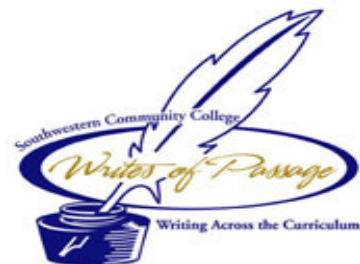


# Writing Matters



## Feedback and the Writing Process

Have you ever written an email then stopped for a moment to read back over it before you hit “Send”? If so, you used a simple version of the writing process. A writing process is simply a set of steps that a writer follows in order to ensure that the final product is exactly what the intended audience wants to read. Some instructors employ a traditional approach to the writing process, having students turn in rough drafts for evaluation, then returning the drafts for revisions and proofreading. However, even if this isn’t required in all classes, we certainly hope that our students are at least proofreading their writing before turning it in. What are ways that we can influence student writing and help it to improve? Writing comments on student writing is a method that most instructors find helpful, as it can be specific and personal, drawing the student’s attention to where it is needed. However, it is wise to reflect on the ways we comment on student writing in order to better understand if our comments are helpful, ignored, or at the very worst, harmful to our students’ learning.

## Commenting on Student Writing

It is clear from extensive research that students frequently misunderstand the comments teachers write in the margins of student papers. We should be sure, then, that we are strategic in the ways we use comments on student writing. There is no one right way to comment, but, according to Peter Elbow, we should consider the following question: what will help this student, on this paper, in this class, at this point in the semester?

One helpful tip is to read the entire paper before commenting. It can be frustrating to spend your time writing out a comment in the

margin, only to discover that what you wrote was incorrect (“you have misunderstood x” when it becomes clear later in the paper that the writer actually does understand the issue at hand).

Second, require students to set up a time to meet with you in a brief conference so that you can go over your comments verbally with them. This makes it easier to clear up any misunderstandings the student may have about the comments you’ve written.

Be specific in your comments. Students are sometimes confused by the vague

“good point” or “awkward structure” that appears in the margins of their papers. If you are taking the time to write the comment, make sure it gets quickly to the point.

Also, write comments from a reader’s point of view. Many students find it helpful to read, “I got confused in these sentences. Are you saying...?” A comment like this means more to the student writer than something vague like, “Give more detail.” In addition, this kind of comment encourages the student to think of writing as a dialogue between the writer

and the reader, a conversation in which he/she has a meaningful role.

Finally, if you have a large number of comments to write, try writing on a separate sheet that you return with the paper to the student. It can be daunting for a student to see his/her paper marked left and right with comments, slashes, underlines, and notes. A separate page also helps the student focus more clearly on the advice you are giving.

Students appreciate feedback; may we give them the feedback that will help them become better writers in our fields.\*

**There is no great writing, only great rewriting.**

**Justice Louis Brandeis**

\*Elbow, Peter. “About Responding to Student Writing.” *Marist College Peter Elbow Workshop Materials*. Web. 25 January 2010.

# Writing Matters



## Academic English: Everyone's Second Language

One of the most frequent complaints voiced by faculty in all disciplines is that students write like they speak - it's informal, confusing, and often incorrect according to the rules of academic writing. Many students have yet to come to the conclusion that the English we use to speak in our everyday lives is very different from the English we use to write in an academic setting. This holds true for ALL of us! Even a well-educated writer with fluid prose and a strong grasp of the English language can be found using incomplete sentences, vague pronoun references, and abrupt topic shifts in everyday conversation.

We can help our students become better writers by emphasizing to them the importance of learning to use English a different (and admittedly often confusing) way. Models of informal and formal writing are helpful, especially since the concept of "good" writing (what is acceptable) is very different from one discipline to the next. Discuss the models in class, showing students how the acceptable model uses English according to what is correct in your discipline. Also, discuss in class the change that must take place in their minds when students sit down to write an academic paper. I've found it often helps to share my own struggles to make the shift from my everyday, "home" English to academic prose.

Even if we're raised speaking English, academic English is a second language to us all. Understanding this, we can work with our students to help them achieve great things in their writing careers.

**Remember to encourage your students to enter the 2010 WAC Awards. Any non-fiction essay written for a class this academic year is eligible to win cash prizes!**

**Complete rules and entry forms are available on the WAC website or outside the WAC office, Oaks 101 B.**

From now on, ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put.

— Winston Churchill