

Return on Investment: Four Core Strategies for Commenting on Student Essays

E. Shelley Reid, August 2008

Preamble

Research in composition/rhetoric demonstrates that

- Students quickly get overwhelmed by teacher-comments on their essays, even positive ones
- Comments specific to the essay have more power than generic ones
- Students frequently don't "transfer" learning from one assignment to the next
- Students learn to write by writing/revising more than by reading advice about writing
- Most of students' syntactic and mechanical errors do not improve via a teacher's direct instruction, drill, and/or correction; students improve by themselves working with contextualized sentences

Your own experience should tell you that

- Teachers quickly get overwhelmed by commenting on student essays
- Few students who revise "fix" everything that you mark, or revise more than about enough to raise their essay-grades one letter-grade level (10%)
- Extensive comments on essays that students do not actually revise have limited pedagogical value
- Writing comments merely to "justify" a grade of less-than-"A" is not a soul-enriching endeavor

Common sense should thus tell you that

- Fewer, carefully-targeted, engaged-with comments could be better for students
- Fewer, carefully-targeted, engaged-with comments could be better for teachers

Core Issue

Your time spent grading is the single biggest investment you will make in your students this semester. How can you ensure the largest return on that investment (ROI)?

Four principles for the savvy grading-investor

- 1. Know what you're looking for most in each assignment, and focus on those issues.**
 - a. Choose core competencies for each assignment, 3-4 max.
 - b. Focus your teaching and homework on those; build a common vocab. with students
 - c. Triage each essay quickly: what 1-2 core competencies does this student most *need* to improve? what 1-2 core competencies *can* this student most likely improve?
 - d. Use written-out comments only to address those issues
 - e. Remember the value of praising the student's *best effort so far* in one or more areas

2. Use your individualized responses to teach at teachable moments

- a. Invest more *commenting* time early
 - i. early in the semester
 - ii. early in the writing process for a project
- b. Invest less time in *commenting* on final and/or late-term assignments
- c. Write *short, leading comments* that ask for or direct a particular kind of revision
 - i. Prefer "What were you happier *than*?" to "Vague."
 - ii. Prefer "Could you make this clear earlier?" to "Reorganize"
 - iii. Prefer "X says ___; however, this won't work because ___" to "Be explicit."
- d. Write end comments that prioritize achievements and necessary revisions: what's first?

3. Enlist students in helping you (all) achieve maximum investment returns

- a. Use models and/or peer-review questions to help students identify "stronger/weaker" sightings of your 3-4 focus elements in each other's writing
- b. Have students self-review based on your assignment or rubric: what did they do well? what not so well?
- c. Use in-class time for planning and starting revisions based on peer review, self-review, or instructor-review
- d. Require students to explain what they already know they'll change in the current draft
- e. Ask students to annotate any draft that comes in: what they did well, where they have questions
- f. Require students' responses to your/others' previous comments before or with the next draft
- g. Ask students to enumerate key revisions to current draft and/or plans for next draft

4. Use shortcuts, rubrics, other strategies to minimize time spent on ranking/defending/grading

- a. Use underlines, squiggles, or X's as minimal marking at the sentence-level
- b. Consider marking mechanical/stylistic errors only for a paragraph or two in intense cases
- c. Limit yourself: numbered comments, space on response sheet, formulaic response outline
- d. Make fewer evaluative decisions: fewer categories, fewer scores within categories
- e. Use rubrics stating *high-water-mark* specific goals—or computer macros—to provide feedback on a range of commonly-expected competencies; annotate your rubric if needed
- f. Keep a list of common critiques to elucidate for the whole class
- g. Provide sample "A" vs. "C" paragraphs or checklists *before* handing back graded essays
- h. Offer additional responses to direct, specific questions if students request them (48 hour rule)
- i. ***Don't feel guilty!***