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Audiotaped Critiques of Written Work

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from the past to see which errors were most commonly made. I then wrote rule sheets to explain correct word usage, quotation style and so on. Some rules were simple, like “commas and periods always go INSIDE quotation marks.”

Other were more complex, like teaching correct use of ellipses in quoted material to indicate omissions, the correct use of the words “that” and “which.” I created handouts with rules for correct punctuation and quotation, how to get rid of litter words, and so on. The students could then refer back to the handouts throughout the class.

I also had the students take rules and organizational tools they had learned and apply them to their papers before they came in for individual conferences. For example, for papers that seemed to lack organization and tended to skip around from topic to topic, I had the students go back and identify, in the margins, the type of information in each paragraph. Was it a rule paragraph, was it an issue statement? I was generally teaching the students the IRAC form of organization. When the students completed the exercise, they saw something like the following in the margin of their paper:

R
C
I
C
R
C

We would then sit down and go over the missing sections and discuss why moving things around would improve the flow of their papers. On occasion, the student would be unable to identify what the purpose of a particular section was. I pointed out that if they did not know what they were doing, it was highly unlikely that a reader would be able to make sense of it. Requiring them to be able to identify the point of each section really seemed to improve the organization of their papers.

Reading back over this article, the “fixes” seem quite basic, but they really have made a great deal of difference in the quality of student writing.

COMMENTING ON STUDENT PAPERS

Judy Fischer

Chapman University School of Law

I will discuss comments on students’ finished papers, not comments made during the composition process.

Comments on the papers. I write comments directly on the papers in blue ink, deliberately avoiding red because of its often jarring effect. (I have yet to be convinced of the benefits of using a computer to embed comments on students’ disks.) I do not attempt to mark every error, and I may deliberately neglect some minor ones, believing that students absorb only a limited number of comments on their papers. Where a sentence or paragraph is particularly good, I say so, but I explain why.

I also attach a checklist to every paper. The list is organized into the major categories of substance and form, with subpoints under each. On each list, I check items needing work, sometimes adding comments. The purpose of this is threefold: 1) it provides the students with an additional form of feedback; 2) it provides the students with a schema showing what items I critique and how they relate to one another; and 3) it provides me with a record of the basis for the paper’s score.

At the top of the checklist, in a space left for that purpose, I write a summary comment, either in ink or by computer. I always begin with a positive comment. Usually a paper has some strong points, but in desperation I may write “I can see you’ve put a great deal of effort into this paper.” I then write my suggestions for improvement, framing them as such rather than as negative statements. I avoid using “you,” because that may seem to be an attack. Thus I would not write “Your organization is poor,” but “Next time, focus on organization,” followed by some

explanation. I then write a score at the top of the paper. I realized years ago that there is no completely objective method of scoring, so I relaxed into assigning holistic scores with the checklists as guidance. I use scores instead of letter grades because we have a mandatory grade curve. Letter grades might mislead the students, because I could not guarantee that their final grades would be a simple average of their letter grades.

In-class feedback. I then type up a list of good and bad examples from the papers in order to make certain points about the assignment. In class, I project this on a screen for discussion.

One-on-one feedback. A final form of feedback occurs one on one. My mandatory conferences occur while the students are writing the papers, but students often come in after the papers are scored to discuss them.

I must acknowledge the work of Anne Enquist at Seattle. Years ago I went to one of her presentations on this topic, and the research she presented there has greatly influenced my methods.

AUDIOTAPED CRITIQUES OF WRITTEN WORK

Elisabeth Keller

Boston College Law School

I began taping my critique of students’ memos when I was seven months pregnant and was no longer comfortable sitting at a desk to type or write my comments. I used a small hand-held audio tape recorder and a cassette provided by each student. In the eight years since I began using this method, the majority of my students have chosen taped comments over written comments on their major assignments. I provide all my students with a taped critique of their first objective memo, which is ungraded and does not have to be rewritten. After this first assignment, students have a choice between written or taped comments for their major assignments, which are graded objective and persuasive memoranda that students must rewrite. I do not give students a choice on the first

memorandum since many of them have never received a taped critique on their writing and would be unable to judge its suitability for them without experiencing it first hand. The overwhelming majority of students choose taped feedback for their subsequent graded assignments.

When taping a critique of a student's paper, I first read or skim the paper to evaluate the overall organization and get a sense of the quality of the writing and analysis. After the first reading, I begin taping my thoughts about the memo by commenting on sentences, paragraphs, or sections of the memo and placing numbers on the paper that correspond to numbered taped comments. I still make any grammatical or spelling corrections on the paper, unless there is a consistent problem which I would likely address on the tape as well. I usually end the tape with a summary comment that stresses the strengths and weaknesses of the memo and focuses the student on the main goals for the rewrite.

In a written memo that accompanies the tape, I instruct students how to most effectively use the tape to help them revise their memos. I first ask that they listen to the tape in its entirety and identify the major themes of my comments. Next, I ask them to listen to the tape again and this time they must stop the tape after each comment and summarize my comment in their own words either directly on their memo or on a separate sheet. By the time they have reached the end of the tape they have a written document to guide their revision and have interacted with my critique through listening, writing, and finally by reading their own version of my comments. This approach requires students to actively engage with my commentary at least three times. In contrast, a written critique provides the student with a more passive learning experience and doesn't demand that they return to the comments. Once a student reads and initially reacts to the professor's comments, the student may be unclear how to most effectively use the comments in the revision process.

My oral critiques ultimately evolve into written critiques produced by the students

and although the ideas are mine, my students must try to digest each comment to write a useful summary. Very few students write my comments verbatim; instead, they interpret my comments and write a note to guide their revision. This written summary is important because my tapes are long (20-40 minutes per 10 pages). The length is due to my efforts to state some of my comments in more than one way to make certain the students grasp the concept that I am trying to convey. This points to another distinction between written and oral critique: when writing a comment, a teacher generally makes a comment once instead of writing several versions of the same idea.

However, when speaking, it is easy to make a point several times using different approaches, especially when addressing analysis, in the hope that students may better grasp the point by hearing it repeated in more than one way. This is similar to the advantage that oral critique has over standard comments that are composed on the computer before reading a student's paper. Although these comments are generally aimed at common problems seen in student writing, there may be a tendency to use the same comment on every paper even when it may not be the best way to address the problem for every student. Certainly there are times when I have to make the same comment on every paper, but just as often I find myself varying a comment that I have used with other students. A standard comment may be overkill for the more astute students and at the same time may not provide enough explanation for the student struggling with basic concepts. Since oral critique is developed on the spot as the teacher reads the paper, the comments are more likely to be directed at each student's individual needs.

Finally, when I come upon awkwardly written and confusing sentences or paragraphs where ideas do not flow well, I read the passage to the student on the tape before commenting. Many students report that when they hear their writing read to them they recognize the problem before they even hear my comments. Reading portions of their memorandum

to the students gives them the reader's perspective and helps them face their problems with clarity and precision in their writing. A written critique cannot place the student in the audience role as effectively. Students tend to react to written critique from the writer's perspective only and not from the perspective of the reader of the memo.

Incidentally, my pregnancy resulted in the birth of a beautiful baby girl who is now eight years old and can occasionally be heard in the background of my tapes laughing and playing with her three-year old brother.

"DID I SAY THAT?" VIDEOTAPING ORAL ARGUMENTS

Sharon O'Roke

Oklahoma City University School of Law

Having struggled with the best way to provide feedback to students following their first oral arguments in law school, I have finally settled on videotape. Although it is time-consuming to administer, I found the benefits more than worth the required time and effort.

At Oklahoma City University School of Law, first year law students give their first oral arguments as a part of the second semester of LRW. Students individually argue the side they briefed to panels of three judges (one moot court member and two practicing lawyers). The LRW professor observes the argument, makes notes, and assigns the grade (usually 30% of the total grade for the course). I found that under even the best of conditions, it was difficult to make all the notes I wanted without missing some of the argument, or to listen carefully and still provide enough detailed comments so as to be helpful to the students. Most disconcerting, however, was that students were often unable to remember the aspect of the argument that a particular comment centered on. They either remembered nothing, remembered something they did particularly well, or could only recall something they considered to be a horrible mistake at the time (often one I attributed to nerves and didn't really focus on at all).