must first understand the question, which hooks into something the reader is already interested in. The opening parts of a thesis-governed essay therefore typically begin with the question to be addressed rather than with the thesis.



**Is the Draft Free of Errors in Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling?**

Although I have called grammatical errors, misspellings, and punctuation mistakes “lower-order concerns” from the perspective of the writing process, they can be high-level concerns for readers. Finished work marred by these errors greatly annoys teachers and may have disastrous consequences in the work world—professional embarrassment, loss of ethos, or even failure to be hired or promoted. (See my discussion of Beason, 2001, and Hairston, 1981, in Chapter Five, pages 80–81.) What teachers should do about these errors, particularly teachers across the curriculum who are not writing teachers, remains a knotty problem. If teachers circle all the errors in students’ papers or serve as a line editor by making corrections, they significantly compound their workload and in most cases don’t help their students improve. In Chapter Five I argue for an approach to error that places maximum responsibility on students for learning to edit their own work. This philosophy follows Haswell’s practice of “minimal marking” (1983), in which teachers don’t mark student errors but require them to find and correct their own errors. The teacher tells a student that his or her paper is marred by sentence errors and that the student’s grade will be either reduced or unrecorded until most of the errors are found and corrected. (Haswell places a check in the margin of lines where errors occur.)

The beauty of this policy, from a teacher’s perspective, is that abandoning the role of proofreader and line editor saves substantial marking time (although it adds time required to look at rewrites). More importantly, it trains students to develop new editing habits for eliminating their own careless errors. The policy goal is to encourage students to edit their drafts with a reader’s eye, to use a grammar handbook, and to keep lists of their characteristic errors. Students with severe sentence-level difficulties may even be motivated to take another writing course or to seek tutorial help. The point, in any case, is to make students responsible for their own editing. (See Chapter Five for a full discussion of this complex and politically charged matter.)

When I recommend “minimal marking,” therefore, I am not advocating being soft on error. On the contrary, I am arguing that students’ errors should be noted emphatically and that some stick-and-carrot strategy should be applied to motivate students to find and fix them. My own strategy is to write an end comment like this:

*Sally, no grade yet because your paper is marred by sentence level errors. Your ideas are worth more careful editing. Please find and correct errors and resubmit.*



How high I raise the grade depends on how successful the student is in reducing the number of sentence errors. To speed rereading of corrections, I follow Haswell's practice of placing a check in the margins of lines that have errors so that I need to reread only those lines to determine whether the error was corrected. If a sentence is grammatically incomprehensible, I mark it with a comment such as "garbled" or "tangled syntax."

Another approach is to line edit one or two paragraphs and then ask the student to do the same for the rest of the draft. If you line edit, however, be careful to distinguish rule-based mistakes from stylistic choices. When you cross something out, for example, students often do not know if what they did was "wrong" or just stylistically unpolished. (The next section deals with stylistic, as opposed to grammatical, problems.)

A final strategy for helping students with sentence errors is to note characteristic patterns of errors. Shaughnessy (1977) demonstrated that what often looks like a dozen errors in a student's draft may really be one error repeated a dozen times. If you can help a student learn a rule or a principle, you can often clear up many mistakes in one swoop. Sometimes teaching a principle is a simple matter (explaining the difference between *it's* and *its*); at other times it is more complex (explaining what is meant by a comma splice). Even if you do not explain the rule or principle, helping students recognize a repeated pattern of error is a real service. Here is a typical end-comment:

*Sam, you have lots of sentence errors here, but many of them are of two types: (1) apostrophe errors—you tend to use apostrophes with plurals rather than possessives—and (2) comma splices (remember those from English class?).*

### **Is the Draft Free of Stylistic Problems?**

What distinguishes stylistic problems from grammar errors is that stylistic problems are rhetorical, between-sentence concerns rather than concerns of correctness. Errors in grammar are violations of the rule-based conventions that govern pronoun cases, subject-verb agreement, dangling modifiers, parallelism, sentence completeness, capitalization, and so forth. In contrast, stylistic problems involve rhetorical choices—matters of clarity and grace rather than right or wrong. Wordiness, choppiness, weak verbs, or excessive use of the passive voice are problems of rhetoric or style, not grammatical errors.

Students often need advice on achieving the right level of formality and voice in a paper (depending on genre and audience) or on

understanding when technical language or the passive voice is or is not appropriate. In addition, every teacher has pet peeves about style, so you might as well make yours known to students and note them on drafts when they start to annoy you. Here are my own personal top three annoyances. (I invite readers to make their own “top three” lists.)

*Wordiness.* Even though I am not always able to practice what I preach, I prefer a succinct, plain style unclogged by deadwood or circumlocutions. I urge students to cut and prune their drafts to achieve economy and tightness. Here’s an example:

**Original Version:** *As a result of the labor policies established by Bismarck, the working-class people in Germany were convinced that revolution was unnecessary for the attainment of their goals and purposes.*

**Improved Version:** *Bismarck’s labor policies convinced the German working class that revolution was unnecessary.*

*Lazy use of “this” as a pronoun.* Some writers try to create coherence between sentences by using *this* as a pronoun to link backward. Sometimes the “this” stands for a noun in the preceding sentence, but more often it is meant to stand for a whole idea. No grammatical rule actually forbids using *this* as an all-purpose pronoun (although some handbooks call the practice “broad reference” and frown on it), but its overuse can lead to gracelessness, reduced coherence, and outright ambiguity. Here is an example:

**Original Version:** *As a little girl, I liked to play with mechanical games and toys, but this was not supported by my parents. Fortunately, a woman math teacher in high school saw that I was good at this and advised me to major in engineering. But this turned out to be even more difficult than I imagined.*

**Improved Version:** *As a little girl, I liked to play with mechanical games and toys, but my parents didn’t support such “boylike behavior.” Fortunately, a woman math teacher in high school noticed my talent in math and physics and advised me to major in engineering—advice that turned out to be even more difficult to follow than I had imagined.*

*Choppy sentences—excessive coordination.* Experienced writers vary the length and structure of their sentences to emphasize main ideas, placing subordinate ideas in subordinate phrases or clauses. In contrast, beginning writers often string together a sequence of short sentences—or simply join

them with coordinating conjunctions such as *and*, *or*, *so*, or *but*. Excessive coordination creates a choppy effect that fails to distinguish between more important and less important material. By occasionally marking excessive coordination on a draft, you can help students learn to combine sentences by subordinating subordinate ideas.

*Original version:* I am a student at Sycamore College, and I am enclosing a proposal that concerns a problem with courses. During lectures many students use laptops. These students aren't taking notes. They are surfing the web or answering e-mail or checking Facebook. This usage makes it hard for other students to concentrate. The quality of learning goes down. The university should forbid use of laptops in classrooms.

*Improved version:* As a Sycamore College student, I am enclosing a proposal to forbid the use of laptops in lecture courses as a way of improving student learning. My proposal notes the frequency with which students use laptops during lectures to surf the web, answer e-mail, or check Facebook rather than to take notes. Because this behavior makes it hard for other students to concentrate, the best solution is to forbid laptops.

To help students overcome my top three peeves, I sometimes line-edit early examples of each problem and then ask the writer to do the same sort of thing throughout. I also draw a box around every "this" as pronoun.

## Suggestions for Writing End Comments That Encourage Revision

On the last page of a student's paper, teachers typically write an end comment, accompanied by the paper's grade. If they think of the end comment as a justification of the grade, the end comment tends to emphasize the bad features of the paper ("Here are the problems with the paper that caused me to give you a C"). But if teachers think of the end comment as guiding revision, it can become more affirmative. A draft that is unsuccessful as a final product may still be an excellent draft in terms of its potential. I like to tell students that a draft is to a finished product as a caterpillar is to a butterfly: all that's missing is the metamorphosis.

In writing end comments, I try to imagine the butterfly while critiquing the caterpillar. The purpose of the end comment is not to justify the current grade but to help writers make the kinds of revisions that will move the draft toward excellence. The strategy I recommend is to follow a three-step template: (1) strengths, (2) summary of a limited number of problems, and

(3) recommendations for revision. In all cases, try to be as specific as possible. Here are some examples of end comments that follow this template:

*Shanita, you have a good draft here that should be easy to improve. You present a strong thesis that *The Tempest* supports the colonial project, and you often use textual detail effectively for support. However, your introduction is hard to follow because you state your thesis before the reader quite sees what conversation you are joining. A second problem is that some of your discussions of Caliban aren't clearly connected to your thesis about the play's political work. (See my marginal notes.) Finally, you don't address counterarguments. Many of your classmates think that *The Tempest* opposes colonialism.*

*To improve this draft:*

- *In your introduction, explain the question before you state your thesis.*
- *Keep your discussion of Caliban focused on the colonial project by showing why you think Shakespeare's presentation of Caliban is similar to Hakluyt's view of natives in America.*
- *Anticipate the objections of those classmates who have a different view of Caliban.*
- *Respond to my marginal comments.*

• • •

*Paula, This is an excellent draft, perhaps one revision away from an A. I like very much your discussion of Diem's leadership and the rise of dissent in Vietnam. You set your ideas clearly and with strong evidence.*

*However, I got lost in a few places, which I noted in the marginal comments. It would also help your reader if you mapped out your purpose and structure more clearly in the introduction. Finally, in the middle of the paper, you need to expand and clarify your discussion of Vietnamese attitudes toward American soldiers. I wasn't quite sure what your point was in that whole section. Again, check my marginal comments to see where I got confused. Good job. I'm looking forward to your revision.*

## Conclusion: A Review of General Principles

The following list summarizes the main principles of commentary discussed in this chapter.

**General Procedures**

1. Comment first on ideas and organization: encourage students to solve higher-order problems before turning to lower-order problems.
2. Whenever possible, make positive comments. Praise strong points.
3. Try to write an end comment that reveals your interest in the student's ideas. Begin the end comment with an emphasis on good points and then move to specific recommendations for improvement.
4. Avoid overcommenting. Particularly avoid emphasizing lower-order concerns until you are satisfied with higher-order concerns. If a draft requires major revision at the level of ideas and organization, it is premature to worry about sentence errors.
5. As you read the essay, indicate your reaction to specific passages. Particularly comment on the ideas, raising queries and making suggestions on how the argument could be improved. Praise parts that you like.
6. Resist the urge to circle misspellings, punctuation errors, and so forth. Research suggests that students will improve more quickly if they are required to find and correct their own errors.

**Marking for Ideas**

7. The end comment should summarize your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the writer's ideas. Challenge writers to deepen and complicate their thought at a level appropriate to their intellectual development.

**Marking for Organization**

8. Use marginal comments to indicate places where structure becomes confusing.
9. Praise good titles, good thesis statements, good transitions, and so forth.

**Marking for Sentence Structure**

10. Although I recommend against marking or circling sentence errors, you might consider placing checks in the margins where they occur. When you return the papers, either withhold a grade or lower the grade until students who made substantial numbers of errors have reedited their work. Most students should be able to find and fix a majority of their errors. Students with severe sentence-level problems may need to seek personal tutoring.

11. Note places where sentence-level problems cause genuine confusion (as opposed to annoyance). Marginal comments such as “Tangled sentence” or “This passage is garbled” help the writer see where problems occur.

#### **Some Further Principles**

12. Try to make comments as legible and as straightforward as possible. As anyone who has looked at papers graded by a colleague knows, teachers’ comments can be difficult to decipher. Teacher comments are often unintentional examples of first-draft writing—clear to the writer but cryptic and baffling to others.
13. Whenever possible, use one-on-one conferences instead of commenting on papers. Perhaps my most frequent end comment is this: “You’re making real progress. Please see me so that I can help you move to the next stage.” An invitation for personal help is particularly useful when the student’s problems involve higher-order concerns.
14. Finally, think of your commentary as personal correspondence with the student, something that makes your own thinking visible and permanent. Try to invest in your commentary the tone of a supportive coach—someone interested in the student as a person and in the improvement of the student’s powers as a writer and thinker.

In sum, when students know an instructor’s criteria for a final product and when they have opportunities to revise their work with the guiding help of the instructor’s comments on drafts, the quality of their final work will noticeably improve. It is satisfying indeed to see how well many undergraduates can write when they are engaged in their projects and develop their ideas through multiple drafts. The point, then, of assigning writing across the curriculum is to engage students in the process of inquiry and active learning. When teachers give students good problems to think about—and involve them actively in the process of solving these problems—they are deepening students’ engagement with the subject matter, promoting their intellectual growth, and increasing the pleasure of learning for both students and teachers.