

Students' Wants and Preferences for Essay Feedback in College Level English Courses

By Bryan Corbin



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Abstract: Providing written commentary on essays to students in English has long been a challenge for instructors. With increasing numbers of students being placed in classrooms, it can be difficult to deliver an adequate amount of feedback without taxing too much of teachers' time. Consequently, the author wanted to know what feedback students valued most from instructors in college level English courses. Through two surveys and informal conversations, the researcher discovered that students do, in fact, value detailed and meticulous feedback. The author also experimented with providing feedback through highlighting mistakes in conjunction with an error correction guide. This method could potentially ease the burden of English instructors across all levels of education. Students in online and face-to-face classes were queried for this research article. The results indicate that learners appreciate honesty, constructive criticism, and the opportunity to be proactive in their learning.

Keywords: English composition, feedback, writing, student perceptions, time, college, classes

As an educator and lifelong reader, I am someone constantly thirsting for knowledge. I want to know the best ways to help my students improve their reading and writing abilities. Since 2007, I have had the privilege of teaching writing to students around the globe including in South Korea, China, Qatar, and in recent years, Houston, Texas. I have provided feedback on thousands of writing assignments, but to this point, I had never stopped to query my learners—my most important audience—what they like about my comments and what could be improved about them.

Over the years I have searched for articles on what type of feedback students value most in the college level English classroom, but very little exists. Most of the research is focused on providing feedback to students learning English as a second or foreign language. As a reader of student work and a writer responding to dozens of texts every week, I felt it was important to know how to help my learners improve their own skills. I found that when I thought about my students as my audience when I responded to their work, it made me only want to serve them better. Consequently, I embarked on a research project to learn how to help those I instruct improve their own skills as readers and writers, with the feedback loop continually in mind. I recognize that the way I read and respond to students' writing assignments is one of the most important things I do as a full-time English instructor.

Introduction

Numerous studies have been completed on providing writing commentary to English language learners, but the number of recent studies related to providing feedback to students enrolled in traditional college composition courses is highly limited. Barrett and Junio (2017) considered ways in which writing professors

can provide more effective feedback to learners. They concluded that a variety of feedback including conversations with learners, explicit teaching, and multiple writing tasks were necessary for students to improve their writing. Laflen and Smith (2017) found that most students readily opened attachments that included digital comments, but they were not able to ascertain if the learners used the feedback to implement changes in their writing. Ferris (2006) found that feedback helped improve students' writing capabilities.

Chen (2018) studied English majors' perceptions of writing feedback in China and found that approximately 98% of students understood instructors' direct comments. Singaporean students learning how to write in English also preferred direct, even brief feedback to make positive changes in their writing (Song, Hoon, & Alvin, 2017). When indirect instruction was used to point out errors, fewer than 60% of students in Chen's (2018) study properly fixed their mistakes. Song, Hoon, and Alvin (2017) also found that their students had difficulty correcting errors without more explicit guidance.

Several studies suggest that when students receive positive and encouraging feedback on their writing, they feel more motivated to continue engaging in the practice (Mauri, Ginesta, & Rochera, 2016; McGrath, Taylor, & Pychyl, 2011; Zumbunn, Carter, & Conklin, 2014). For the feedback to be well-received, it has to be meaningful; students must understand how to act upon the information they are receiving (Wingate, 2010). In addition to the idea that students should be supported with positive feedback, research also shows that correcting all mistakes is not necessarily the most helpful for students (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Some students, though, disagree with this notion, with almost half of them in one English as a foreign language class preferring that instructors mark all their errors (Diab, 2006). There will likely, however, always be a discrepancy between what students and instructors view to be best practices when it comes to feedback on writing assignments.

Study

In the fall of 2018, I decided to complete my own research on precisely what types of feedback students value most. During that semester, I taught four face-to-face classes of English 1301 and three online sections of the same class. Across all seven classes, I surveyed students through the Google Form platform about their attitudes related to feedback received from writing instructors (see Appendix A). The goal of this survey was to gain a general understanding of student perceptions as it relates to writing feedback.

Students in my face-to-face classes filled out one additional survey, and this related to the students' experiences using the error correction guide that I created. When making comments about student writing, I typically make suggestions digitally in Blackboard or Microsoft Word using the inline grading or review features respectively. Along with these comments, I provide links to various videos discussing a range of composition principles. Some of the videos are ones I have created, and other presentations are performed by content makers I do not know. Nonetheless, I supplement my feedback with interactive links for students to click on and learn from at the conclusion of each major essay. I then require my learners to take and submit notes on the feedback I provided. This was the feedback process that was used for the students' first two papers of the semester.

Beginning with the third essay that students in my face-to-face classes submitted, I changed my approach to feedback. Instead of making comments digitally, I required all of my in-person

students to submit hard copies of their essays to me. I then read through each essay marking up mistakes with nothing more than a highlighter. When I was done highlighting the majority of errors on each essay, I returned the papers with a common error correction guide that I had created. I told students it was their responsibility to go through their individual essays and find the mistakes using the error correction guide to help them. I showed the students how to use the error correction guide, and I gave them examples on how it could help them. I encouraged learners to work with their classmates to figure out how to solve the problems associated with their papers. Working with others was not a requirement, and some students chose to work independently.

The error correction process was completed electronically during class, and I was available the entire time to confer with students as they worked. Students were required to open their essays in a Word document and use the review functions to explain their errors to me. Upon finding the errors I had pointed out, they were asked to write a reflection paragraph at the bottom of their essays. The goal of the reflection paragraph was to summarize what they learned from finding their mistakes and to discuss steps they will take to improve their writing on future assignments.

The final step was for me to meet with the students in individual conferences that occurred during class time while they were working on group activities. The goal of these conferences was to answer any questions and make sure they had properly discovered their errors and to address any additional concerns about their essays. I asked all the students if they were able to find all of their mistakes, and I asked them if they needed any clarification. The majority of the students had very few questions for me, which I attribute to the fact that I was accessible throughout the entire error correction process. I used this time to check in with the students not only about their recent essay but also to inquire about their progress in the class in general. After conferring with students, I had my students fill out a final survey related to their experiences with the new feedback process.

The results of Survey I indicated that students do, in fact, value professor feedback, with more than 90% of respondents indicating they review every single word of commentary. Extensive comments and feedback was also valued highly with over 20% of students stating that they found all comments beneficial. However, there was an almost perfect divide among students who thought all errors should be marked and those who disagreed with such a practice. Receiving compliments did not seem to matter to most students, with approximately four learners suggesting that that was even important to them. Quadruple the number of students wanted harsh and honest feedback as opposed to praise on their papers.

Survey II indicated that nearly all the students considered the highlighting of words and mistakes a beneficial way of receiving feedback. In terms of using the error correction guide to find mistakes, a little under a fourth of the learners enjoyed working with others to find their mistakes, and one fifth preferred working alone. It is obvious, though, that the process needed refining with almost half of all students suggesting that symbols or comments would have helped clarify meaning and better facilitate error correction. Nevertheless, most students at least found the error correction guide helpful; they just would have liked to have seen more common errors added to the material. Ultimately, however, more learners preferred a more traditional approach to feedback with comments directly provided by the instructor on assignments. Just 30% of students thought the highlighting method was better.

Results: Survey I

What type of feedback have you found most beneficial for improving your writing in previous composition courses?	% out of 92 respondents
Grammar	18%
Peer Reviews	12%
General Feedback/Non-Specific Feedback	28%
Constructive Criticism	9%
Direct Instruction	15%
Honesty	2%
Verbal	3%
Formatting	3%
No Answer	10%

If you could create the perfect type of feedback on an essay what would it look like?	% out of 92 respondents
Extensive comments 29/92	32%
Constructive feedback 16/92	17%
Grammar 18/92	20%
No answer 13/92	14%
Miscellaneous 16/92	17%

What would motivate you most to incorporate feedback onto your future papers? In other words, what steps could your professors take to help you utilize their constructive comments on future assignments?	% out of 92 respondents
Clear instructions	7%
Constructive criticism	13%
Detailed explanation	10%
Point out mistakes	17%
Extra credit	4%
Remind students errors matter for future assignments	5%
Review work before assignments are due	5%
Specific examples	10%
No answer	8%
Miscellaneous	21%

Do you read every single word and piece of advice a professor provides you on graded writing assignments? Why or why not?	% out of 92 respondents
No	8%
Yes	92%

Do you think it is a good use of the professors' time to point out every single error on your paper?	% out of 92 respondents
Yes	49%
No	50%
No answer	1%

If you could provide a writing professor one piece of advice for providing feedback, what would it be?	% out of 92 respondents
Be detailed	20%
Provide examples/explanations	15%
One on one conversations 5/92	4%
Be honest and harsh	16%
General feedback	4%
Clear instructions	7%
Compliment	4%
No answer	9%
Miscellaneous	21%

What types of feedback do you find least beneficial on writing assignments and why?	% out of 92 respondents
Vague 13/92	14%
Limited comments 8/92	9%
All comments are beneficial 20/92	22%
Grammar/spelling 12/92	13%
Peer review 5/92	5%
Negative comments 4/92	4%
Only compliments 6/92	7%
Focusing on wrong 6/92	7%
No answer 2/92	2%
Miscellaneous 16/92	17%

Results: Survey II

Did you find the highlighting of the words, phrases, and ideas that needed correction helpful? Why or why not?	% out of 70 respondents
Yes	93%
No	7%

Please describe your experiences working by yourself and with a partner to determine how to fix the highlighted parts of your paper.	% out of 70 respondents
Comfortable working alone	23%
Enjoyed working with partner	21%
Hated working with others	4%
It was beneficial	14%
Helped me find mistakes	13%
Easy to use	8%
Struggled	6%
Miscellaneous	11%

What could make the feedback process better in regards to highlighting the information on your paper?	% out of 70 respondents
Using symbols or comments	44%
Using a legend	13%
Make highlighting clear	7%
Works okay	19%
No answer	7%
Miscellaneous	10%

Did you find the feedback guide helpful? Why or why not?	% out of 70 respondents
Yes	83%
No	10%
No answer	7%

What could make the feedback process better in regards to highlighting the information on your paper?	% out of 70 respondents
Using symbols or comments	44%
Using a legend	13%
Make highlighting clear	7%
Works okay	19%
No answer	7%
Miscellaneous	10%

What could make the feedback guide more useful to you on future assignments?	% out of 70 respondents
Additional error demonstration	20%
Add APA/MLA guidelines	11%
Works okay	36%
Chat with professor about guide	3%
No answer	11%
Miscellaneous	19%

Which type of feedback do you feel helps you improve your writing most? Please answer A or B and write an explanation explaining why you like one method over the other.	% out of 70 respondents
Feedback with major errors and common problems pointed out by the professor.	70%
Feedback with highlighted problems pointed out by the professor and a one-on-one conference.	29%
No answer	1%

What other ideas do you have that might help the professor provide better feedback to you on future assignments?	% out of 70 respondents
Miscellaneous	7%
Use symbols with highlighting	7%
More details	16%
Enjoyed conversations with professors	12%
No answer	58%

Discussion

In the first phase of this study, many students indicated they preferred harsh feedback. One learner stated, “Harsh feedback is really good for me because it only makes me better.” Another student said, “Harsh criticism is what makes me change how I write my essays because I don’t want to make mistakes. Being critical is important to me.” Perhaps these students had thicker skin than some of their peers because another learner indicated, “It’s okay to be harsh but also back it up with some good reinforcement.” When giving feedback that may be considered harsh, using the right tone is crucial for the comments to be well-received (Dannels, Gaffney, & Martin, 2008). Considering that many English teachers usually provide instruction on tone and its importance to an audience, modeling appropriate tone in their own feedback further reinforces its value.

As much as some students may appreciate criticism, they also want to know that their writing has some merit. The idea of praising work came up several times throughout the data. One learner said, “I would include some compliments on the paper, and when I notice a mistake I would give a solution or an example along with it.” Another student expressed a similar statement: “I would not only point out the mistakes but compliment the writer for some of the things they are doing right.” Rogers and Graham (2008) suggested that praising can help struggling writers and thus plays an important role in composition feedback.

Regardless of the type of feedback that is provided, many students indicated a preference for extensive comments on their work. Detailed, extensive, and constructive feedback were all themes that showed up frequently in the first phase of this research project. One student said:

Provide suggestions or an alternative to what was written. I think that when a professor gives a comment such as “please restructure this paragraph,” I would like more detail or how I could change it. It’s one thing to tell someone what they did wrong, and another to help them correct it. They need to understand why or how to change. They need to know what they could do differently to change it.

All of the comments related to detail were phrased in a way that indicated the students wanted to learn from their mistakes. “I want to know everything I’ve done wrong explained with detail and how to fix it,” said another student. This meshed well with what Diab (2006) discovered about students’ desire to see as many errors marked as possible. However, providing extensive feedback on every paper submitted requires a large amount of time and can be overwhelming to even the most experienced instructors. The second phase and structure of the composition feedback I gave my students was largely an effort to still provide them with meaningful information, while alleviating some of the burden of time for the instructor.

The second phase of this project was also about finding ways to help students be more active in learning how to fix their own errors while not shortchanging them on their ability to understand their deficiencies. Results from the second survey demonstrated that the alternative approach to providing feedback to students was still largely found to be helpful and useful. One student remarked, “I was more engaged than if someone was outright telling me what to change, so I found it helpful.” Another student said, “I did like it because honestly it being so close to the end of the year I probably

wouldn’t have bothered to look over my mistakes.” Almost 95% of students found that they learned from mistakes being highlighted and being required to figure out the errors independently. The mistakes the students had to correct were not delineated by any kind of marking or symbol system. As indicated earlier, errors were simply highlighted.

An instructor could take this process a step further and use different color highlighting for content, grammar, citation errors, and other categories of common errors. A guide separated by common mistakes matching the chosen highlighted colors could then be provided to students to further help them with their own correction processes. Although highlighting in multiple colors will undoubtedly cost the instructor more time, this is something that could have addressed some of the learners’ complaints about the process. Furthermore, such a practice could help avoid the challenges of one student who stated, “In some cases, I knew what the highlighted phrases implied. However, there were more cases where I had to ask why the phrases were highlighted.” Further differentiating the highlighting of papers could ease some of the uncertainty students feel, and it could reduce the number of questions instructors must field. More importantly, a correction guide can help improve students’ writing skills (Cahyono & Rosyida, 2016). Ultimately, as a reader and responder to student work, I realize that students are individuals with preferences like anyone else, and for me to be successful in my job, it is essential that I understand what type of feedback works best for those whom I teach. Once I understand this more fully, I can more easily adjust my teaching style to meet their needs.

Conclusion

The results of the study indicated that students felt they benefited from actively finding their own errors using a correction guide. Furthermore, the data showed that students value direct, specific, and detailed feedback as well. Approximately half of the students felt it was necessary to show every error on a paper, and 90% of students stated they read every single piece of feedback provided by their instructors. One student stated, “I think [showing] some general mistakes are not a waste of a professors time just because it kind of gives you a guideline but every single error is a bit much.” Another learner stated, “I don’t think they should point out every constant error on each person’s paper because once they have pointed out a specific type of error and it occurs again in the paper, it is the students job to correct that.” Nevertheless, not all feedback may be taken into consideration. One student stated, “Yes I do. I read everything that he has to say about my work. But that does not mean that I listen and do what he says just because either I like the way I wrote something and or I just do not agree with it.” Another learner said:

I believe that it is not a good use of the professors’ time to do this (show every mistake) because it might become repetitive. I believe they should focus on trying to correct the actual content of the paper rather than the small grammar mistakes. I still think the professor should sometimes point out the grammar errors but not every single one.

More needs to be done to continue to explore whether extensive marking of papers does, in fact, improve students’ grades and writing skills. There are many aspects related to providing students with meaningful composition feedback, but regardless, all writing instructors must find the right balance between providing enough feedback for students to improve their skills while managing



their own time constraints in overpacked classes. A system of highlighting errors with a correction guide may help facilitate that process, and it may ease some of the instructor's burden while still having a positive effect on student growth.

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Appendix A

Survey One

Feedback on Writing Assignments

On this website is a series of questions regarding your experiences receiving feedback from writing professors. Your responses will be completely confidential. Any responses with potential identifiers will be changed to ensure your complete anonymity. Your input could improve the quality of feedback you receive on future writing assignments. Therefore, I respectfully request that you spend a few minutes responding with as much detail as you can to the questions in the survey.

There are no right or wrong answers. Your opinion is the only thing that matters. If you are interested in receiving the results of the research, you will have the option to provide your contact information at the end of the survey. You may refuse to participate at this point or change your mind about participating in this study at any point along the way. You will not be penalized in any way for your decision to withdraw from the study.

1. What type of feedback have you found most beneficial for improving your writing in previous composition courses?
2. Do you read every single word and piece of advice a professor provides you on graded writing assignments? Why or why not?
3. If you could create the perfect type of feedback on an essay what would it look like?
4. What would motivate you most to incorporate feedback onto your future papers? In other words, what steps could your professors take to help you utilize their constructive comments on future assignments?
5. What types of feedback do you find least beneficial on writing assignments and why?
6. Do you think it is a good use of the professors' time to point out every single error on your paper? Why or why not?
7. If you could provide a writing professor one piece of advice for providing feedback, what would it be?

Appendix B

Survey Two

Feedback on Writing Assignments

On this website is a series of questions regarding your experiences receiving feedback from Dr. Bryan Corbin. Your responses will be completely confidential. Any responses with potential identifiers will be changed to ensure your complete anonymity. Your input could improve the quality of feedback you receive on future writing assignments. Therefore, I respectfully request that you spend a few minutes responding with as much detail as you can to the questions in the survey.

There are no right or wrong answers. Your opinion is the only thing that matters. If you are interested in receiving the results of the research, you will have the option to provide your contact information at the end of the survey. You may refuse to participate at this point or change your mind about participating in this study at any point along the way. You will not be penalized in any way for your decision to withdraw from the study.

1. Did you find the highlighting of the words, phrases, and ideas that needed correction helpful? Why or why not?
2. Please describe your experiences working by yourself and with a partner to determine how to fix the highlighted parts of your paper.
3. What could make the feedback process better in regards to highlighting the information on your paper?
4. Did you find the feedback guide helpful? Why or why not?
5. What could make the feedback guide more useful to you on future assignments?
6. Which type of feedback do you feel helps you improve your writing most? Please answer A or B and write an explanation explaining why you like one method over the other.
 - A. Feedback with major errors and common problems pointed out by the professor.
 - B. Feedback with highlighted problems pointed out by the professor and a one-on-one conference.
7. What other ideas do you have that might help the professor provide better feedback to you on future assignments?