



Top Three, Bottom Three

A Teacher's Compact List With Applicable Advice

A compact list can provide more applicable advice than a comprehensive one. My favorite lists include positive feedback and areas for improvement, and they are easily read and digested by students.

A teacher's Top Three, Bottom Three list at the end of an essay might look like this:

Top Three: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Strong central idea2. Conclusion raises compelling new idea3. Correctly formatted citations	Bottom Three: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Some organizational issues, especially in the third paragraph2. Second paragraph needs more support3. Many comma errors
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Add A Feedback Loop For Further Impact

Students can respond to one, two or all three of the "Bottom Three" items by reworking a section of the essay or identifying ways to work on particular skills. You can respond with your own suggestions, and even that exchange will be less time consuming than comprehensive commenting.

Students are often pleased to have their strengths recognized and may wish to articulate pride in their own work:

- *"I really messed up my citations earlier this year, so I paid careful attention to them this time"*
- *"I was so excited to think of that connection in my conclusion. Glad you noticed!"*

For the next assignment, ask students to return to the Top Three, Bottom Three list from the previous essay and articulate how they worked to improve their Bottom Three list while maintaining the successes of their Top Three list.



Why It Works

Because Top Three, Bottom Three is not especially time consuming for teachers, students get their work back sooner, which can lead to better learning outcomes since they're more likely to remember what they were thinking and feeling as they wrote.

Ask Student To Create Their Own Top Three, Bottom Three

It is also possible, after they've seen this response technique, to ask students to create their own Top Three, Bottom Three. They might end up commenting not only on the product but also on their process. Such a student list might look like this:

Top Three: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I really like the topic I chose2. The grammar is solid3. I found a lot of supporting details	Bottom Three: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I procrastinated getting started, which was stressful2. The conclusion is very repetitive3. Some of the vocabulary feels basic
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Why It Works

Similar to filling out a rubric, writing this list creates a space for meaningful conversation and increased student self-awareness.

Similarly, students might focus on details like vocabulary or grammar (as in the example above) when you want them more focused on big ideas; identifying that distinction can help students refocus on higher order concerns.