

# CENTER FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Tom Waldrep - Director

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## Teaching through Comments

1. Read the paper through without marking on it.
2. Identify one or two problems. In deciding what to teach this time, view the paper descriptively, not to judge it, but to discover what the text reveals about decisions the writer made. You may want to ask yourself the following questions:
  - a. Was the student committed to the assignment?
  - b. What did the student intend to do? What was the purpose for writing?
  - c. How did the writer define the audience for the piece?
  - d. How thoroughly did the student probe the subject?
  - e. How are paragraphs arranged?
  - f. What are the most frequent types of sentences?
  - g. What patterns of errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage does the paper contain? In what contexts do the errors appear? What makes them similar?Examining scratch notes and earlier drafts also helps reconstruct how the student created the final draft.
3. Formulate tentative hypotheses to explain the problem you want to focus on. You can assume that there's a logic to what appears on the page, even if it isn't your logic. Try to define that logic so that your comments can turn it around or modify it. For example, "I disliked the story because it's ending confused me" assumes (logically but unconventionally) that 's marks the possessive pronoun just as it does most nouns. Students who put commas in front of every *and* may be misapplying the rule for punctuating series or conjoining independent clauses; they need to learn that a "series" of two coordinated subjects or verbs doesn't need the comma. Merely labeling the error "misplaced comma" doesn't teach students *why* and *how* your logic and theirs differ.
4. Examine what the student has done well. Can this evidence help the student solve a problem elsewhere in the paper? How can the student's strengths be used to repair weaknesses?
5. Now you are ready to begin commenting on the paper. You have examined the evidence, decided what you want to teach, and identified specific examples of the problem (and perhaps solutions) on which to base your lesson.
6. Questions can call attention to troublespots, but avoid questions that prompt simple "yes" or "no" answers. Preface questions with *why*, *how*, or *what* so that students must reexamine the paper and become conscious critics of their own prose. ("How often have you used this kind of sentence in this paragraph?") Avoid imperatives ("Proofread more carefully"), which identify problems but don't help students learn *how* to solve them.

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7. Avoid labeling problems *unless* you also give students a way of overcoming them. If something is "unclear" or "awkward," let students know the source of your confusion. ("Do you mean...or...?") Refer to other sections of the paper that illustrate a strategy worth repeating. ("You're using abstract words here; why not give me another example as you did in paragraph 2?") Eschew, when you can, Latinate grammatical terms, abbreviations, and private symbols. They may be clear to you--after all, you've marked hundreds of papers with them--but they might mystify the student.
8. Make praise work toward improvements. Students need to know how a reader responds to their work, but they're rarely fooled by token praise. Avoid "good" or "I like this" unless you add a noun ("Good sentence variety here") or a reason. ("I like these details because they help me see Uncle Max.") Remember to commend students for progress they've made.
9. Avoid doing the student's work. Rewriting an occasional sentence can give students a model to imitate if you make it clear what principle the model illustrates. Circled or underlined words (and most marginal symbols) simply locate and label errors; the student probably didn't see the problem and needs practice proofreading and editing. A better strategy for handling surface errors might be to place a check in the margin next to the line in which a misspelled word or punctuation problem occurs. Then ask the student to examine the entire line, locate the problem, and determine how to eliminate it. Students who can't find the error on their own should feel free to ask you what the check means. Students may log these errors and their corrections in their journals so that they develop a sense of what they're overlooking. Logs can be discussed briefly in conference to identify patterns in the errors and work out strategies for anticipating them in future papers.
10. Write out a careful endnote to summarize your comments and to establish a goal for the next draft. Endnotes can follow a simple formula:
  - a. Devote at least one full sentence to commending what you can  
Legitimately praise; avoid undercutting the praise with *but* ("I like your introduction, *but* the paper is disorganized)."
  - b. Identify one or two problems and explain why they make understanding the piece difficult.
  - c. Set a goal for the student to work toward in the next draft.
  - d. Suggest specific strategies for reaching the goal. ("In you next draft, do this:...")Traditional endnotes address a paper's weaknesses, but if you want to see the strengths repeated, praise them when you find them. Silence tells students nothing. Traditional endnotes also omit goals and offer few explicit suggestions for reaching them. Including goals and strategies gives the endnote a teaching function, helps redirect a writer's energies, and reduces the amount of trial-and-error learning students must go through to improve their writing. Subsequent papers are more likely to show improvement if you explicitly define what you

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think needs work and how to go about it. Your suggestions also will encourage students to see connections between what they discuss in class and what they practice in their assignments, between problems they've encountered in one draft and solutions worth trying in the next.

Setting goals and offering specific solutions to writing problems can be difficult at first, especially if you don't know what to suggest to address the problem you see. But with practice, you find yourself developing a repertoire of goals and strategies to adapt to individual papers. State each goal positively, perhaps mentioning problems in previous papers that now have been solved or pointing to specific strengths in this paper. Instead of writing, "This paper shows little thought," write, "In planning your next paper, spend fifteen minutes ferreting; then fill a page with notes on your subject and decide how to group them under three or four headings." Not, "Your sentences are hopeless"; rather, "You've made considerable progress in organizing the whole essay. Now it's time to work on sentences. Read this draft aloud to hear where sentences could be combined or made less wordy. Your ideas will come across more forcefully if you avoid passive voice verbs and sentences that begin with *There are* and *It is*." Phrase the goal in language that encourages students to experiment and take risks. Avoid prescribing additional goals until students have reached those you've already given them.

11. Write yourself a note to chart the student's progress, a reminder you can keep in the student's folder. Describe briefly what areas no longer seem to be problems, what problems you addressed this time, and what needs attention later on. If this draft enabled you to teach a principle of paragraphing, remind yourself to evaluate the next paper in light of the paragraph goal you set. If you also noticed sentence problems this time around, a note will remind you to set a sentence goal when paragraphs begin to look stronger.

*Taken from: Lindemann, E. A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, 3rd edition.*