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!***

Good Investments

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