

## HELPING STUDENTS GROW THROUGH CRITICAL FEEDBACK

There are several things you can do to help your students cope with critical feedback—a necessary evil in the writing process. The techniques outlined below are designed to help you help your students work toward high standards for their writing, create a classroom environment in which criticism is less personal and therefore less threatening, and grade assignments in ways that provide honest feedback but aren't so overwhelmingly negative that they undermine students' motivation. This list is by no means comprehensive. It is intended to get you started, and it is based on my personal experience and my knowledge of psychological research on learning and motivation. You may have ideas of your own, and I encourage you to experiment—Individuals' learning styles differ, and, as psychologists, we're still learning what motivates people and makes them persist in difficult activities.

### In the classroom

*Emphasize your own enthusiasm for writing and your commitment to help each student become a better writer.*

- Spend some time thinking about how difficult and frustrating it can be to try to learn what you're teaching. Let your students know that you understand the difficulty of what you're asking them to do. If your students see that you empathize with them, they will be less likely to see you as the bad guy.
- Show genuine, individualized interest in students' work, in their ideas, in their growth, and in their learning. In my experience, students who aren't interested in the course itself will work harder if they like you and want your approval. Students who are struggling will persist if they know that you are there to support them. Some specific suggestions:
  - Memorize your students' names. This may or may not be feasible, depending on the size of your sections and the nature of your memory, but I find that students are willing to work much harder for me and are more likely to show up to class if they know that I know them and will be monitoring their progress throughout the semester.
  - Another possibility is to have students complete an index card with basic info on the first day of class. Doing this has allowed me to include examples from the interests of any non-majors and to tailor my justifications for utility value of class activities (see below) to those who aren't aspiring to be academics.
  - If students are working on cumulative projects throughout the semester, have them hand in prior drafts with each revision. Or, keep a cheat sheet of student project ideas and major issues that you've told them to work on. Use this information to demonstrate that you're seeing them grow as writers. (e.g., in a conference... "When we last met, you were thinking about doing your paper on topic X; have you thought about that idea further?" or on a paper revision... "Good job reorganizing this section. It flows much better now that you've included transition sentences.")

*Emphasize the utility value of writing.*

- Find ways to communicate the importance of writing. This is especially important if the Comm-B course you're teaching is focused on a particular writing style. Students might be reluctant to see the benefits of some of the skills you're teaching—for example, knowing how to write citations in APA style.
  - Who is in your class? What are their career goals? Help them see how writing is a part of just about any successful career, even if they don't plan to go to grad school or be an academic. Even if they don't see the benefits of your particular genre, at least get them to see the value of writing as a skill.
  - This will be even more effective if you can get your students to generate the reasons why writing is useful on their own. If students are grumbling, take a minute and brainstorm as a group. Have them decipher why you've given them a particular assignment and how it might benefit them. I once did this with a group of whiny students and challenged them to come up with an alternate assignment that accomplished the same goals. They did, and we came up with a compromise assignment. Not only were they happier, but they really seemed to enjoy the assignment and took it much more seriously.

*Emphasize that writing is a process.*

- Many students are inclined to think that his or her academic performance, in general, and their success with writing, in particular, is more based on ability than effort. Persuade them otherwise. Especially where writing is concerned, there is a process of continual growth. Not even the best writer gets their work published on the first draft. Here are a few ways to drive this point home:
  - Use lots of informal writing activities in class, so that there is a constant process of writing and revision. In this context, students' writing is constantly being evaluated but not graded, so they get

- used to getting feedback without the added pressure of having it affect their GPA.
- Group writing activities can be particularly effective, because they keep the pressure off individuals and are time-effective. For example, after teaching students how to run a statistical test, I'll do a quick (five to ten minute) segment where we compose the Results section together—how would you write up this test? Or, after reading a scientific study, I'll have each person write a paragraph summary similar to what they might write in an introduction; then we'll compare and contrast our paragraphs.
- When providing feedback, critique the writing, not the writer. What are the particular strengths and weaknesses of this piece of writing at this point in time? How can it be improved? Not—this person is a good/bad writer.
- Demonstrate that all writers are fair game for criticism.
  - I like to use examples from my own writing. It evens the playing field and gives students a chance to be on the evaluative side of the writing process (they love this!). Meanwhile, you can use their renewed interest to get them thinking about specific writing skills, all while providing them with a strong model of writing in your field. For example, you could use a course paper that you've revised, a chapter from a senior thesis or master's thesis, or a section of a scientific paper that you're planning to publish. Pick a short segment of your writing and highlight specific things that they should critique (e.g. content, organization, APA style, passive voice—whatever point you want to drive home that day). Have them identify strengths and weaknesses, and have them make specific suggestions for improvement.
  - If you have them, peer reviews of your own submitted articles are particularly good illustrations of how criticism is a part of the writing process for even the best writers. Simply sharing a peer review of your own work with your students can reassure them that revision is a normal part of the process.
  - Another way to emphasize revision is to use research papers in your field, and critique them together as a group. As you know, some papers are fun to read and you burn right through them; others are so garbled that you find yourself rereading the same paragraph five times before you can move on. Pick a good one and a bad one (preferably on the same topic). Have students compare them to see if they can identify what makes one easier to read than the other. Who is the more successful writer? Students sometimes have the mistaken impression that wordy, convoluted writing is a sign of good scholarship. Help them see otherwise.

#### *Reward progress.*

- Use outstanding student papers as exemplars.
  - When students are writing well or have made dramatic improvements, reward them with praise and recognition. This tactic has the added benefit of providing other students with models of what they should strive for in their own work. I've done this by making photocopies of a page or two for the whole class to review together (when the work is really stellar) or by reading an excerpt and highlighting what was good about that paper (if it is not uniformly good).
  - As an aside, I like recognizing good work, but I always ask students' permission before I use their papers as exemplars. Some are uncomfortable with the extra attention and will prefer to remain anonymous. Others will love the attention. I also try to spread the recognition around. This keeps the classroom dynamic a little more egalitarian. Even if there are one or two standout students, there are likely to be other students who are improving or who do specific things well. It is important for instructors to recognize the little things.

#### **When discussing upcoming assignments and returning drafts:**

*Prepare student expectations appropriately. As much as possible, make sure students know what you'll be looking for.*

- I like to distribute my grading sheets to students several days before assignments are due. This allows them to submit the best paper possible (which makes for better reading for me, less revision for them, and happier people all around). This may not be allowed in some courses, but the clearer you can be about your expectations, the closer their writing will come to meeting your expectations.
  - For example, with oral presentations, I give explicit instructions about what is expected (Powerpoint or other media? Time length? Level of detail? Attire? Should they use notes or read a prepared speech? ...). Then we talk about what an "A" presentation would look like, a "B" presentation, etc. Finally I distribute the sheet I will use when grading them, so they know how points will be distributed among the various components of the presentation.
  - Make sure students understand the time constraints on your responding—i.e. that you won't be

documenting every mistake and that responding to all your comments doesn't necessarily guarantee them an "A."

*Share and analyze some successful models with students after the first assignment.*

If there are stellar papers, this is the time to use them to teach critical principles, to set the bar high, and to motivate students.

### **When responding:**

*Highlight the positives.* Research shows that people need a 3:1 positive to negative ratio to perceive things positively, so look hard to find the little things students are doing right.

- Reinforce the good things, even if they're small, so that students continue doing those things well in the future.
- Don't forget to praise progress, development, growth, etc.

*Provide feedback to everyone.* No matter how successful a paper is, there is always room for improvement. Try to write as much on the most successful papers as you do on the least successful ones.

- This can be tricky, because it's tempting to speed through the "easy" papers with a few comments of "good job" and "nice work." I typically allot a specific amount of time for each paper, and try to stick to that no matter how successful or unsuccessful the paper.
- If you're having trouble coming up with feedback for the more successful papers, try reviewing them as if they belong to a colleague. Really push students to think of their ideas critically and articulate them clearly. Use standards you would normally reserve for your own work or for published work in your field. Your comments don't have to be negative—just interjecting your own questions and thoughts will open an intellectual dialogue to help students expand or deepen their thinking.

Be as specific as possible with your feedback.

- I know. I know. You have a limited amount of time. But think of how a student will react to each of the following statements:
  - "Nice" vs. "I like that your opening paragraph previews the introduction section and justifies your experiment."
  - "Confusing" vs. "Your results section would be easier to follow if you used parallel sentence structure throughout."
- If pressed for time, I always write fewer expansive comments rather than more brief comments.

*Avoid copyediting.* Nothing fills a paper with red ink faster than trying to fix every little grammatical error (or for that matter, fills up all of your time).

- If there are bigger issues, skip the copyediting altogether, and encourage students to focus on global concerns.
- If the writing is otherwise sound, then some copyediting might be warranted, but focus on trying to help students understand the errors they're making (e.g. confusing sentences, imprecise technical vocabulary), so they know your comments are not just stylistic preferences. If they understand the errors, they are much less likely to repeat them in future assignments.
- Look for patterns of problems. When problems recur, comment closely in only one section of a paper, then draw a line and explain where your comments stopped but that these \*kinds\* of problems continue.