

Content specific

Content specific comments should be used for assignments where the real purpose of writing is to assess knowledge, learning, or growth rather than asking students to practice a particular type of writing style or skill. Content specific comments address issues of the assignments purpose: whether the student has truly learned the content, demonstrated knowledge, or utilized critical application. These types of comments are not focused on the style of writing, the formatting, or sentence level constructions.

To get the most out of content specific questions, do not use them in conjunction with other types of comments. This may mean asking students to see a rough draft of a term paper just after midterms. Such a draft would receive content specific comments only. If you've assigned an essay exam and students will likely not have enough time to revise their writing, content specific comments are a good way to focus your feedback. Essentially, use these comments when the only thing you want to focus on is the content of the essay. Try limiting yourself to using content specific comments.

first drafts; peer review; blue book exam; in class writing assignment; midterm/final exams

Structure specific

Structure specific comments should be used for assignments where the organization of the written content is of the most importance. These comments focus on the organization and coherence of the writing. Because they focus on the mechanics of building a case (proving a hypothesis, explaining a thesis, arguing a point), these types of comments are most useful for mid-draft, pre-final papers and should be used to guide students toward a more soundly constructed text. Use these comments when the only thing you want to address is how the paper is developed. Try limiting yourself to using structure specific comments.

mid-drafts; peer review; assignments where students are learning to write for the discipline; papers whose content is strong but the case is not well-made

Style specific

As with content and structure specific comments, style specific comments focus on one particular component of a paper or a student's writing; they focus on the sentence-level constructions and stylistic choices a student makes. These comments should seek to help students enhance their writing style, and such comments avoid addressing the content of the paper or purpose of the assignment.

Style specific comments might reference writing styles discussed in class by using particular codes or by referencing textbooks/handbooks. By telling students what the problem is and then directing them to reference material on the error, students are more likely to review the issue and attempt to change it. Some teachers tie class discussions of discipline-specific styles to this type of comment. For example, someone teaching chemistry might point students to the proper way an experiment result is discussed.

Marginal comments only

The opposite of overarching comments are marginal comments, which are left in the margins of the paper, right next to the students' text. We can use this technique to limit our commenting as well. While they do not, perhaps, encourage holistic response, marginal comments allow us to point out interesting points, inconsistencies, and specific areas where an example or further explanation would improve the student's writing.

When using marginal comments, it's important not to tread on the student's writing. Try not to cover her writing with your own or cross out sections of her prose. These types of comments are often interpreted as negative, and students often feel these moves are erasures of their own voices and responsibilities in the paper. In order to encourage improvement, our students need to know that they can improve without being erased from their own writing.

In order to save time with marginal comments--and to avoid overwhelming ourselves and our students--it's a good idea to limit the amount of marginal comments you'll make on a paper. Marginal comments can be content, structure, or style specific--even a mix of all three--but keeping marginal comments to a minimum (perhaps three or four per page) will help avoid wasting our time and overwhelming students.

early, mid, and late drafts; types projects (where there is less of a chance of writing over a student's work)

Minimalist marking

Minimalist marking is a style specific marking technique that takes various forms, but the most common is to leave all surface level errors unmarked in the sentences themselves. Every line of text with an error gets a check mark (or some other mark) next to it. The more errors in the line of text, the more checks. For example, if a student has a line with three errors (one spelling, one verb tense, another improper use of apostrophes), then the line gets three checks next to it. Students will review the returned papers and be expected to find and correct the errors in their writing. Often, instructors have students return their papers with the errors circled and corrected.

Multiple studies have shown that this method of marking actually improves students' style over time if it is used consistently throughout the whole semester. One researcher shows that his use of the minimalist marking method (and immediate required revisions from his students) improved students' style and sentence-level work. He states, "Overall, the drop was from 4.6 errors per 100 words to 2.2 (52%)" (Haswell, 1993, p. 603). As with style specific comments, the key here is to help students when they cannot catch the errors themselves and to point them to helpful resources and reference tools.

Minimalist Marking Teaching-Return Percentages (Haswell, 1993, p. 602)

Timer Method

This method of responding to student work has less to do with the style in which we respond and more to do with the time we take to respond. Many texts for new faculty and teaching assistants suggest setting a timer when responding to student work. It may take some time to work out how much is enough, but generally, for a five-page, double spaced essay, teachers should allow about 30 minutes. For shorter papers, set the timer for 15 minutes. For longer papers, give yourself more time (maybe 45 minutes to an hour, depending on the paper topic, length, and purpose). Sometimes, setting a warning timer (for example, there are many free apps that will allow a smartphone user to manage multiple timers) and an end timer may help you stay on track toward responding to a paper within a given length of time.

This technique is often difficult for new faculty, but the more a teacher understands about her responding habits (does she prefer overarching comments? is the paper a draft that a few marginal, content-specific comments will be useful on?), the easier it will be to stick with a general time. Many teachers find that the more they work on developing a personal responding process, the more consistent they are with time. This doesn't mean it will only ever take you 30 minutes to read and respond to that five-page paper, though. Often, when students need a little more help with their writing (especially in the case of ineffective content or Second Language Learners), it's best to give the paper more attention and time.

Setting a Paper Goal

Along with using a timer method, many teachers find it useful to set a "paper goal." Having a grading and responding marathon all day on Sunday is no teacher's idea of a good Sunday. In order to avoid this, set a goal for yourself every day that you have a stack of papers. Some teachers divide them evenly (I have 20 students, so if I grade four per day, then I'll be done in five days and can hand them back early) while other teachers devote lengths of time (I have an hour and a half before my next meeting, and I can devote that time to grading a few

