Conclusion: A Review of General Principles

The following list summarizes the main principles of commentary discussed in this chapter.

General Procedures

1. Comment first on ideas and organization: encourage students to solve higher-order problems before turning to lower-order problems.

2. Whenever possible, make positive comments. Praise strong points.

3. Try to write an end comment that reveals your interest in the student’s ideas. Begin the end comment with an emphasis on good points and then move to specific recommendations for improvement.

4. Avoid overcommenting. Particularly avoid emphasizing lower-order concerns until you are satisfied with higher-order concerns. If writing lacks focus or a thesis statement and a plan for supporting it, it is premature to worry about paragraphs or sentence structure.

5. As you read the essay, indicate your reaction to specific passages. Particularly comment on the ideas, raising queries and making suggestions on how the argument could be improved. Praise parts that you like.

6. Resist the urge to circle misspellings, punctuation errors, and so forth. Research suggests that students will improve more quickly if they are required to find and correct their own errors.

Marking for Ideas

7. The end comment should summarize your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the writer’s ideas. Challenge writers to deepen and complicate their thought at a level appropriate to their intellectual development.

Marking for Organization

8. Use marginal comments to indicate places where structure becomes confusing.

9. Praise good titles, good thesis statements, good transitions, and so forth.
Marking for Sentence Structure

10. Although I recommend against marking or circling sentence errors, you might consider placing X’s in the margins where they occur. When you return the papers, either withhold a grade or lower the grade until students who made substantial numbers of errors have reedited their work. Most students should be able to find and fix a majority of their errors. Students with severe sentence-level problems may need to seek personal tutoring.

11. Note places where sentence-level problems cause genuine unclarity (as opposed to annoyance). Marginal comments such as “Tangled sentence” or “This passage is garbled” help the writer see where problems occur.

Some Further Principles

12. Try to make comments as legible and as straightforward as possible. As anyone knows who has looked at papers graded by a colleague, teachers’ comments are frequently difficult to decipher. They are often unintentional examples of first-draft writing—clear to the writer but baffling to others.

13. Whenever possible, use one-on-one conferences instead of commenting on papers. Perhaps my most frequent end comment is this: “You’re making real progress. Please see me so that I can help you move to the next stage.” An invitation for personal help is particularly useful when the student’s problems involve higher-order concerns.

14. Finally, think of your commentary as personal correspondence with the student, something that makes your own thinking visible and permanent. Try to invest in your commentary the tone of a supportive coach—someone interested in the student as a person and in the improvement of the student’s powers as a writer and thinker.