## Ways to Give Effective Feedback on Student Writing

## Response From Susan M. Brookhart

*Giving feedback on writing is a special responsibility. If you ask students to write thoughtfully to you, it would be hypocritical of you not to write (or speak, if your feedback is oral) thoughtfully back to them. And students will notice! Here are five things to keep in mind as you think about feedback on students’ written work:*

*#1 - Before the students write, make sure they know what they are trying to learn (more specifically than just “writing”) and what qualities their writing should exhibit. Unless students are trying to learn something specific, they will experience teacher feedback as additional teacher directions they have to follow. So, for example, if students are writing descriptive paragraphs, they should know what the kind of descriptive paragraphs they are aiming for looks like. Criteria for success might be that they (1) use adjectives that describe by telling what the object of their description looks, sounds, tastes, smells, or feels like; and (2) help their readers feel like they “are there,” experiencing whatever is described themselves. If this is what students are aiming to do, then the feedback questions are already set up: Are my adjectives descriptive? Do they conjure up sight, sound, taste, smell, or touch? Did you (my teacher and my reader) feel like you really experienced what I was describing that you were there? The best feedback on student writing tells students what they want to know to get closer to the particular vision of writing they are working on.*

*#2 - Describe at least one thing the student did well, with reference to the success criteria. Focus your feedback on the criteria, not on other features of the work (like handwriting or grammar, unless that was the focus of the writing lesson). Even the poorest paper has something to commend it. Find that and begin your feedback there. Students can’t navigate toward learning targets by filling in deficits only; they also need to build on their strengths. And don’t assume that just because a student did something well, they know what that is. The best feedback on student writing names and notices where students are meeting criteria that show their learning.*

*#3 - Suggest the student’s immediate next steps, again with reference to the success criteria. Your feedback does not need to “fix” everything possible. It only needs to take the student’s work to the next level. Select the one or two—whatever is doable in the next draft of the writing piece—things that the student should do next, given where they are right now. The best feedback on student writing moves students forward in their quest to reach a learning goal.*

*#4 - Make sure you learn something from the feedback episode, too. Too often, teachers think of feedback as their expert advice on students’ writing. But every opportunity to give feedback on student writing is also an opportunity for you to learn something about what your students are thinking, what kinds of writing skills they have, and what they need to learn next. The best feedback on student writing gives teachers a window into student thinking; it doesn’t just advise students.*

*#5 - Give students an immediate opportunity to use the feedback. Much feedback on student writing is wasted, because students don’t use it. Many teachers subscribe to the myth that students will use the feedback “next time” they write something similar. However, it’s not true that students have some sort of file drawer in their heads, with files labelled according to type of writing, that they will magically open at some point in the future.*

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