Writing Across the Curriculum
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

COMMENTING ON STUDENT WORK ONLINE

Some WAC-Inspired Tips

Online instruction does not just mean planning (a)synchronous lectures and facilitating online class discussion. Another implication of going online is that students will not print their written assignments and hand them over to you in class. And similarly, you won't return their graded and commented work in class (or put their assignments in your departmental mailbox in the hope that students come and pick them up).
This tip sheet suggests strategies you might want to use when commenting on student work for an online class. Feel free to experiment with these tips!

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Think about what your goals are when providing feedback
- *Are you merely trying to justify the grade you're about to give?*
  Comments written with this purpose in mind tend to be punitive. They'll feel even more punitive if the grade you're about to give is the final one (and not just the provisional grade, pending students' revisions of their drafts).
- *The WAC philosophy about commenting on student work is to use such comments to encourage revisions.*
  An implication of this philosophy is that commenting is most useful on unfinished work! Put differently, on final drafts, give a grade, and your job is done. You can of course offer more in-depth comments to those students who want them. Rubrics can be your friend here.

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Prioritize core learning goals
- *Through your comments, aim to help your students achieve your core learning goals.*
  Even in normal times, the WAC philosophy about grammar and correctness is not to comment on every single mistake (which might overwhelm students), but to call students' attention to one or two recurring mistakes that they have made. Now, in these chaotic times, while grammar and sentence construction errors might jump off the page, consider prioritizing your core learning goals, focusing on ideas and organization over correctness.
- *Give students your ARMS: **A**dd, **R**emove, **M**ove, and **S**ubstitute*
  If you tell students to "rethink" a passage, or "reshape" their introduction, the odds are, they will think your suggestions are vague. Instead, you might want to aim at precision by using ARMS. In other words, invite students to:
    - **A**dd something (evidence, quote, explanation, etc.)
    - **R**emove something (because it is redundant, unclear, superfluous, etc.)
    - **M**ove something
    - **S**ubstitute something to something they wrote.
- *If you have rubrics, use them! (If not, no worries)*
  Clear rubrics provide common ground for students and instructors for. They also help you save time when commenting on student work.

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Where should your comments go?
- End comments instead of marginal comments might be a way to communicate clearly despite not meeting with students. End comments make it easier to take a discursive tone. Feel free to refer to specific passages of the paper in end comments, tying together different parts of the paper which work or do not.

- Group responses might also be helpful. To address writing issues shared by the whole class, you might consider a screencast or track-changes: pull up sample assignments (strong ones, weaker ones), comment on it, and share your comments with students.
- It is important to remember that students will find dealing with grading and comments on their work confusing in these times without in-person office hours or after-class questions.

Choose the technology that works best with you and your students

- *Do you like to read, and comment on, student work pen in hand?*
  Will you print your students' assignments, grade them pen in hand, then scan them, and send them back to their respective authors? That sounds a little time-consuming, but if you need to use a pen, go for it: you don't want to disrupt too many habits in these habit-disrupting times !
  Some apps could help you save time:
    - Tiny Scanner (android, iPhone) turns any smart-phone camera into a scanner.
    - If you use a tablet with a stylus, a great many pdf apps allow you to edit documents directly with your stylus (e.g. Pdf Expert).
    - If you use a Surface Pro, you can use the pen tool.
- *Are you fine with text-editing software?*
  Track-changes might come in handy, but you want to make sure that students know what track-changes are and how to read them. Also, bear in mind that not all your students might have access to Word or Pages. In fact, a lot use Google Docs (because it's the platform used in NYC high schools). Google Docs has a track-changes function! Click here for more info.
- *Do you use Blackboard?*
  Blackboard has a pretty good interface--one that features in particular a 'comment' box.
- *Consider sending voice memos to your students.*
  If you use your phone to record them, you can email the file straight from your phone. Alternatively, you can upload it on Blackboard.

  Contact e-learning for any questions you have regarding Blackboard or technology: elearning@bmcc.cuny.edu

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Don't forget to show sensitivity

- These are confusing and scary times for many. This is not to say that we should let our students skate by, but rather that we should all recognize that the conditions and possibilities of learning are different for all involved. One simple thing to do is build in more flexibility with regards to deadlines and lateness policies. Also, be kind and considerate to yourself! Instructors are dealing with many new and confusing situations.

The Writing Center is still serving students

- If you are not able to conference with students who need additional writing guidance, you can still refer them to the Writing Center. The BMCC Writing Center has moved all of its support online: https://bmcc.upswing.io/
- Below are videos you can share with your students to help them with login and scheduling:
  How to Schedule a Session in Upswing as a Student: https://youtu.be/8h3vsdrO4ZQ
  How to use Upswing's Virtual Learning Center: https://youtu.be/eqOvmSLyGS4

  When logged into BMCC's Upswing site, students can search by tutor name, subject, and the word "writing" to find the Writing Center.
  The schedule is: Mondays - Thursdays, 10am - 8pm; Fridays - Saturdays, 10am - 5pm