

STATEMENT ON ASSESSING STUDENT WRITING

My approach to commenting on student writing has evolved over the course of my teaching career as I have gained experience and become more familiar with research for best practices. I now understand assessment as an essential tool for building teacher-student relationships, maximizing writing knowledge gains, and encouraging and supporting diverse learners. My commenting practices demonstrate the value I place on initiating a constructive and nurturing dialogue with students about their writing. I want to begin, rather than end, conversations with students. To help students engage with my commentary, I work hard to provide positive as well as more critical feedback. Finding a moment or passage worthy of praise in a student's essay helps build rapport between student and instructor – it also inspires motivation in learning and writing and prompts engagement with more critical feedback. Praise is essential in all assessment, because it opens a door for motivated learning, engagement, and teacher-student relationships. Even a simple and brief comment such as “I really like this moment in the essay” can go a long way to begin a productive and sustainable relationship.

Encouragement helps pave the way for legitimate gains in writing knowledge. Written feedback supports my teaching in two knowledge domains: first, genre knowledge and the effective practice of specific conventions common in academic genres; second, knowledge of the writing process. Teaching students to understand and master particular features common in academic and other genres can be accomplished through insightful and specific comments regarding how students “try out” these features. My feedback teaches students how certain textual forms and genres expect certain conventions, and provides specific advice for how to improve their efforts at practicing these conventions. In my comments to students working with secondary sources, for example, I ask them to understand conventions of quoting and analyzing outside sources, as well as how those practices function in academic genres. In addition to genre knowledge, my comments also help students gain procedural knowledge. For students to more effectively understand the writing process, they must be able take a holistic view of an essay's structure and a recursive view of the revision process necessary to create that structure. Such an understanding takes time to develop, but engaging with insightful instructor commentary is an important part of this learning. Written feedback helps students see their own writing from a macro-structural perspective. How does the essay work as a whole? How are its parts working independently and together? How does a particular move or moment in an essay function in the larger context of the work? These questions, and the feedback that answers them, allow student writers to see how they can make different choices in their writing, and to better understand how they can return to in-progress texts to make revisions that support a holistic and recursive notion of the writing process.

In addition to building relationships and maximizing writing knowledge, I am also committed to practicing assessment of student work that supports diverse learners and nontraditional literacies. In first-year and basic writing courses especially, I often use grading contracts, which help to reduce student anxiety by placing more of an emphasis on effort than skill or previous knowledge. The grading contract allows me to focus more on qualitative, conversational assessment that directs students to think more about learning – to value the dialogue we can have about their writing, rather than worrying excessively about a quantitative grade. In all of my courses, I also make the grading process as transparent as possible by exposing students to assessment criteria at multiple points in the assignment process, and using that same criteria to guide my final comments and grading. Such transparency helps students to better understand and engage with my evaluation and feedback, but it also demonstrates to them the most important elements of an effective essay or project. Finally, I also seek to build bridges between individual feedback on essays and the conversations we have in class. During grading sessions, I work to discover patterns and trends among student projects. Having identified these, I can target specific issues or needs of multiple students that can then be addressed in class discussions and activities (as well as individual conferences). Such a practice reminds students that we are all actively working to improve their writing knowledge and skill. My assessment practices seek, overall, to encourage and motivate learning by building rapport and starting conversations, to focus on specific knowledge domains and skills for writing instruction, and to support students at all levels and literacies, to meet them where they are as learners and writers.