Giving Writing Feedback

(when you're not a writing teacher)

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Overview

1 | What constitutes feedback?

- Higher-order concerns
- Lower-order concerns

2 | What feedback do students need?

- Referring to learning goals
- Articulating clear, achievable expectations

3 | How can I best give feedback?

- Managing feedback time
- Feedback tools

What constitutes writing feedback?

Higher-order Concerns

- Higher-order concerns address the content and structure of the writing. Some questions you may ask of the writing include: does this paper fulfill the genre of the assignment (argumentative, narrative, report, etc.)? Does this paper have a clear topic throughout? Does this paper include more or less content than is needed for the assignment?

- **Primary focuses:** conceptual/genre, content, and structural/organizational

Lower-order Concerns

- Lower-order concerns address the technical elements of writing. These concerns are secondary to the higher-order concerns and should be addressed after higher-order concerns. However, if a lower-order concern inhibits understanding higher-order concerns, then both may be discussed simultaneously.

- **Primary focuses:** sentence-level grammar and word choice, style and formatting preferences

Example: higher-order concern feedback

This paragraph does a great job of establishing a timeline for your topic, which I believe is ICE's actions during COVID. An introductory paragraph is the perfect time to provide relevant background on your topic. Do you think it's necessary to include information about all of ICE's operations? Is more context needed about COVID?

Explanation:

This short response praises a specific (higher-order) quality of the writing and promotes deeper engagement with the writing by asking the student to reconsider *how much* and *what* content is needed in an introduction on this topic.

Sample text from student paper:

Since its inception after 9/11, ICE has shaped and enforced immigration policy by upholding diametric categories of wanted and unwanted immigrants. Their main operations include Operation Predator, the National Fugitives Operations program, the Criminal Alien Program, and Enforcement and Removal Operations (ICE). The agency removes hundreds of thousands of unauthorized immigrants each year (Gramlich). The onset of COVID-19 in the United States in March warranted reevaluation of immigration procedures given the highly transmittable nature of the virus. In response to the pandemic, ICE issued a directive on March 9th that appeared to protect the immigration status of international students by temporarily exempting them from online course restrictions. Months later, the July 6th directive unexpectedly reinstated these limitations, which would categorize international students who do not conform as unwanted, unauthorized, and liable to be removed from the country.

Example: lower-order concern feedback

Great analysis of the content on the NYU webpage. The analysis is apt, but your sentences are similar in length throughout, and you rely on a lot of "this's." How can you present this information more dynamically? What connections can you make in this information that can be conveyed through your writing?

This feedback again offers praise, and in doing so acknowledges that the higher-order concerns in this paragraph are met. I then point out sentence-level concerns that make the writing less effective and ask the student to brainstorm how to improve these aspects of their writing. I avoid telling students how to fix things in favor of promoting revision.

Sample text from student paper:

This NYU FAQ for international students states that international students should "avoid receiving government funding or benefits that might make [them] seem to be what is known as a 'public charge.'" This means that international students are not allowed to apply for financial support from the government, such as SNAP/food stamps or unemployment. The term "public charge" is a common label used throughout immigration rhetoric in the United States. The use of the term dates back to the "new immigrants" coming to the US through Ellis Island. Immigration officers, who relied primarily on looking at immigrants moving through the island, would label immigrants who supposedly displayed physical or mental deficiencies/disabilities as LPCs, or "liable to become a public charge." This reinforces the historical notion of the United States requiring immigrants be a net-positive for the United States economy. If immigrants can potentially detract from the economy rather than improve it, then they are removed. This requirement also reflects the racist and ableist history of the term "public charge."

What feedback do students need?

What skills do students need to demonstrate with this assignment?

- Refer to course, major, or program learning goals

How do I convey these expectations to my students?

- Assignment sheet
- Rubric
- Practice these skills in scaffolded assignments

TIP: *Don't underestimate positive reinforcement!* *Research* *shows that praising students' proficiencies improves their writing abilities.*

How can I best give feedback?

Managing feedback time

- Limit comments
  - Try to limit your feedback to 2-4 sentences, focusing only on what a student can reasonably incorporate into their writing habits. Avoid writing comments throughout the assignment because it can overwhelm the student (and you!).

- Rubrics
  - Do the work on the front end of the assignment by making a rubric that spells out your expectations. You can refer to this rubric instead of giving personalized feedback to every student.

- Peer review
  - You can curtail how much time you spend giving feedback by having students peer review one another with a rubric before turning in final assignments. Consider making a rubric with your students, so they can actively articulate the writing expectations of the assignment, which will make them more informed when they peer review.

What feedback tools can I use?

Depending on your preference, you may use the following feedback tools to help aid in providing feedback:

- Written comments on your LMS (Canvas, Sakai)
- Video/audio comments on your LMS
- Comment function on Microsoft Word or Google Docs

You should also plug the Writing and Design Lab! Peer tutors can help students assess both higher-order and lower-order concerns. Out of courtesy for the WDL, please do not require students make an appointment, but do let them know they have access to tutors and other writing resources.

Closing thoughts

1. By focusing on what writing skills students need to demonstrate and how you will communicate those expectations, you can avoid any pitfalls you feel you may encounter because of a limited writing background.

2. Although it may seem paradoxical, prioritizing the higher-order concerns of content and structure will oftentimes resolve most lower-order concerns as well.

3. Urging students to spend more time thinking about the content of their writing rather than the form on their writing promotes a deeper engagement with the course.

Works Cited

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