

Writing Across the Curriculum

BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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From left to right, front row: Susan Stratton, Khushmand Rajendran, Carol Linnea Johnson. Middle row: Christa Lam, Rifat Salam. Back row: Cara Frissell, Tom Marks, Maxx Rivera, Sarah D'Andrea, Kelsey Pugh, Holly Messitt, Cara O'Connor. Not pictured: Paoyi Huang, Cheryl Comeau-Kirschner, Dana Liljegren, Natalie Oshukany.

All the articles featured in this issue address the often complicated and time-consuming task of commenting on students' written work. In it, we provide perspectives on and strategies for commenting in order to promote clarity of thought and effective revision.

Commenting on Students' Papers

By Dana Liljegren and Tom Marks

Responding to students' writing can be a complicated part of the feedback and assessment process. Students may either become confused by the vague comments left behind on their papers or become simply overwhelmed by the amount of grammatical errors corrected on their work. In this article, we explore some of the WAC strategies for commenting on and responding to students' writing.

Adopt a productive order of operations.

It may seem instinctual to take a red pen in hand before we even begin the process of reviewing a student's writing; however, the mere presence of this particular grading tool can impact how we respond to a text. The urge to line-edit and correct grammatical mistakes might then hinder a reader's ability to perceive, reflect on, and discuss the larger,

(“Commenting on Students’ Papers” *cont.*) more fundamental features of student writing. “What is the student doing in this piece of writing? Does the text fulfill the assignment successfully? Why or why not?” These are just a few examples of questions that graders can ask themselves before uncapping the red pen. In the same way that proofreading and polishing are the final steps of the writing process, the marking of surface errors is often best left for a revised or final paper. As Nancy Sommers writes in “Responding to Student Writing,” her emblematic essay from 1982, “[A]ppropriation of the text by the teacher happens particularly when teachers identify errors in usage, diction, and style in a first draft and ask students to correct these errors when they revise; such comments give the student an impression of the importance of these errors that is all out of proportion to how they should view these errors at this point in the process. The comments create the concern that these “accidents of discourse” need to be attended to before the meaning of the text is attended to” (Sommers, 150).

Experiment with “minimal marking” strategies.

One way to both save yourself time in the commenting process while simultaneously encouraging students to take responsibility for their own grammatical errors is to adopt R. H. Haswell’s “minimal marking” approach (Haswell, 1983). In this style of commenting, professors refrain from marking specific grammatical issues in the student’s written text. Instead of indicating where to place a comma or a hyphen, for example, the professor merely indicates the presence of such an error with a marginal checkmark. This visual indicator informs the student that something in the line of text requires their attention, and students are subsequently responsible for identifying and addressing these errors themselves. Such an approach not only asks students to understand the reasons behind their grammatical peccadillos, but it also prevents them from merely implementing the

editorial marks of their teacher in the revision process. It helps, in John Bean’s words, to “avoid sending the misleading message that a poorly written essay simply needs editing rather than revision” (Bean, 84).

Use the margins to begin a dialogue.

Teachers and students alike can attest to the ubiquity of certain marginal comments on graded papers: exhortations such as “Be specific here,” or “Clarify!” are familiar to many of us who have either written or evaluated student essays. Yet this type of marginalia often renders the commenter guilty of the very thing she is remarking upon in a student paper. In an effort to be concise, clear, or time-efficient, even the best-intentioned teachers can provide feedback that, from a student’s perspective, is vague, unclear, or suggests only shallow engagement with the completed assignment. A straightforward strategy for remedying this issue is to pose a question whenever possible, rather than making a statement. Consider how an in-person conversation with the student about her paper might proceed. Instead of one-word imperatives, formulate commentary in a more dialogic format: “You seem to be agreeing with the author here, is that correct? If so, can you clarify your position with added evidence?” This type of comment clarifies the teacher’s meaning for the student and it creates a space for reflection and revision. The question not only offers an observation, it extends an invitation for further response.

Offer students a space for their own voice in the commenting process.

Often, when educators leave comments for further revision on students’ papers, these remarks can be misinterpreted or not fully understood. Rather than asking the professor for clarification, students are more apt to guess at the intended meaning of the comment, leading to further interpretive differences and, potentially, frustration or even anger.

(“Commenting on Students’ Papers” *cont.*)

In order to clarify any misconceptions about comments on student writing, consider employing Pamela Gay’s method of dialogic commentary. In her article “Dialogizing Response in the Writing Classroom: Students Answer Back,” Gay discourages the one-way approach to commenting which privileges the voice of the professor while effacing that of the student. Instead, Gay asks students to first read all the comments on their papers and respond in a free-written paragraph that outlines their initial reactions. Next, students extract all of the professor’s comments and respond to each of them individually. In these responses, students may choose to 1) vent their feelings and frustrations about the comment, 2) counter the comment by adding a new piece of information, 3) leave a question for the professor if the comment is unclear, 4) explain their reasoning and rationale behind a particular point argued in the written work, or 5) leave a note for themselves to do further work (11). The students’ responses are then returned to the teacher, who may choose to address them on an individual basis or, after reading through all responses, address them collectively in class. If done successfully, this method not only affords a voice back to students, but also helps them reflect deeply on their own work during the revision process.

Compose an end comment.

Like all other comments offered on students’ papers, end comments should be composed with revision in mind. The objective of a good end comment is not to explain why a student received their particular grade—an enumeration, in other words, of all the good and bad aspects of their paper—but rather to coach students on the proper way to precede with reworking and re-crafting their paper into a solid piece of scholarship. In his book *Engaging Ideas*, John Bean offers a three-step process to writing an end comment in which

the paper’s revision is the primary goal. Bean recommends that educators first highlight the student’s strengths in the paper, focusing on what works well and what is adroitly executed. Next, teachers should offer an overview of some of the more significant problems in the paper. Here, the purpose is not to tally in great detail all the faults found within, but rather to comment on some issues that fundamentally affect the quality of the work, including issues with logic, argumentation, and organization. Finally, the professor should offer comments for revision, outlining some of the ways in which the student might address the problems overviewed in the second part of the end comment (Bean, 333-334). By giving attention to these three aspects, professors can, in the words of Nancy Sommers, continue “to sabotage our students’ conviction that the drafts they have written are complete and coherent. Our comments need to offer students revision tasks of a different order of complexity and sophistication from the ones that they themselves identify, by forcing students back into the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning” (Sommers, 154).

Each of these steps and strategies provides, in distinct ways, the potential for deeper engagement and clearer communication with students, while also saving precious time for the reader/responder. For more on this topic, see Carol Rutz’s 2006 essay, “Recovering the Conversation: A Response to ‘Responding to Student Writing’ via ‘Across the Drafts’” (available on JSTOR and the WAC @ BMCC Commons site), and John Bean’s “Writing Comments on Students’ Papers” in *Engaging Ideas*.

Students Discuss Professors' Comments

We asked BMCC students to share some thoughts and feelings about receiving professors' comments on written work. Here's what two Liberal Arts majors—James Harris and Shanel Thompson—had to say.

How do you feel when you get a paper back from a professor with his/her comments? What kinds of emotions do you typically experience?

James Harris: "When I am about to receive my paper back, I get nervous about the uncertainty of my grade."

Shanel Thompson: "It depends on whether there is constructive criticism, and if I can take the comments on the work and use them to revise in an actionable way."

Why do professors comment on written work? What, do you think, is the ultimate goal of this process?

JH: "They comment on your work to help you improve on what you wrote. The goal is to make you hit your marks and produce stronger written papers."

ST: "Comments are to help students better understand mistakes, and to give the opportunity to correct them going forward and do better. This aids in the learning process."

What kinds of comments would you like to see more of on your written work? What is most beneficial for you personally?

JH: "I would like to see more comments like, 'Add more research,' or 'Include more.' All of it is beneficial."

ST: "Some professors hint towards things rather than give direct responses. I want guidelines to direct me toward the specific correction to make."

When revising a paper according to professors' feedback/instruction, what kinds of comments have been the most helpful? What comments are not helpful?

JH: "Comments like 'Talk more or include more about this' are helpful to revise your paper, since each teacher's grading style is different."

ST: "It depends on the course. If the course uses a textbook, it can be helpful if comments reference specific material, even pages, from the relevant text. Vague comments are not usually helpful; complicated comments - too long or too complex - are also not very helpful."

WAC Faculty @ BMCC

The new CUNY Commons site for WAC-trained faculty at BMCC has launched. Features of the site include:

- Online refresher workshops and discussion boards
- Sample writing assignments from a variety of disciplines
- Sample rubrics
- Pedagogical literature on WAC principles
- Reading activities for students
- Profiles on WAC coordinators and WAC fellows

If you are a WI-trained faculty member and have not yet received an invitation to join the new WAC Faculty @ BMCC Commons site, email Holly Messitt (hmessitt@bmcc.cuny.edu) or Rifat Salam (rsalam@bmcc.cuny.edu) to request permission to join.



Thoughts from the BMCC Writing Center

Writing Across the Curriculum Fellows contribute some of their thoughts about commenting on students' written work based on their time tutoring in the BMCC Writing Center. WAC fellows discuss some points of confusion students encounter when reading their professors' comments and provide a few helpful strategies for addressing these common occurrences.

Understanding Assignments

By Sarah D'Andrea

When tutoring in the writing center, students often say, "I thought this was what the professor wanted, but she/he asked me to rewrite the paper." After talking with them and reviewing the assignment, I often find that students misinterpret or misunderstand the requirements. I then review the heavily marked up paper, and notice the comments include more thorough instructions than were present in the initial prompt. However, there are a few strategies professors can

employ to reduce the likelihood of student confusion.

- **Provide a Rubric:** Rubrics help students know what is required/prioritized in an assignment, and on which criteria they will be graded.
- **Go Over the Assignment in Class:** Set aside class time to explain the assignment, its requirements, and take questions. This gives students clarification before beginning the writing process.

(“Thoughts,” *cont.*)

- **Offer an Exemplary Paper:** This serves as a template, and allows students to see the assignment in context.
- **Role, Audience, Format, Task (R.A.F.T):** Most importantly, include as many aspects of R.A.F.T. as is appropriate for the assignment. Indicating the role, audience, format, as well as the task will answer a lot of student questions, and elucidate the prompt.

Adapting one (or more) of these strategies will not only greatly help students, but also cut down on the time spent responding to student writing. If students understand the prompt from the beginning, lengthy comments clarifying the assignment become unnecessary.

Using Evidence

Kelsey Pugh

One comment that frequently appears on student work in the Writing Center falls along the lines of “you need to support this idea with evidence.” Since we work with students from all disciplines, “evidence” can amount to literary quotations, experimental data, behavioral observations, or anything in between. However, it seems that, regardless of discipline, BMCC students are often unprepared to understand both how they should go about finding sources containing such evidence, and what supporting an argument with evidence means in the context of their assignments.

The first issue is relatively straightforward to address, especially in the social and hard sciences where an in-class tutorial on how to use Google Scholar or another search engine that focuses on primary academic literature can be very useful to students new to research. I have had great success with this in the Writing Center, and have still had plenty of time to address other concerns during a

one-hour appointment. To address the latter, more complicated issue of how discipline-specific evidence can be used to bolster an argument in a thesis-based paper, I would suggest an in-class exercise where groups of students are given a thesis statement and a handful of primary sources or quotations. Students can then work together to choose which pieces of evidence are best used to support the thesis. This exercise, followed by an explanation of the reasoning behind their choices, should help students to understand the role of evidence in argumentative papers

Addressing Grammar

By Natalie Oshukany

I often work with students on assignment revisions in the BMCC Writing Center. While opportunities for revision can allow students to reflect on and improve their ideas and communication skills through writing, too frequently this potential is undone by one well-meaning but vague comment on students’ papers: “Grammar.” Sometimes this corrective is more nuanced (e.g. “run-on” or “sentence structure”), but the effect is the same: students feel overwhelmed, disheartened, and unsure of how to proceed. In general, students who receive such comments are aware that they need to “work on grammar.” But the lack of suggestion or direction in this genre of commentary works to concretize the idea in students’ minds that they are simply “bad” at grammar, rather than presenting it as a challenge that they can understand and tackle. Below, I offer some suggestions for commenting on students’ papers that aim to 1) provide students with concrete ways to improve grammatical aspects of their writing, and 2) encourage a growth mindset with respect to these writing challenges.

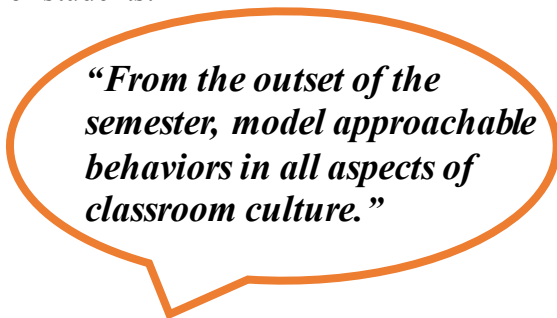
“If students understand the prompt from the beginning, lengthy comments clarifying the assignment become unnecessary.”

(“Thoughts from the BMCC,” *cont.*)

- **Encourage students to refine their ideas and arguments, in addition to grammar.**

This promotes a holistic understanding of thinking and communication, and, ideally, moves away from the demoralization that comes with a sole focus on grammar.

- **Point out only 1-2 dominant patterns of error.** By focusing on, say, subject-verb agreement and capitalization rather than “grammar” in general, the task of revision becomes manageable for students. Such focused revision also encourages students to deeply understand and master those particular aspects of grammar, which they can build on in their later assignments.
- **Provide detailed corrections for only the first 1-2 instances of error.** This offers students both a way of understanding the issue at hand, and a model for how to proceed with their own revisions. This also cuts down on the time professors spend commenting on student assignments.
- **Create a worksheet of common grammatical errors, drawn anonymously from student papers, and have students correct them.** Have students complete these worksheets with partners or in groups, and spend some time making sure that the errors and their corrections are understood. This is an economical way for professors to address patterns of grammatical error on a larger scale, and it can be a handy reference sheet for students.



“From the outset of the semester, model approachable behaviors in all aspects of classroom culture.”

Encouraging Dialogue

By Tom Marks

One facet of commenting on students’ writing I’ve observed during my time in the Writing Center is students’ general trepidation toward asking their professors for clarification about certain comments left on their work. Though educators strive to communicate clearly with their students, comments can sometimes be ambiguous or received in unintended ways. Rather than reaching out to their professors for further clarification, students will often wander in confusion and attempt to intuit their professor’s intentions. In short, students often feel that they are not permitted to ask for further clarification in the revision process—the returned draft is the authoritative end of a dialogue rather than one more step in the ongoing thinking/writing process.

In addition to striving for clarity with the comments left on students’ work, educators can encourage conversation with students after marked drafts have been returned. Afford opportunities for students to ask questions about comments in class. After returning papers, give students five minutes to look over your comments and address any concerns they might have about your remarks. From the outset of the semester, model approachable behaviors in all aspects of classroom culture. You might, for example, require each of your students to visit your office during the first week of class so that they know not only how to find it, but also recognize that the space itself is inviting and welcoming. Demonstrating approachability and allowing students the opportunity to voice confusions can help to deconstruct the misconception that professors’ comments on a written draft are final and are not to be questioned.

Works Cited

All referenced articles in this Newsletter can be found at the new WAC Faculty @ BMCC Commons site.

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WAC at BMCC

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CUNY Academic Commons

BMCC WAC Site

Bmcc.cuny.edu/wac

The WAC ClearingHouse

Wac.colostate.edu/intro

Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab)

Owl.english.purdue.edu/owl