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How to Spend Less Time Grading: Write Less and Make Each Word Count

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One of our most time-consuming and dreaded tasks as humanities faculty is grading student papers. We're making it worse by writing too many comments. Some of my colleagues correct every single grammatical error. Others fill the margins with thoughtful suggestions, noting all the misunderstandings of the text, the lapses in logic, and the awkward expressions.

Of course, extensive feedback is sometimes appropriate, for instance, in commenting on a draft of a strong students' capstone thesis. But over the years, I've come to think that for a lot of undergraduate papers, especially in gen ed courses, it's counterproductive.

I understand the temptation to write a lot of comments because I used to do it myself. I fell into it while I was a teaching assistant at a big university. I was just a few years older than my students, and they kept challenging my grading. My extensive comments were armor, intended to prove to my more obnoxious students that their papers were ridden with errors and deserved an even lower grade than I had assigned.

I continued writing extensive comments for many years afterwards. The colleagues that I admired the most did, so I assumed that it was good practice. If I don't show the students their errors and to explain how to correct those errors, how will they ever learn? I wrote and I wrote.

It took forever. And my students' writing didn't improve much. They kept making the same mistakes even though I had corrected them in previous papers. Judging from my colleagues' complaints, they didn't have better luck.

I started understanding why extensive feedback doesn't work at my Taekwondo *dojang*. I was watching two intermediate students show a beginner how to turn and do a low block. The beginner's block was wobbly and weak, and the intermediate students kept shaking their heads and offering lots of helpful suggestions. The beginner kept trying, they gave more feedback, and he tried again. He was looking increasingly confused and his technique started getting worse. After a few minutes, Grandmaster Kim walked over. He quietly watched and then said: "When you turn, step 3 inches wider." The student tried again and it worked. He wasn't wobbling, and his block was much more powerful. The move suddenly looked OK.

I laughed at the two student-teachers until I realized that as I was acting just like them.

What usually happens when we write a lot on student papers?

- Most students don't read the marginal comments, especially not in gen ed classes. At best, they read the end comment.
- If they do read extensive comments, they become overwhelmed and don't know where to start.
- They focus on the wrong things. My students frequently focus their revisions on minor issues, ignoring the larger and more important ones. They do this even when I write that comment #1 is very important and that #2-5 are less important.

Reflecting on the taekwondo experience made me realize that I was focusing on the wrong task. My job isn't to provide a thorough critique of the paper; it is to help the students write better next time. A long list of errors won't help them do that, but brief and simple feedback might. "When you turn, step 3 inches wider."

Focusing on helping the student and not on critiquing the paper is a fundamental shift. I'm no longer assessing an objective product. Instead, I'm interacting with a fellow human being who can get hurt, flattered, or angry, somebody who can listen or tune out. I aim to write so that they will hear, understand, and then choose to act on what I'm saying. It's a delicate balance. My comments need to be brief and focused because if I overwhelm them with too much information, they'll get confused and tune out. But if I say too little, they don't get enough guidance. If I'm too harsh, they get defensive and they'll stop hearing me altogether. But if I offer empty praise, they won't understand that their writing needs work.

After years of experimenting, I've landed on the following approach:

1. I read the whole paper without writing any comments. Sometimes I sit on my hands to keep from writing. (Yes. Seriously. It helps!)
2. I think:
    a. What is this person already doing well?

    b. What is the next thing they need to learn?
3. And then I comment accordingly:
    a. I use their name
    b. I mention one specific thing they did well.
    c. I give them one or two specific things to work on, and I mark examples of those in the body of the paper. I offer my criticisms clearly but gently, favoring phrases like "I lost you here!" over "this is incoherent," and "cool, say more about this!" over "poorly developed."
    d. I offer encouragement.
    e. I ignore all the other problems in the paper. (Yes. Really.)

Commenting on papers is still time consuming, but it takes less time and it's more rewarding because I sometimes see that my comments help students improve their writing. They're less likely to repeat the same mistakes in the next paper. And when they revise, they're working on the more significant problems.

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