Teaching Assistant Primer: Writing Commentary

Final comments — remarks written at the end of papers — are a key opportunity to reflect your students’ accomplishments back to them. They can be wonderfully helpful; they can also be extremely time-consuming for the TA. Considering some basic questions will make your final comments more efficient as well as more effective.

1: Considerations Before Writing

• What specific goals do you want your final comment to accomplish?
• How are your final comments a part of your other interactions with the students: conferences, margin comments, prewriting, and class activities?
• What is a reasonable amount of time to spend on an individual comment given your time frame, and how will you limit your commenting to that amount?

2: Your Final Comment Might:

• Restate the essay’s argument
• Express any questions about the essay’s overall argument
• Note what the essay is trying to accomplish, argumentatively
• Note the ways the essay succeeded
• Note the ways it did not succeed
• Offer strategies that would strengthen the essay
• Praise the essay’s strongest and most interesting moments
• Synthesize your overall response

3: Practical Tips:

• Comment on the paper, rather than the writer (ie: write “the essay argues” rather than “you argue”)
• Keep comments tied to specific qualities of the essay
• Let your earlier teaching help you: refer to handouts, lecture, or activities rather than restating/rewriting information already given
• Refer specifically to the rubric
• Remember that more isn’t necessarily better. Plan what you want to say before you begin writing.
• Consider other media for responding: audio comments, conference responses