Return on Investment:  
Four Core Strategies for Commenting on Student Essays  
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Preamble
What did you most struggle with as a writer in college? what kind of comments helped or didn't help?  
Why do you give comments as a teacher? What makes you feel best/worst about responding to writing?

Background
Research in writing education demonstrates that

- Students quickly get overwhelmed by teacher-comments on their essays, even positive ones
- Comments specific to the essay have more power to engender learning than generic ones
- Students don't automatically "transfer" learning from one assignment to the next
- Students learn to write by writing/revising more than by reading advice about writing
- Students don't always improve their next essay's sentences simply from seeing teachers' corrections; students improve by themselves attending to and working to improve the next essay's sentences

Your own experience should tell you that

- Teachers quickly get overwhelmed by commenting on everything on all student essays
- Few students revise more than about enough to raise their essay grades one letter-grade level (10%), and few students will improve in a dozen different ways from one essay to the next one
- Extensive comments that students don't apply to their own writing have limited pedagogical value
- Writing comments merely to "justify" a grade of less-than-"A" is not a soul-enriching endeavor

Common sense should thus tell you that

- Fewer, carefully targeted, engaged-with comments could be better for students and for teachers

Core Issue

Your time spent grading is a significant investment to make in your students this semester. How can you ensure the largest return on that investment (ROI)?

Four principles for the savvy grading-investor

1. **Know what you're looking for most in each assignment, and focus on those issues**
   a. Choose core competencies for each assignment, 3-4 maximum
   b. Communicate those to your students through your assignment prompt, in-class discussions, rubrics, and/or handouts: clarify expectations and build a common vocabulary with students
   c. Triage each essay quickly: what 1-2 core competencies does this student most need to improve? what 1-2 core competencies can this student most likely improve?
   d. Use written-out comments only to address those central, understood, improvable issues; use a checklist to provide feedback on less crucial or less complex issues (e.g. format or style)
   e. Remember the value of praising the student's best effort so far in one or more focus areas
2. Use your individualized responses to teach at teachable moments
   a. Invest more commenting time early
      i. early in the semester
      ii. early in the writing process for a project
   b. Invest less time in commenting on final and/or late-term assignments
   c. Write short, specific, leading comments that ask for or direct a particular kind of revision
      i. Prefer "What were you happier than?" to "Vague."
      ii. Prefer "Could you make this point clear earlier?" to "Reorganize"
      iii. Prefer "Try 'X says ___; however, this won't work because ___" to "Be explicit."
   d. Write end comments that prioritize achievements and necessary changes: what's first?

3. Enlist students in helping you (all) achieve maximum investment returns
   a. Share models of student-level writing; help students identify "stronger/weaker" sightings of your high-focus elements in those models, then in peers' paragraphs, and then in their own
   b. Have students formally self-review their current progress based on your assignment or rubric: what are they doing well? what not so well? what questions do they have?
   c. Ask students to annotate any asgt. they turn in: what they did well, what they might improve
   d. Require students' responses to your/others' comments before or with the next assignment
   e. Ask students to describe key revisions to the current draft and/or plans for the next assignment
   f. Use some in-class time for planning and starting revisions (or "revision memos" for documents they won't actually revise) based on peer review, self-review, or instructor-review

4. Use shortcuts, rubrics, other strategies to minimize time spent on ranking/defending/grading
   a. Use underlines (good!), squiggles (problem!), or X's as minimal marking at the sentence-level
   b. Consider marking mechanical/stylistic errors only for a paragraph or two in intense cases
   c. Deliberately limit your written comments: for instance, write only two comments per page, fill limited space on your response sheet, stick to a formulaic response outline
   d. Make fewer evaluative decisions: fewer assessment categories, fewer scores within categories
   e. Use rubrics or scoring guides that state high-water-mark specific goals—"makes clear early argument" vs. "thesis"—to provide feedback on a range of commonly-expected competencies
   f. Keep a list of common critiques to share with and elucidate for the whole class
   g. Provide sample "A" vs. "C" paragraphs or checklists before handing back graded essays
   h. Offer to provide additional responses to direct, specific questions if students request them
   i. Don't feel guilty!

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**Good Investments**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>More student writing, less grade-calculating:</th>
<th>More information, less original writing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Try minute-papers scored S/U/0</td>
<td>Discuss and use abbreviations or codes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assign/collect four responses; letter-grade two</td>
<td>Use detailed rubrics, checklists, macros</td>
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<tr>
<td>Judge using fewer criteria</td>
<td>Use whole-class handouts for common issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use fewer score levels: ABCD v. 95-94-93…</td>
<td>Have students write the first comments</td>
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<tr>
<th>More awareness-raising, less fixing</th>
<th>More precision, less volume</th>
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<tr>
<td>Minimally mark (don't fix) errors</td>
<td>Comment on a few key issues</td>
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<td>Mark one paragraph substantially as a model</td>
<td>Use questions or leading-statements instead of vaguely evaluative language</td>
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<td>Underline strong sentences/phrases/analyses</td>
<td>Praise exactly: &quot;Focused summary&quot; v. &quot;Good&quot;</td>
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<td>Squiggle weak sentences/phrases/analyses</td>
<td>Use direct end comments: do what next time?</td>
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<td>Use comments to identify patterns</td>
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