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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

# **Providing Effective Feedback on Writing Assignments**

## **Writing Across the Curriculum+**

December 4th, 2018

\*Today's slides can be downloaded from our website: [www.scwrl.ubc.ca/wac/](http://www.scwrl.ubc.ca/wac/)

\*Workshop certificates available on request.

## Workshop Outline

- Introductions, feedback reflection activity
- Purpose of feedback
- Challenges in giving feedback
- Strategies for effective feedback
- Summary, additional resources
- Feedback

## Workshop Objectives

By the end of today's workshop you will:

1. Recognize techniques to provide effective feedback on writing assignments;
2. Practice giving feedback on a piece of writing using revision-focused feedback techniques; and
3. Reflect on your own strategies for giving feedback.



## **Feedback reflection activity**

At your table and using the handout provided, reflect on your current methods of providing feedback on writing assignments.

- 1. How do you currently give feedback on writing?**
- 2. How effective do you think your feedback is? Explain.**

## Purpose of providing feedback on student writing

- Why do you give students feedback on their writing?
- Gibbs and Simpson (2004-05) define six roles for feedback:
  - To correct errors
  - To further student understanding by explaining
  - To suggest specific tasks that increase learning
  - To help students develop general skills, by focusing on these rather than content
  - To have students reflect on their understanding
  - To motivate students to continue studying

## Purpose of providing feedback on student writing

- Feedback is a coaching process (Bean 2011)
- Feedback diagnoses problems in the work, identifies gaps between the work and the standard (Price *et al.* 2010)
- Feedback is...“information about how we are doing in our effects to reach a goal” (Wiggins 2012)
  - "Each time you swung and missed, you raised your head as you swung so you didn't really have your eye on the ball. On the one you hit hard, you kept your head down and saw the ball."

## Challenges when providing feedback on writing assignments

- Standardizing the feedback (and marking)
  - Diedrich (1974) study
  - Universal reader (Broad 2003)
- Finding time to give detailed feedback
- Getting students to actually use the feedback



## Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing

Read through the writing example, "*Traveling in Vancouver*".

What might you tell the student they need to work on? **Write down the first thing you notice about the piece.**



## Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing

- 1) Focus on revision-based feedback instead of editing (Bean 2011; Hope College 2013, review in Underwood and Tregidgo 2006).
  - Identify “higher-level” concerns and “lower-level” concerns.

# Editing-Oriented Feedback Strategy

Spell author's name correctly!

Ga~~fit~~Hard~~en~~ and Peter Singer have both  
 w~~rite~~n essays that are thought provoking.  
 Hardin has the strongest argument, <sup>comma splice</sup> on the  
 other hand, Singer has some good things to say  
 too but his arg~~u~~ment~~s~~ are~~n~~t as strong as  
 Hardin's because he is ~~to~~ idealistic. Meaning he <sup>Look up to,  
too, two</sup>  
 believes people will give up things like color  
 frag. TV and stereos to thrid world poor people  
 even though they (the rich people) will have  
 earned these things (TVs and stereos) through <sup>Don't put  
antecedents  
of pronouns in  
parentheses  
after the  
pronoun.</sup>  
 their own hard work. This is what I don't like  
 about Singer. Hardin believes in private  
 property and I do too.

Another weakness of Singer is . . .

# Revision-Oriented Feedback Strategy

Garit Harden and Peter Singer have both written essays that are thought provoking. Hardin has the strongest argument, on the other hand, Singer has some good things to say too but his arguements arent as strong as Hardins because he is to idealistic. Meaning he believes people will give up things like color TV and stereos to thrid world poor people even though they (the rich people) will have earned these things (TVs and stereos) through their own hard work. This is what I don't like about Singer. Hardin believes in private property and I do too.

Is this your first point about Singer  
 - "A first weakness of Singer is that he is too idealistic (?)"  
 Expand and explain

Excellent insight here - different attitudes about private property are at the heart of their differences - but you raise the point and then drop it without development.

↪ Another weakness of Singer is ...

Good transition but implies that previous paragraph was about a "first weakness" - e.g., Singer's idealism?

In your next revision break the weaknesses of Singer into separate chunks and develop each. Also edit for sentence errors!

## Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing

- 1) Focus on revision-based feedback instead of editing (Bean 2011; Hope College 2013, review in Underwood and Tregidgo 2006).
  - Identify “higher-level” concerns and “lower-level” concerns.
  - Consider the stage of the assignment.
  - Identify the goal or learning objective to focus on (e.g. content-specific, structure-specific, style-specific)

## **Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing**

- 2) Employ an error marking technique to minimize time spent on sentence-level errors (grammar, mechanics, etc.,) (Haswell 1983, Hyland 1992, Chandler 2003).



<b>Category of Error</b>	<b>Number of Errors Checked in Margin by Teacher</b>	<b>Number of Errors Correctly Emended by Students</b>	<b>Percent Corrected by Students</b>
Semantic Signalling (capitalization, underlining, question marks, apostrophes)	97	74	76.3%
Syntactic Punctuation	142	81	57.0%
Spelling (including hyphenation)	132	74	56.1%
Grammar (including tense change, omission of word, pronoun disagreement)	30	16	53.3%
<b>All Errors</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>61.1%</b>

(Taken from Haswell 1983)

## Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing

- 3) Comment on drafts rather than on final products (review in Gibbs and Simpson 2004-05)
  - Students pay more attention to feedback on earlier drafts (Ferris 1995).
  - Focus on formative feedback. What can they use in the next draft, assignment or exam?
  - Put minimal comments on the final version. Become the judge at the end of the process.

## Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing

- 4) “Less is more” – minimize comments (Werner 2013, review in Underwood and Tregidgo 2006)
- Try focusing on one specific type of feedback or limit the number of comments (e.g., 3-4 margin comments per page).
  - Limit comments to 2 sentences, but more than one word.



## Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing

- 5) Use models feedback to give feedback to large groups
- Do not comment on individual papers and grade them rapidly.
  - Choose a strong example from the current class (or a previous class) to explain the grading and provide feedback.
  - Places responsibility for using feedback onto student (Underwood and Tregidgo 2006).

## Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing

6) Create a feedback script for recurring comments:

- “Please seek help for your writing at the UBC Writing Centre if you want to really improve your essay writing skills.”
- “Your mark will improve significantly if you try to contribute to our class discussions.”
- “When someone else says something, think about whether you agree or disagree and WHY.”

## Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing

### 7) Use peer review for early drafts

- Periodic unmarked peer review of small assignments can increase marks on exams (Forbes and Spence 1991, review in Gibbs and Simpson 2004-05).
- Peer feedback tends to give a balance of advice and praise (Cho *et al.* 2006), which can increase use of feedback (Patchan *et al.* 2016).
- Peer review by multiple peers motivates more revisions (complex type) than expert review (Cho and MacArthur 2010) and greater improvement (Cho and Schunn 2007).

## Reducing the time needed to give feedback on writing

### 7) Use peer review for early drafts

- Students typically require practice to provide thoughtful comments.
- Students can evaluate peers' work according to set questions or the assignment rubric.
- Peer review can also focus on reader experience by using "responding" techniques (Elbow and Belanoff 1989).

## Encouraging students to use feedback and get involved in the writing process

- Manage student expectations:
  - Clearly define your method at the start
- Give students something specific they can act on.
  - Be clear on the changes needed (directive)
  - Must be more specific than “Good job” or “Needs work”
- Give specific feedback relative to assignment goals.
  - e.g. “...remember that the aim is to interest people in your work as well as to describe the facts you discovered through your experiment. Self-assess your work against those two criteria using these rubrics...” (Wiggins, 2012)

## Feedback examples

- “Needs to be more concise”
  - “Confusing. I need to know what the teacher means specifically.”
  - “Define concise.”
  - “I thought you wanted details and support.”
  - “Vague, vague.”
- “Be more specific”
  - “Be more specific.”
  - “It's going to be too long then.”
  - “I'm frustrated.”

## Feedback examples

- Instead of “vague” try:
  - “Which research finding are you referring to here?”
  - “I don't understand your use of the underlined phrase. Can you rewrite this sentence?”
  - “Can you provide specific details to show what you mean here?”

## Encouraging students to use feedback and get involved in the writing process

- Effective feedback includes **specific positive** comments (review in Underwood and Tregidgo 2006).
  - Students view constructive criticism as positive.
  - Praise motivates students and helps them gain confidence (Beason 1993, Patchan *et al.* 2016), but is preferred when it is explained and linked to the work (Straub 2006).
  - Students are more likely to read and use feedback when positive comments are included (Patchan *et al.* 2016).
  - Personalized comments are even better, where possible.



## Feedback examples

- “You haven't really thought this through”
  - “This is a mean reply.”
  - “That makes me madder than you can imagine.”
  - “How do you know what I thought?”
  - “I guess I blew it!”
- “Try harder!”
  - “I did try!”
  - “You're a stupid jerk.”
  - “Maybe I am trying as hard as I can.”

## Feedback examples

- Instead of “confusing,” “what?” or “???” try:
  - “I lost the thread of your argument. Why is this information important? How is it related to your argument?”
  - “You imply that this point supports your argument, but it actually contradicts your point in para. 3.”
- Instead of “good” try:
  - “This excellent example moves your argument forward.”
  - “Wonderful transition that helped clarify the connection between the two studies you are summarizing.”

## Encouraging students to use feedback and get involved in the writing process

- Focus comments on how the paper would lose readers, rather than on the grade.
  - Describe your reaction (e.g. “I was confused by...”).
  - Students may not look at feedback when a grade is provided (review in Underwood and Tregidgo 2006).
- Provide feedback at an appropriate time (review in Gibbs and Simpson 2004-05).
  - Assignment with multiple drafts, ongoing feedback.
  - Feedback comes when the students can use it.
- Provide consistent feedback.
- Have students respond to the feedback (Ferris 2014).

## Feedback examples

- How would you respond to the advice?
  - “Omit this paragraph”
  - “You might consider omitting this paragraph”
  - “I wonder what you gain by having this paragraph here”

(From: How to Provide Constructive Feedback – That Won't Exasperate Your Students, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Teaching Centre, Columbia University)

## Feedback examples

- How would you respond to the following comments?
  - “These arguments are not convincing”
  - “Explain why this is the case”
  - “I find this statement less than convincing”
  - “Your point might be clearer if you state, point by point, your opponent’s view as clearly and objectively as you can. Then you can deal with each of the arguments and show the weakness in the position.”

(Taken from How to Provide Constructive Feedback – That Won’t Exasperate Your Students, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Teaching Centre, Columbia University)

- Remember, students engage with comments that are specific and positive.
  - “Your paper might be clearer if you state, point by point, your opponent's view, as clearly and objectively as you can. Then you can deal with each of his arguments and show the weaknesses in his position.”
- Students lose motivation and feel frustrated by comments that are viewed as criticisms or do not suggest or lead to actions they can take.
  - “These arguments are not convincing.” “You've missed his point.”

## Workshop Summary

- Saving time on writing assignment feedback
  - Revision-based feedback (higher-order concerns first)
  - Minimize comments; keep short (assignment goals; key criteria)
  - Put detailed comments on drafts, not final version
  - Minimize time spent editing
  - Models feedback
  - Feedback scripts for common comments
  - Peer review for drafts
- Encouraging students to use feedback
  - Include specific positive feedback
  - Give feedback relative to a goal (actionable comments)
  - Include timely and consistent feedback
  - Build in a revision process with ongoing feedback
  - Have students respond to the feedback



## **Feedback reflection activity**

Reflect again on your current methods of providing feedback on writing assignments.

**What are your ideas for improving your feedback on writing assignments?**





## WAC+ Program Services

- Best Practices in Teaching Science Communication Symposium
- Workshops
  - Writing Assignment and Assessment Design
  - Teaching Succinct and Accurate Science Writing
  - Strategies for Student Success with Writing
  - Teaching Oral Communication in Science
  - Non-traditional Communication Assignments
- One-on-one consultations
- TA Training
- Class visits to discuss writing assignments



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