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Students who serve as Writing Associates (WAs) spend a good deal of time giving written feedback. Their goal in doing so is not only to help other students improve their current papers but to help those students become better writers in the long term. But what types of comments *are* most effective at achieving this goal? In particular, what role does positive feedback play? Is it possible to give too many or too few positive comments?

Before beginning to examine the questions of what types of feedback are most helpful, it's important to first look at whether written comments do actually make any difference at all. In fact, some studies have challenged this assumption. Arnold, for instance, conducted a study of tenth-grade English classes in which two groups of students were given moderate amounts of feedback, sometimes focusing on mechanics and sometimes on organization, while the other two groups were given extensive feedback on everything from grammar to "general effectiveness" and were made to revise their writing until their teachers found it satisfactory (12). In the end, the students who had been given lots of feedback and had done extensive revisions showed no more improvement than those who had been given moderate amounts of feedback (14).

Fortunately, other studies have come to different conclusions. Underwood, for instance, examined the progress made by students in a high-school English class over the course of completing a number of different writing assignments (27). For the first paper, the teacher adopted a "conventional" commenting style that involved writing both marginal and end notes on grammatical and content-based issues (29). The teacher did not request that students make revisions (29). On the second paper, the number of students who had improved on grammar and

content was roughly equal to the number that had done worse—hence, the grading of the first paper appeared to have made little lasting impact (32). In marking up the second paper, however, the teacher used a different approach—this time giving only end comments and asking the students to revise (29). Between the second and third papers, all but one of the students in the class showed improvement on content (32). From this Underwood concludes that comments can make a difference, especially when they are coupled with a requirement for revision.

Interestingly, Underwood also found a negative correlation between marginal comments and quality of content revision: that is, when the instructor included micro-level comments in the margins, fewer students improved the content of their papers through revision than when the instructor only included comments at the end (40). Underwood's results are consistent with the more theoretical concerns that have been raised by other authors. For instance, Sommers notes that teachers too often make suggestions for both structural changes and micro-level changes at the same time in a given paragraph of a student work (151). The "remarkable contradiction of developing a paragraph after editing the sentences in it" leaves students confused about the relative importance of micro- and macro-level changes. Moreover, when the teacher lists the mechanical issues to be fixed, students see their writing as a series of small pieces, not a unified whole. In that case, "all they need to do is patch and polish their writing," and in the process, larger concerns get ignored (Sommers 151).

The Swarthmore College *WA Handbook* reinforces Sommers's point with the adage, "the more you say the less you convey" (12). Talking too much about grammar in a paper that also needs major structural changes can overwhelm the WAee; in addition, since micro-level changes are the easiest to make, the WAee may focus on them and ignore the paper's most important issues (*WA Handbook* 12). Along the same lines, Diederich suggests that teachers limit

themselves to one suggestion for improvement on each student paper (59). The conventional method of dealing with errors—"drowning them in red ink"—has shown practically no benefits, while the potential costs—"mak[ing] the majority of students hate and fear writing"—are considerable (Diederich 58).

The lesson of the above studies is that teachers must think carefully about the types of feedback that they write on student papers. But apart from avoiding an inordinate emphasis on mechanical issues, what can teachers do to make their comments more effective? One thing, suggests Kehl, is for teachers to spend more time writing high-quality comments that meet the same sort of standards—organization, use of detail, concreteness—that are required of student papers (974). Short phrases like "awk" and "inadequate topic development" are often too vague—and sometimes even undecipherable—to help students make changes (974). Beyond this, Kehl urges, teachers must also make an effort to "be human" in their written interactions with students (976). This means showing respect for the writer's individual growth (976). As poet William Stafford put it, "A student's writing should be welcomed and responded to—not necessarily praised greatly, and certainly not attacked for inadequacy:—just as we talk best when in congenial company, so we write best when met with response […]" (qtd. in Kehl 976).

Part of showing respect for student writing is finding a way to express comments—including criticisms—in a nonjudgmental way. Boise State University's Writing Center guidebook recommends that tutors use "I" statements. For instance, instead of writing "This sentence is confusing," tutors could write "I don't understand what you're trying to say in this sentence." Along the same lines, Lamberg suggests that tutors can write down the feelings and thoughts they experience as readers going through the text (65). He gives the following example of a response that a tutor could give to a problem with thesis development: "After I read your

first paragraph, I expected you to be arguing in favor of more rights for students. But then your second paragraph starts out with how immature students are and the third paragraph goes on with that idea. I was confused about your thesis" (65-66).

Related to, though separate from, the issue of nonjudgmental criticism is positive feedback. This is a chance for teachers and tutors to give the student an unqualified statement of support. The Boise State University guidebook recommends devoting at least an entire full sentence to explaining a genuinely praiseworthy feature of the student's paper ("Notes"). This should be done, the guidebook advises, without "undercutting" remarks, *e.g.*, "This is a good paper, but …" ("Notes").

How much do teachers make use of positive feedback? Quite a lot, reports Smith. Her study, "The Genre of the End Comment: Conventions in Teacher Responses to Student Writing," analyzed end comments on first-year rhetoric and composition papers at Penn State, as well as a number of other papers from universities across the country (251-52). Smith found that 83 percent of all evaluations of student papers as a whole were positive ones (254). Furthermore, 88 percent of end comments started with a positive statement (261). This may reflect teachers' desire to avoid discouraging students by conveying an impression of "global failure" on an assignment (253). Teachers may also want to show students that their purpose in reading papers is not only to look for criticisms but also to highlight things students do well (261).

Unfortunately, Smith points out, this impulse may lead some teachers to write artificially positive statements. Afraid to stray from the "ritual opening" pattern for comments, these teachers may give "insincere or exaggerated praise in order to fulfill expectations" about how an end comment should be written (261-62). When this happens, "teachers' credibility and the effectiveness of the end comment may suffer" (254) because students will assume that the

teacher's remarks "take highly standardized forms" that are not worth reading (262). Furthermore, a student who does poorly on an assignment will often assume that the teacher's positive introductory statement is only there to make him feel better, while the "real reason for the grade" lies in the criticism portion of the comment (262).

Teachers can avoid diluting the effect of their positive comments, Smith recommends, by expanding the scope of what they talk about (262). For instance, a teacher might explain why a particular passage affected her as a reader. Alternatively, a teacher could give an example of a technique that the student used well and urge the student to apply the same principle to a section that wasn't done so well—thereby adding an instructive purpose to a positive statement. In addition, teachers could disperse their positive comments throughout their criticisms and suggestions for revision. That way, students would be less likely to ignore the positive comments as something the teacher included at the beginning out of habit or convention (262). Other literature on positive feedback offers similar suggestions. For instance, the Boise State University guidebook recommends that Writing Assistants avoid overly general statements—*e.g.*, "Great paper!"—and instead point out specific parts of the piece that were well done ("Notes").

While most teachers do give positive feedback, sometimes even in situations where it sounds forced or artificial, the question remains: Are positive comments even necessary? Do students need to be assured that they are doing a good job, or can they just be told where they need to improve? One evaluation of the response practices of two high-school teachers found it "crucial that we praise students' writing" in cases where students have actually done a commendable job (Bardine, Bardine, and Deegan 101). Molly Schmitz Bardine, one of the two teachers studied, noted that she always takes the time to find something genuinely positive to say

about every paper—even if that means praising a single example or sentence (Bardine, Bardine, and Deegan 97). Elizabeth Deegan, the other teacher in the study, explained that students want to know when they have done a good job (Bardine, Bardine, and Deegan 100). Especially for students who doubt their own writing abilities, giving "positive feedback on every paper is important, not only for their writing development, but also for their self-esteem" (Bardine, Bardine, and Deegan 101).

Also writing in support of positive comments, Diederich describes the responding style of one of his professors at Harvard (58). Instead of writing negative notes on student papers, the professor would merely point out one or two things that each paper did well. "The space between these high points in our papers was filled with the usual student bilge, which he never honored with a comment." Sometimes the professor would reward excellent writing further, by reading examples of it in front of the class. This type of reinforcement was effective because it motivated students to write well on their own. "I believe that a student knows when he has handed in something above his usual standard," Diederich explains. "[H]e waits hungrily for a brief comment in the margin to show him that the teacher is aware of it, too. To my mind, these are the only comments that ever do any student any good" (58).

Zak reached a similar conclusion after conducting a study with two sections of her Introduction to the Writing Process course at SUNY/Stony Brook (41). The course, which was mainly for students who had received low scores on the English placement test, taught basic composition skills (52-53). Zak divided her students into two groups: one to receive "normal" feedback (a combination of positive comments, questions, and suggestions for changes) and one to receive only positive comments (42). Zak found that the students in the latter group were very receptive to her commenting style (46). As one student wrote, "I like these comments because

they help me feel more comfortable with my composition. I wish my teacher can give me more comments. […] I appreciate these comments" (46).

What's more, Zak found, giving only positive feedback did not come at the cost reduced achievement. In both groups, students showed significant improvement between the beginning and end of the semester in the length, amount of detail, strength of descriptions, and overall quality of their papers (51). This was in spite of the fact that, for the positive-only students, Zak offered no suggestions (e.g., "Try to be more specific") or criticisms (e.g., "I don't understand what you mean") (42). One possible explanation for this trend was that the positive-only students were often more motivated to make revisions on their own (40). For instance, one student wrote the following response to Zak's approach: "Receiving positive feedback made me think that my writing was very, very good and it made me try to do better everytime. In fact, it made me have a competition towards myself. I wouldn't hand in anything that I didn't think was good enough" (46).

This last quotation, while optimistic, raises an important concern. If students who receive a lot of positive feedback believe that their writing is "very, very good," aren't their teachers being dishonest? As Zak questioned of herself at one point during the semester, "aren't I giving a false impression that the paper is good, and […] being patronizing?" (49). While Zak found that these concerns did not materialize, her results were based on a single basic-writing class at a large university. It's not clear whether the same would be true of most students at Swarthmore. Positive feedback may be valuable for basic writers who need to build confidence in their ability and need to be motivated to work hard on their assignments. But is it still valuable for students who feel confident in their abilities and are already motivated to do a good job? In addition, even if positive comments from teachers do help to motivate student improvement, as Diederich and

Zak found, is the same true of positive comments from WAs? Do students try to write their drafts well in order to get praise from WAs? Or do students mainly care about the judgments of their professors and come to WAs only with the purpose of getting suggestions for revision? These topics have not been fully addressed by the literature on positive feedback; our survey of Swarthmore students will aim to provide some initial answers to these questions.

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