
Engaging Ideas

The Professor's Guide
to Integrating Writing,
Critical Thinking,
and Active Learning
in the Classroom



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Commenting on Higher-Order Concerns

Commentary should be aimed first at the higher-level concerns of ideas, organization, development, and overall clarity. Here is a hierarchy of questions you can ask to stimulate higher-order revision. (These questions assume an assignment calling for thesis-based academic writing.)

1. Does the Draft Follow the Assignment? If the draft is not fulfilling the assignment, there is no purpose in commenting further. Tell the writer that the draft is on the wrong track and that he or she needs to start over by rereading the assignment carefully and perhaps seeking help from you. I generally return such a draft unmarked and ungraded.

2. Does the Writer Have a Thesis That Addresses an Appropriate Problem or Question? Once you see that a draft addresses the assignment, look next at its overall focus. Does the draft have a thesis? Does the thesis respond to an appropriate question or problem? As discussed in Chapter Two, thesis writing is unfamiliar to students, whose natural tendency is toward “all about” reports, toward summarizing rather than analyzing, or toward the unfocused dumping of data or information.

Drafts exhibiting problems at this level may have no discernible problem-thesis structure; other drafts may have a thesis, but one that is not stated explicitly or is buried deep in the body of the paper, forcing you to wander about lost before finally seeing what the writer intends. Frequently drafts become clearer at the end than they were at the beginning—evidence that the writer has clarified his or her thinking during the act of composing. To use the language of Flower (1979), such a draft is “writer-based” rather than “reader-based”; that

is, the draft follows the order of the writer's discovery process rather than a revised order that meets the reader's needs. Thus, drafts that become clear only in the conclusion need to be revised globally. In some cases, you may wish to guide the writer toward a prototypical academic introduction that explains the problem to be addressed, states the thesis, and gives a brief overview of the whole argument. (See the discussion of academic introductions in Chapter Twelve, pages 207–209.) Composing such an introduction forces the writer to imagine the argument from the reader's perspective. Typical end comments addressing thesis and focus include these:

I can't find a thesis here, nor is it clear what problem or question you are addressing. Please see me for help.

Your thesis finally becomes clear by the end; for your next draft, move it up to the introduction to help your reader. Open your intro by explaining the problem your thesis will address, and then follow that with your thesis. Also, the reader needs a preview map of your argument.

3. If the Draft Has a Thesis, What Is the Quality of the Argument Itself? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas? Marginal and end comments for this level address questions about ideas. Is the argument appropriate to your discipline? Is the argument logical? Is there appropriate use of relevant and sufficient evidence? Are the ideas developed with sufficient complexity, subtlety, and insight? Is there adequate awareness of and attention to opposing views? Typical marginal comments addressing these concerns might be the following:

Interesting idea!

Nice comparison of X to Y here.

Good point—I hadn't thought of it in quite this way.

Expand and explain; could you give an example?

Aren't you overlooking X's point of view here?

I don't see how you got from X to Y. Argument is confusing.

This is too much a rehash of X. Move from summarizing to analyzing.

You have covered X well but haven't addressed Y or Z.

You need to anticipate and respond to opposing views here.

What's your evidence for this assertion?

4. Is the Draft Effectively Organized at the Macro Level? As writers, we all struggle with organization, often producing final prod-

ucts organized differently from our original rough drafts. Student writers have even greater problems with organization and often need our personal help. When commenting on organization, try considering questions like these: Can the draft be outlined or tree-diagrammed? What should be added to the draft? What should be eliminated? What should be moved or shifted around? Are there adequate transitions between paragraphs and sections? Are all details tied to points? Are all points supported by details? Are the purpose, point, and structure of the essay adequately previewed for the reader through a good title and introduction?

Comment on the title, which should suggest the thesis of the piece. If the title is good, praise it. If not, suggest improvements (see pages 209–210).

Comment on the opening paragraph/introduction. The opening should engage the reader's attention and, in most academic writing, set forth a problem or question that the essay will address. If the opening has a good thesis, praise it.

Look at the opening sentences of paragraphs. These should be transition sentences with forward- and backward-looking elements. Praise good transitions. Point out ways to improve others. In academic writing, paragraphs typically have explicit topic sentences.

Although many students may need personal help in reaching solutions, you can draw students' attention to organizational problems by placing "readerly" comments in the margins. Typical comments include these:

How does this part fit?

You lost me in that last sentence; I'm getting confused.

What's the point of this section?

How does this paragraph relate to what you just said?

Your introduction made me expect to hear about X next, but this is about Y.

You're bouncing all over. I need a road map of where we have been and where we are going.

5. Is the Draft Organized Effectively at the Micro Level? Are paragraphs unified and coherent? Often readers first become aware of organizational problems when they get confused by the writer's paragraphing. What one often sees in student drafts is a series of short, choppy paragraphs (perhaps in imitation of the paragraphing in print advertisements or popular magazine articles) or, conversely, long

paragraphs that change direction midstream so that the last part of the paragraph seems to have nothing to do with the first part. Writing teachers consider a paragraph unified if all the sentences support or develop the controlling idea, often stated explicitly in a topic sentence. They consider a paragraph coherent if the sentences link to each other without abrupt leaps or gaps in the flow of thought.

To help students notice problems of unity and coherence in their paragraphing, you can get mileage out of marginal comments like these:

Why so many short paragraphs?

This paragraph wanders. What's its main point?

This paragraph has lots of details, but I can't see their point.

Add a topic sentence?

You seem to be making several points here without developing them. Break into separate paragraphs and develop each?

These sentences don't link to each other. Fill in gaps?