



The Content/Form Split

Well-Organized Comments Lead To Learning and Growth

Just as we can minimize comments, we can also organize them. An essay covered with comments can feel overwhelming, and students may not know where to begin. The overall impression of such an essay is “I’m terrible at so many things.”

How It Works

Left Margin For Content, Right Margin For Form

One way to streamline your feedback is to employ the two margins of the essays for different purposes. This idea, shared with me by Dr. Jill Gladstein, separates comments into content and form. The left margin can be used for substantive comments and the right margin for grammatical or diction comments. For online grading, you can use the comments feature for substance and the “suggestions” feature for sentence-level work, or choose some other distinction depending on the program you use.

Add A Feedback Loop

Ask students to address the substantive comments and write questions about the grammatical or diction comments they don’t understand. Then ask them to write about how they would change one or two of those substantive areas.

Why It Works

Even if you don’t comment on or grade their responses, they’ll have learned from doing the exercise.

Like Top Three, Bottom Three, this approach highlights digestible, usable collections of information to help students see patterns in their writing. Once they recognize those patterns, they’re more likely to be able to change them.

Empower Students To Identify Their Own Writing Patterns

If you do all of the commenting, students may benefit very little despite your extensive work. If you do none of the commenting, students struggle to identify their strengths and weaknesses. But if you do some portion of the commenting, like an in-text content/form split, and then encourage them to summarize and analyze your feedback, your time actively informs their knowledge.