Providing Effective and Efficient Feedback to Student Writing in an Online Course

In fall 2009, Jack Szpiler conducted an email survey of faculty regarding online courses. Sixty-six instructors responded to this survey. In response to the question “What do you believe are the disadvantages of offering courses online?”, about 1/3 of the respondents expressed concern regarding lack of student contact.

Here are some of the specific concerns instructors identified:

- Students lose opportunity to engage with faculty member as a mentor
- Instructor cannot build a relationship with the student
- Communication between student and faculty is less effective
- Miscommunication is common
- Lack of community
- Faculty teaching online courses cannot socialize or professionalize their students
- Isolation from fellow students also impedes socialization
- Faculty don’t get to see students “grapple with a concept, or smile”
- Students are not given the opportunity to practice conversation and debate
- Students do not have the opportunity to practice public speaking skills
- Students do not practice listening skills
- Students will make “suppositions and assumptions about the material and the perspectives of the material’s author(s)”
- Shallow learning
Tips for Providing Feedback

One way to keep students engaged in an online environment is to provide thoughtful feedback. The challenge for us is to provide thoughtful feedback without multiplying our workload. Here are some strategies:

**Connecting with your students through feedback:**

- When possible speculate as to why students might be struggling with a particular assignment, reading, or idea. When students understand why they are getting something wrong, it will help them get it right.

- Review the comments you gave students last time around, and identify how they have improved, or identify a particular issue with which they continue to struggle.

- Set goals for your students and monitor their achievement of these goals.

- Use the students’ own papers to demonstrate that they know how to do something they are not doing elsewhere in the paper. For example, if you see them applying a concept they learned in class in one place, but not in another, let them know.

- Address and sign your feedback as you would a letter.

**Make the most out of your time devoted to feedback:**

- Provide feedback to the class as a whole by identifying trends. That is to say, name what your entire class is doing well and what they need to continue to work on.

- Repeating yourself? Cut and paste comments for one student to another.

- Do not mark every error/problem you see. This takes too much time and overwhelms the student. Save most of your feedback for an end comment or letter.

- Tie your feedback to the larger goals of the course, and emphasize its usefulness for the next assignment.

- Avoid posing a long list of questions or telling students to “consider” or “think about.” Instead, tell the student one thing he/she could do to improve this paper or next time around.

- Assign models that you can use as a touchstone in your feedback.

- When students’ writing demonstrates that they do not understand the reading, help them become better readers by sending them back to the text with a specific reading task.
A Template for End Comments

1. **Say back:** Articulate the student’s argument/thesis/question/claim as you understand it.

2. **Identify at least one specific thing the student has done well:** If students know what they are doing well, then they are more likely to continue to do that thing well. If students are revising the piece at hand, the student has no real motivation to go back and revise unless he/she has something to build on. Avoid the “spoon full of sugar” approach; instead, specifically name what the student is doing well.

3. **Name two or three things (tops!) that the student needs to work on.** It’s tempting to identify all of the problems that need fixing, but it is unreasonable to expect students to learn everything they need to learn as writers, readers, and thinkers all at once. Learning new skills and concepts slow process. Be aware that students will sometimes backslide.

4. **Provide the student with manageable tasks that will help him/her work on these things.** Often you’ll hear students say: “I know what I need to do, but I don’t know how to do it.” Help them with the **how.** For example, if students are not defining their terms, suggest that they do the following: “Before you complete the next assignment, be sure to identify at least three key terms and define them.” Or, if a student has not understood the central argument of an assigned reading, direct the student to: “Return to the article and reread the title, the beginning, and the end (first three paragraphs and the last four). Mark key concepts and terms (words that are repeated in the title, beginning and end). Using at least three of these concepts (the ones you think are central to the author’s point), write the author’s argument in 1-2 complete sentences.” Rather than focus on the negative, this type of feedback provides students with a concrete approach and a goal for the next assignment.
Usage Errors: Strategies for Providing Feedback

We have the best of intentions when we mark or correct all of the errors in a student’s paper, but this is not the best use of our time. When we correct students’ errors, they are not likely to learn how to find and fix these problems themselves. When we cover our students’ papers with marks, they are likely to lose hope or interest. How can we mark students’ papers so that they are responsible for fixing problems?

**Minimal Marking:** Mark the lines with errors and ask the students to figure out what the problem is and fix it. One study suggests that students can find and fix 60% of their errors on their own. See Haswell.

**Look for patterns:** Mark, name, and fix one or two instances of pattern problems on one or two pages of a student’s paper. Ask the student to find and fix them in the remainder of the paper.

**Prioritize:** If a student has a number of pattern problems, don’t expect that student to learn to fix them all at once. Focus first on errors that prevent the student from conveying his/her ideas. Identify the error for the student and provide him/her with a handout or a link that explain the rules.

**Purdue’s OWL:** Others have taken the time to explain these problems and their solutions so that you don’t have to. Once you’ve identified a problem, email the student the relevant link: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/)

**Ask students to keep journals:** Students need to take an active role in learning to eradicate pattern errors. Students can keep a journal of their pattern problems and refer to this journal as they proofread papers.

**Keep a list:** When you have a stack of papers to grade, instead of marking each error on the page, keep a list of errors. This way you can identify patterns for a particular student and across the class. For example, my comp students are having trouble with homonyms and they are capitalizing words that don’t need to be capitalized. Rather than respond to these issues in each individual paper, I will work with the entire class on homonyms and capitalization.

**Give students time to proofread one another’s papers:** Give students Lunsford’s top twenty errors or explain one or two common errors you’ve noticed in their papers. Students can proofread one another’s papers in light of this discussion. Try giving students ten minutes at the beginning of class on a day that a paper is due to proofread that paper.

**Build in extra time for students to proofread their own papers:** You might ask students to proofread papers the day after they were due. David Bartholomae found that when students read their drafts aloud they were able to correct many of the mistakes on their own.

**Share your strategies:** It helps to talk to our students about our writing processes. Students benefit from knowing that we write multiple drafts, we read passages aloud, and we ask peers for feedback.

**Send a student to the Reading and Writing Center with a specific goal:** RWC appointments are short. It helps the consultant make the most of his/her time if the student can say exactly what kind of help he/she needs.
Comma Use

1. Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet.

The game was over, but the crowd refused to leave.
The student explained her question, yet the instructor still didn't seem to understand.
Yesterday was her brother's birthday, so she took him out to dinner.

2. Use commas after introductory a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that come before the main clause.

a. Common starter words for introductory clauses that should be followed by a comma include after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while.

While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.
Because her alarm clock was broken, she was late for class.
If you are ill, you ought to see a doctor.
When the snow stops falling, we'll shovel the driveway.

However, don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it (except for cases of extreme contrast).

Incorrect: She was late for class, because her alarm clock was broken.
Incorrect: The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating.
Correct: She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar. (This comma use is correct because it is an example of extreme contrast)

b. Common introductory phrases that should be followed by a comma include participial and infinitive phrases, absolute phrases, nonessential appositive phrases, and long prepositional phrases (over four words).

Having finished the test, he left the room.
To get a seat, you'd better come early.
After the test but before lunch, I went jogging.
The sun radiating intense heat, we sought shelter in the cafe.

c. Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include yes, however, well.

Well, perhaps he meant no harm.
Yes, the package should arrive tomorrow morning.
However, you may not be satisfied with the results.
Rewrite Proposal

Want to give students the opportunity to revise without multiplying your workload?

For some students, the concepts and modes of thinking presented in a particular course take some time to sink in or “click.” These students would benefit from the opportunity to revise earlier writing assignments. It can be painful to read the same unsuccessful student paper twice, but if the student’s work improves dramatically, it’s gratifying for both teacher and student.

Here’s one way to ensure that students genuinely revise a piece and will learn from the process:

**Rewrite Proposal Letter (optional)**
You may rewrite one of your writing assignments for a higher grade. Please realize that making superficial changes does not constitute revision and that you are not guaranteed a better grade. In order to receive a better grade, your piece must improve holistically. Your grade will not go down. If you are interested in rewriting one of your assignments, you are required to submit a proposal. Your proposal will be accepted if you complete the following tasks.

**Step 1, Rereading:** Before you begin writing, you should reread the assignment sheet and your paper.

**Step 2, Marginalia:** Respond in the margins to my marginal comments. Please be specific in your response. If you intend to change something, indicate how you will change it. If you don’t understand something, explain what it is that doesn’t make sense. Please use a different color ink.

**Step 3, Letter:** Write persuasive letter explaining to me that if given the opportunity, you could improve your essay dramatically. In this letter you should:

- Explain what hindsight reveals to you. What was your initial response after rereading your essay? Why do you think you can improve it? *(intro paragraph, 1 graph)*
- Respond directly to my end comments *(1-3 paragraphs).* Be very specific about how you could address these comments in a rewrite. When possible, explain how you intend to change what needs changing. For instance, if I wrote that you need to represent the project and overarching idea of a source you’ve incorporated, you will need to return to the source, read for the author’s argument, and incorporate that argument here in the letter. This does mean that you will actually need to do some revision work to meet the requirements of the proposal. This work will help you rewrite.
- Detail a strategy for revision that extends beyond my end comments *(1-2 paragraphs).* In other words, you should identify intended changes other than those I specifically suggested. What do you think needs rewriting? How do the changes I suggested lead to other changes?
- Reread the sources you are working with in light of my comments and your argument. What does rereading the sources you are working with reveal to you? Name at least one thing you’ve uncovered from rereading the essays you’ve incorporated. *(1 paragraph)*
- Sign your letter.


**Further Reading:**

http://bcscollege.com/lunsford/Lunsford_TopTwenty.aspx

John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. (2001)
This provides useful for tips on designing assignments.

This provides template sentences that your students might find useful.

Joe Williams’ *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. (9th edition, 2007)
This is a great book to help your students understand what it means to write clearly. It is difficult for students to learn from it on their own unless you assign specific tasks. The assignments in the book are good.