

Making the Most of Instructor Feedback

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Receiving feedback on your writing is a tremendous resource! When we are in the writing process, we sometimes have a tendency to overlook a lot of small writing errors, so it is always a great idea to have an outside reader review your papers. Some of the people that might review your paper are: your writing instructor, an online tutoring service such as SMARTHINKING, your campus Writing Center, an English teacher that you had for a previous course, a friend who you believe has strong reading and writing skills, another student that you know that is an English major, or a family member or friend who could provide honest, strong feedback. For the purposes of this article, we are going to examine instructor feedback!

Instructors provide feedback to their students in a number of ways. Feedback can take the form of holistic comments, line-by-line edits, and one-on-one discussion or conferencing.

Holistic Comments (End Comments)

Holistic comments are generated when your instructor reads through your entire piece of writing and then focuses on composing some general comments that address any areas/categories of concern in your paper. For instance, your instructor may write:

Well done with this draft! Overall, you have strong ideas and good character description. Please work on strengthening your descriptions of place. Also, review comma rules before editing and proofreading your paper again.

These comments are specific to the students' text, but do not go through individual sentences or paragraphs. Rather, holistic comments provide a place to start for a student to evaluate and re-examine her writing. The above example includes the critique: "review comma rules before editing and proofreading your paper again," which indicates that this students' paper has errors in comma rules. Since no particular comma rule is mentioned here (such as: Review the comma rule for introductory phrases and clauses), this indicates that the student made more than just one type of comma error. Perhaps there are run-on sentences, introductory phrases lacking commas, and lists without proper separation.

At this point, the student should read through the holistic feedback and determine whether or not these comments make sense to them. If the instructor's feedback states, "You have strong ideas and good character description," does the student understand the character description that is referred to? Does the student feel confident in the ideas and character description included in the paper? Essentially, does the student understand and agree with the holistic comments?

Next, perhaps the instructor states, "work on strengthening your descriptions of place." Does the student understand what is meant by this comment? Did the author describe a specific location in this text? How was it described? Was there an appeal to all of the senses or could more information be given to provide the reader with details?

If at any point in the feedback the student has questions or disagrees with the instructor, the student should discuss these questions, comments, and concerns with their instructor. Perhaps you spent a great deal of time reviewing your comma rules before you submitted this paper, so you don't understand the comma mistakes indicated here. Ask your instructor to look through your paper with you and provide an example. Maybe even though the instructor said that your character description is strong, you still have

some questions about writing and developing character. Ask your instructor for more specific insight into your characterization.

Line-by-Line Edits (In-Text Comments)

Line-by-line edits are another type of feedback that some students really prefer and some students shy away from. Line editing can be done in a number of ways, but the purpose of line-by-line edits are when an instructor goes through the paper, makes recommended changes in text and provides comments on a line-by-line basis. The types of comments that an instructor may make are potentially unlimited; they may recommend changes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, word choice, sentence structure, paragraph structure, general page formatting, and much more. Some instructors use official proofreading and editing marks (as found [here](#)), but if so, instructors often make their students aware of these marks ahead of time. If not, lists of proofreading and editing marks appear in most writing textbooks and are widely available online, such as the weblink above.

Some students prefer line-by-line edits because instructors point to specific areas of the paper that need attention or changes. Unlike holistic comments, with line-by-line edits students know exactly where their commas were used incorrectly or where the instructor may have had extra comments or questions. Depending on your instructor, line-by-line edits may be done on various computer programs, such as Microsoft Word Track Changes. In Track Changes, the student has the opportunity to right click and accept or reject certain changes and can receive specific edits from the instructor without printing a copy of the paper.

Conferencing (One-on-One Discussion)

Another type of instructor feedback that may be used in conjunction with holistic feedback or line-by-line edits or on its own is known as one-on-one discussion or conferencing. Some instructors prefer to conference with their students regarding editing, proofreading, revising, and general reviewing of a rough draft of a research paper. By the time a conference begins, instructors have typically already read the paper and provided holistic feedback or line-by-line editing. During the conference, the instructor spends time reviewing these changes with the students and determining if the students have any questions about the feedback. Sometimes, instructors use the conference time *just* to provide feedback to the students, which may or may not be written down on the document. In that case, students need to take detailed notes so that they can return to the paper later and make any suggested comments.

Whether or not the instructor has made comments on the draft, students should take this opportunity with their instructor to ask detailed questions about their writing. If the instructor makes the suggestion in a conference that the student review comma rules, the student can ask the instructor to elaborate on that suggestion, to ensure that they truly understand the instructors' feedback in context.

A one-on-one instructor conference is a tremendous opportunity for a student to ask questions about her writing and to garner some significant suggestions for improvement. It may seem uncomfortable at first to ask your instructor about making changes to your writing, but the more readers and insight you can get on your writing, the more you will see a significant improvement in your papers.

Another important note in terms of instructor feedback is the following: you can ignore any and all feedback if you do not agree with it. If an instructor provides you feedback regarding comma rules, spell-

ing, or grammar, it is typically recommended that you heed their advice and make any of the recommended changes. However, sometimes the feedback that instructors will give will be stylistic changes. Stylistic changes may be changes to word choices or recommending that a writer focus on a different element of the story. Below is an example of this:

Perhaps an assignment would be to write a personal narrative in which you tell a story. The story that you choose to focus on is a time when your entire family went out to eat and a member of your party proposed marriage to another member of your party. When I, the instructor, read your essay, I may suggest that since the assignment was a *personal narrative essay*, that you focus on more specific details of your experience: what did you eat? What did you drink? How did you feel about the company during the meal? What was your perspective of the proposal? However, you, as the author, feel that the story of the food is best paralleled to the romanticism of the proposal; you do not think that emphasis should be on the food description, but rather, description will come later in the piece once the story of the proposal has transpired. This is an example of a stylistic difference.

If a student disagrees with a stylistic suggestion of her instructor, she should discuss any questions and concerns with the instructor. Perhaps the student misunderstood the suggestion; perhaps the student misunderstood the assignment description and the instructor is trying to redeem the grade; perhaps the student and instructor can meet in the middle with a compromise between additional food description and additional storytelling. Likewise, if another individual positioned in writing authority (such as Writing Center tutor or another English instructor) makes suggestions to a student's paper that the student author disagree with or are unsure about, she should always discuss these questions and concerns with her instructor for the course. The instructor will be able to provide a student with additional information or explanation about the assignment that they may not know. Perhaps the follow-up assignment requires reflection on the significant food description; therefore, it is more important to have food description than plot definition. If a student does not take the time to ask your instructor these questions, she may never know.

Let's recap!

- A writing instructor provides a student with feedback in a number of ways, sometimes even in a combination of ways.
- The student will review the comments, take notes if they are conferencing, and ask questions about any and all of the comments that are made on the paper.
- The student will then decide which comments she believes are necessary to pursue and change in the document and make those changes.
- If the student has questions along the way, she should always double check with the instructor to follow up or clarify.
- Depending on the instructor, they may want to or be willing to review another draft for the student. If that is the case, the student should provide them with a copy of the modified draft to review again with any changes.