

# **Marking Papers**

## **A Handbook for the Smith College Faculty**

A Publication of the Jacobson Center  
for Writing, Teaching and Learning

A Smith College Publication  
Copyright © Smith College, 2003. Printed in Northampton, Mass.

ISBN 0-9664547-4-x



## **Preface**

This booklet represents the accumulated wisdom from several decades of Smith College colloquia on the teaching of writing. It also includes individual contributions from several members of the faculty who were kind enough to read the manuscript and to make additional suggestions and contributions. I'm grateful to them, and to the workshops' many leaders and participants.

Marian V.H. Macdonald

*Director, The Jacobson Center for Writing, Teaching and Learning*  
Fall 2002



Marking papers is probably everyone's least favorite part of teaching, and it's certainly the part we complain about the most. *How much should I say? How little? Should I re-write? Whose paper is it, anyway? Am I spending absurd amounts of time on this? Will she even read my comments? Does this one deserve an A- or a B+ and how do I decide?* In this booklet we discuss two of the most common aspects of marking papers: commenting on drafts and assessing final products.

## WORKING WITH STUDENT DRAFTS

When we comment on a student draft, the writer is still engaged with the material, still in a position to improve her grade, and as ready as she'll ever be to listen to and incorporate our suggestions. Many of us believe that this moment is arguably our best opportunity to improve student thinking and writing. Yet commenting well is an art, and even when we seize the optimum moment, there are inherent difficulties.

The Harvard Assessment Report (1992) pointed to two main obstacles standing in the way of students' writing improvement. The first is misinterpretation – sometimes inadvertent, sometimes willful – of teachers' comments on their essays.

Students are human beings, after all, and share the common human desire to dismiss unpleasant or demanding criticism and advice. Some students will misinterpret such comments simply in the interest of avoiding hard work. For example, if we've put a question mark or a "why?" beside a sentence, intending to suggest that a promising thought is incomplete, instead of developing the thought a student may just delete the whole thing, saying "he questioned that, so I took it out." It's a course of action much easier than re-thinking or revising. Another response is to dismiss our comments as arbitrary, idiosyncratic, a matter of personal taste: "it wasn't what she wanted. . . .she doesn't like my style. . . . she hated it. . . .she wants me to write like she does."

The Harvard Assessment Report points out another main obstacle to students' writing improvement: even after their drafts have been returned to them with comments, students lack specific strategies for revising. We must admit that sometimes our comments are too general to be helpful. If you went to a doctor you'd be disappointed and frustrated if he or she simply said "Your health isn't very good."

## 2 Marking Papers

Similarly, students don't know how to proceed if all we tell them is "you don't write very well" or "you need to work on your writing."

Contending with these difficulties, participants in various Smith writing colloquia over the years have concluded that the two fundamental elements of the art of commenting productively on papers are **1) responding to a piece of student writing as a communication, not as a collection of mistakes; and 2) being specific.**

Here are a few suggestions, with examples, of ways to avoid dismissive student responses and to make comments on papers an effective force for student learning.

1. **Make sure that your central comment responds to what the student is trying to say**, to the structure, coherence, and presentation of her argument. Comments like these two are helpful:

*Is your thesis about Hobbes's contributions to scientific thought, or is it about the application of scientific thinking and the criteria invoked by Copernicus to describe physical motions and interactions? The second is truer to the assignment. If that's your thesis, you should only introduce examples of the first when they help advance your argument.*

*A good beginning. You make some excellent criticisms of Satan's arguments, especially in the places where you point to his reversing his original statements. I think that your definition of an orator needs changing to accord with the standard one, but the points you make about Satan's arguments will still work. What you need to do in revising is to work more fully with all the ways in which the speech persuades, quoting pretty well the whole speech and commenting in detail.*

Responding to the student's ideas also reminds you to be positive. You wouldn't, after all, react to an acquaintance's effort at conversation by immediately pointing out all her mistakes; you'd be much more likely to respond as generously as you could to her general drift and then to offer questions or comments. **Nancy**

**Bradbury** (English) says “I try to find the point of highest intensity in the paper – its most insightful or complex or analytical moment – and mark it with a highly affirmative comment – ‘yes! excellent! this kind of close attention to language is just what you want more of in this paper.’ When I was a new teacher, I tended to dwell on the worst moments and try tactfully to explain why they were so bad.”

**II. Set clear priorities.** If you don’t, your students may respond to the easiest, most mechanical suggestions first, and never get to the meatiest issues. You might even want to tell your students that your comments will nearly always follow a specific format: for example, in descending order of importance, a) a comment on central focus; b) a comment on a specific point; c) a comment about issues of grammar or style. This clarity will be helpful to them and will also save you time; you won’t have to re-invent the wheel with each student paper. Here’s a good example:

- a) *As it reads now, the essay feels like an ongoing discussion of light as it comes up in the course of the poem. You can now step back and consider how these various passages contribute to an overall effect. Your final section really makes the argument that the paper as a whole is leading to, so you might import that material back into your opening and make it central.*
- b) *One speech that bears on your theme is Clarissa’s, and I think you can do something with it even if it doesn’t have a lot of light imagery in it.*
- c) *Keep working on your verbs. A number of long sentences (the one on p.7) tend to lose their focus – you add clauses or modifiers to the point of obscuring what’s primary about the point you’re making. They need a bit of reshaping to make clear what’s central. In a sense the problem with these is the problem with the draft: lots of good but not yet fully articulated observations.*

You’ve no doubt noticed that this comment and the two above are long. Those who take the time to comment at this length do so because they’re convinced that the investment of time at this stage is

## 4 Marking Papers

worth it.

- III. When you can, **connect your comments about issues of grammar and style to larger issues of communication.** You hope that the student will see mastery of these skills not as pursuit of an abstract ideal of correctness, important only to fussy academics, but as an important part of her development as an effective communicator. Here are two comments that do that:

*The Marx section is successful because you used supporting detail from the text so closely; your Engels section doesn't work as well because it's more general and isn't tied to a specific essay.*

*Vary your sentence-length. Notice the tendency to use a lot of short sentences, one after the other. This tendency has two drawbacks: it makes for a kind of jerkiness in the writing, and it doesn't show the relations between your ideas.*

- IV. If you can, **use common terms and link your comments to broader advice.** This combats students' tendency to dismiss your comments as merely matters of personal taste. For example, rather than saying "I wish you'd said something more about Marx's theory of X," use the term "paragraph development" in your comment. The student may be hearing something similar from her professors in other classes, and these comments will reinforce one another. A common reference point is the *Smith Writing Papers* handbook.

Finally, you may find a grid or a checklist format more helpful than discursive comments, or useful in conjunction with them. This one, derived from the work of Peter Elbow (UMass), is used by **Nathanael Fortune** (Physics) and others.

	Strong	OK	Weak	
Content				
Organization				
Language/Mechanics				



Some of our colleagues use other media. **Susan Van Dyne** (Women's Studies) tape-records her comments. She likes the method because it helps her "concentrate on the big picture, hear my voice, monitor for friendliness, and keep myself from marking too much – and in less time, usually about twenty minutes." **John Brady** (Geology) asks his students to submit their papers electronically. Then he marks them using the "Insert Comment" command, found on the "Insert" menu. When he inserts a comment, it's displayed like a cartoon caption when the cursor is passed over the appropriate spot. He also uses the "Track Changes/Highlight Changes" command under the "Tools" menu. This enables him to make editorial changes and to track them clearly in a color chosen from "Options" under the "Highlight Changes" menu. He finds that he writes longer comments when he uses these tools, since "I type faster than I write."

As these varied approaches should make clear, when it comes to the specifics of marking papers there's ample room for personal style. Some people are wedded to habitual techniques, up to and including the color of ink they choose (the world appears to be divided between advocates of red or green). No practice is wrong if it works for you. Here are, however, a few DON'Ts that have seemed sensible to many of our writing colloquium participants:

1. *Don't mark everything.* Your goal isn't an error-free revision (which may involve no more than a retyping that incorporates your corrections), but rather what the student can learn from this exercise. If a student writes sentence fragments, address that and let the relatively esoteric issues of misplaced modifiers or pronoun disagreement go until she's mastered the complete sentence.
2. *Don't label,* especially with judgmental or abstract language: "unfocused," "loose," "doesn't flow," "awk," etc. Here you're not providing strategies for revision, but offering opportunities for the student to misinterpret your comments as arbitrary: "he hates the way I write." Instead, *ask questions* that indicate where the writer is actually confusing the reader: i.e., rather than labeling the writer's thesis "unclear," say "I don't get this. Are you mainly interested in class division, or in public opinion?"
3. Except for sophisticated student writers, who will appreciate it, *don't re-write.* Beginning writers won't analyze what you've done, but

## 6 Marking Papers

simply dismiss it: “she wants me to write like she does.”

4. *Don't overwhelm*, as in “This paper could stand a good editing job – poor punctuation and grammar, and loose style of writing – besides a tighter construction and organization of ideas.” What's left? And does the student have any idea how to make “loose” writing “tight,” or even how to recognize it?
5. *Don't intimidate*. The student who reads a comment like the following will doubt that her very soul is equal to the task: “It's a stunningly beautiful poem but you must do something with it. Your description only sprawls and does not penetrate to the poem's inner life.”
6. *Don't criticize the writer*, as in “You must have read Marx very carelessly.” Again, your comment, which was meant to point to a lack of coherence in the writer's account of Marx's argument, can be dismissed and defended as follows: “But I spent *hours* reading Marx. You can ask my roommate. You should look at my text; it's all highlighted . . . .” The issue has become not her writing, but her behavior.

## ASSESSING THE FINAL PRODUCT

Reading the above hints, you of course noticed that many of the comments cited as exemplary were quite discursive, and you may have wondered how to manage the time commitment such an approach would clearly demand. The only way to justify such a time commitment, even if you believe firmly in the efficacy of intervening at the draft stage of student writing, is to minimize the time and effort you put in when grading time rolls around.

First, simply tell your students that your comments on their final drafts will be minimal, limited for the most part to a comment on how well their revision process succeeded. Thus:

A-. You did a great job with the redefinition of key terms, although I still wish you'd dealt more closely with Marx's essay.

You'll find that your second reading goes much more quickly because

you're already familiar with what the student was attempting and what she needed to do to achieve it.

Of course some of us don't assign student drafts, at least not for every paper. What's helpful in the assessment of a paper we're seeing for the first time? Again, how can we make the time commitment manageable? And how can we clarify for students what that grade is based on? Here are two suggestions.

First, as you assign a piece of writing, ask yourself what you hope the students will learn to **do** from this assignment. For example, do you want them to use primary sources to develop an argument about an historical event? compare two sociologists' theories, uncovering common assumptions and points of departure? reconcile apparently contradictory accounts of the same scientific phenomenon? Then ask yourself what elements need to be present if the student is to do the above tasks successfully. If you and your students are clear about the aim of the exercise, assessing the papers will be easier for you and understanding and accepting your assessments will be easier for them.

While this sort of specific clarity about a particular writing assignment is especially helpful, some of our colleagues find that their lives are made easier too if they give their students a general outline of their standards and goals. In terms of the writing for the course, such a list might include:

- Establish a clear thesis or central point
- Organize the essay effectively
- Back up the thesis with evidence
- Use the conventions of Standard Written English

Assessing a student paper in terms of these four basic goals should go rather quickly.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the end, of course, there are no real shortcuts. We'll all continue to spend long evenings and Sunday afternoons making our way through stacks of papers, wrenching our minds from one topic to the next, from one student's way of thinking to another's. Grading and commenting on student writing is simply one of the hardest parts of being a teacher. We've shared these tips in the hopes of making the process more effective.

