Effective Commentary on Student Writing: Pairing Praise with Suggestion

by

Suzanne Starheim

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Suzanne Starheim

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Signature:

Suzanne Starheim, Student

Approvals:

Dr. Jeffrey Buchanan, Thesis Advisor

Dr. Steven Brown, Committee Member

Mr. Guy Shebat, Committee Member

Dr. Salvatore A. Sanders, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies
Abstract:

Writing instructors aim to have students produce clean and concise pieces of writing throughout their college careers and beyond. I aimed to instill this goal in my students through a pairing of praise and suggestion within my commentary on their essays throughout the Spring 2013 semester at Youngstown State University. The selected pairing of praise and suggestion was chosen based on several key readings, explained below, and this pairing was meant to praise students to build confidence in writing while also probing them for further exploration and success in their written work.

In order to accurately track the success or failure of the method of pairing praise and suggestion, I kept track of students’ initial graded final drafts and revised second final drafts of essays submitted as a final essay at the end of the semester. I analyzed my comments and saw how these comments prompted revision from students (or did not prompt revision, in several cases.) The study I conducted is presented in detail in the following chapters. Both examples of successful and unsuccessful revision are demonstrated so that the full scope of the study and its resulting pieces of writing can be seen by readers. In addition to the actual student samples shown, methods of how to better serve and aid students in the process of writing and revising writing are also noted.

The goal of the study is to help students understand what revision is, understand how to go about tackling the often seemingly daunting task of revision, and understand how to utilize the comments of praise and suggestion instructors make upon student work in order to obtain a clean and successful revision. In addition to aiming toward helping students, this study also aimed to help instructors become more effective at commenting and aiding students in the revision process.
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Chapter 1—Pairing Praise with Suggestion

Writing instructors work to make better, more thoughtful and effective writers. But how do writing instructors specifically help students obtain the result desired? Instructors, traditionally, comment, correct, and even conference with students in order to lead them in the right direction (with their writing), but is this the most effective way to help students become better writers all around? Last semester, I wanted to investigate ways in which I worked as an instructor to encourage students to utilize the revision process. I encouraged my students to revise by commenting, correcting, and conferencing and I tracked the results of my work to see if the methods used had any effect—desired or not—on the resulting revision process.

Here, my use of the words “desired result” means something very specific. The desired result does not mean that a piece of writing is free of any spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors. In fact, the desired result is focused on the core of a piece of writing’s structure and focus rather than how clean it appears on the surface level. To obtain the desired result as I have defined it above, students must work on a piece of writing over the course of several drafts. The drafting of a piece of writing promotes a revision process, a process that instructors must use to teach students to take the quality of the core of their writing to the next level. It is for this reason that instructors must find a successful way to encourage students to revise in a meaningful and substantive manner from draft to draft.

Creating a beneficial and substantive revision process does not mean merely instructing students to make the thoughtless corrections noted in red ink indicating missed or misused punctuation marks, spelling errors, or grammatical inconsistencies; it
means marking what is at the core of the piece of writing, such as the focus and organization, so that the quality of the material, as well as the technical fittings of it, turns into a more organized, supported, whole, and clean piece of writing after the revision process is complete. Nancy Sommers warns us of this reducing of the revision process to merely correcting the evident errors in (her essay) “Responding to Student Writing:”

When the teacher appropriates the text for the student in this way, students are encouraged to see their writing as a series of parts, words, sentences, paragraphs and not as a whole discourse. The comments encourage students to believe that their first drafts are finished drafts, not invention drafts, and that all they need to do is patch and polish their writing. That is, teachers' comments do not provide their students with an inherent reason for revising the structure and meaning of their texts, since the comments suggest to students that the meaning of their text is already there, finished, produced, and all that is necessary is a better word or phrase. The processes of revising, editing, and proofreading are collapsed and reduced to a single trivial activity, and the students' misunderstanding of the revision process as a rewording activity is reinforced by their teachers' comments.

(151)

This misunderstanding of the revision process is a major problem when it comes to creating efficient and effective revision habits for students, and it is this misunderstanding that I hope to alleviate in the following chapters by combining different forms of commentary to obtain the optimum results from revisions of student writing.

First let me define what success via revision means. As stated previously, merely correcting the mechanical errors marked by an instructor is not the significant revision we
are working toward. Mechanical errors, for our purposes, would encompass errors that impede the flow of the writing but aren’t directly related to the content of the writing. For example, comma splices, spelling errors, and subject-verb agreement issues would fall under this category of mechanical errors. Too often, students have mistaken revision for editing, which is merely the process of correcting their technical errors in a piece of writing, but this is the confusion that needs to be clarified if the idea of substantial and successful revision is to catch on in the minds of students.

Throughout this essay, successful revision can only be defined as improvement upon one’s previous work. It is not merely the process of correcting the comments written on the paper to appease the instructor; instead it means analyzing the comments on an essay and seeing exactly how one can utilize those comments to have a better, more clarified final draft. It also means taking this process one step further by taking a look at one’s work; this means not just working to answer the comments written or add the material the instructor asks for. It means looking at the core of the essay and making sure there is a strong focus and that all the additional information ties into that focus and serves a purpose to make the essay better.

The past problems with revision are, in part, due to the commentary instructors place on a student’s writing. Too often, instructors rush through work only marking the negative rather than also highlighting the positive aspects, no matter how small or scattered, and asking a student to elaborate further on those points. That is, perhaps, the main issue when students go through the revision process; of course they have been trained to fix the marked errors across their papers. These, after all, are the problems that now glare at them from the sheet of paper. In students’ eyes, these red marks may be the
only major problem in the body of their work, but if this is the idea they have been trained to focus on, then we, as instructors, must break them out of that narrow mindset and draw their attention with additional comments and suggestions on content rather than merely the mechanical errors they make. These comments need not be more frequent or heavy-handed, but they must direct students to help them see where the essay can improve without simply giving them the new material.

Richard Straub emphasizes this burden and the pressure that instructors often feel in his piece “Responding—Really Responding—to Other Students’ Writing.” In this piece, Straub speaks specifically on behalf of writing students commenting on their peers’ writing, but he is portraying what a student might say when taking on a stereotypical instructor’s point of view. He says:

Just keep it simple. Read it quickly and mark whatever you see. Say something about the introduction. Something about details and examples. Ideas you can say you like. Mark any typos and spelling errors. Make your comments brief. Abbreviate where possible: awk, good intro, give ex, frag. Try to imitate the teacher… Get in and get out. (136)

While Straub is speaking of how one student may comment on one of his/her peer’s written pieces during a peer review session of sorts, he makes distinct mention to, “Try to imitate the teacher… Get in and get out,” (135). This critical suggestion states that instructors merely mark the glaring surface errors in a piece of student work. This statement is not only disappointing, but also extraordinarily detrimental to any sort of revision process that may come from comments left by an instructor. If an instructor is rushing through an essay or report to just mark the mistakes, then students will see no
purpose to expand upon the already strong and valid points within their written work.

While Straub is making mention of student-to-student commentary on written work, this misconception of what composition instructors look for when grading student work will discourage students from writing to the best of their ability and may even break the trust between student and instructor in the writing classroom. This trust is of great importance in the classroom, as noted in *The Harvard Writing Project Bulletin*:

One of the most significant conversations a teacher can have with a student takes place, not in office hours, but in the margins and between the lines of the student’s paper. Marginal comments are by nature dialogic and multi-purpose: in them, an instructor may give advice, pose questions, offer praise, express puzzlement, suggest new lines of inquiry, and provoke thought. (4)

The reason this trust is so important, as illustrated above, is because this conversation between the margins of student writing is so personal in nature. An instructor in a writing classroom is commenting on the personal thoughts, beliefs, and passions of a student, and it is in the writing classroom more than in any other classroom that an instructor has this kind of access to students. For this reason, above nearly all others, instructors must believe it is their responsibility not only to mark the weak points within student writing, but to also praise and encourage their students to push their work to a higher level.

There are several ways in which to encourage students to go beyond the narrow scope of fixing the red editing marks littered across their essays. One such method is to ask a question. A simple “and?” or “so what?” written in a margin next to a significant point in an essay that begs to be elaborated on or justified further can be just what a
student needs to see the holes in his or her work. While comments such as these are directive, these also fall under the category of suggestion because they give students a basis from which to begin the revision process.

For my purposes, those questions and comments that probe for further explanation or elaboration by student writers on their written work will be categorized as *suggestion*. These probing questions are not the only way to suggest students do something more to their writing in the revision process, though; suggestions can also bluntly state what the professor is looking for in a work. For example, statements such as “elaborate on this point further,” or “fix the logical reasoning in this paragraph,” all suggest to a student that he or she *should* do something within his or her work that he or she has not done in the current draft. Further on in this work, we will visit examples of how I probed students from my own composition classroom to expand points further and elaborate on the strong points in their essays through the use of simple comments that fall under the category of suggestion. While probing students for further explanations or elaborations within their writing encompasses a significant portion of the revision that can be seen from the examples in the coming chapters, suggestion is not limited to this; it may also involve statements directing students to what is lacking or even involve specific sentence-long statements to students made within holistic comments at the end of essays.

Suggestion can be a successful tool for instructors to employ to obtain the desired results from their students’ revision process because it gives students just enough guidance without spoon-feeding them their revision material for the next draft of the work. Suggestion tells students that they have quite a bit more thought and work to do on an essay or report, but it doesn’t just tell them and leave them without any direction;
instead, it tells them there is some problem or lack of information and gives them the
gentle push they may need to fill in the information that the instructor craves.

While it is tempting to highlight and comment on an entire paragraph of student
writing, what must be mentioned about this idea of suggestion in students’ written work
is the fact that suggestion should be aimed at specific areas in an essay. What is meant by
this is that instructors should not just write a marginal comment next to an entire
paragraph saying “elaborate.” For the students’ sake, instructors’ suggestive comments
on where to revise the written work must be narrowly focused and more than just a one-
word comment; instructors should make certain students know what specific area of the
essay they are addressing, and they should also give students a general direction to work
from for the revision process. Often, the revision process is daunting; a student has
written this essay or report, and he or she now has to go back to this seemingly lengthy
piece of writing and start all over. That is why it is so important for an instructor to be
relatively specific about what he or she is looking for in the revision process, without
giving away the content to the student.

While suggestion gives students a path to take during their revision work, it alone
is often not enough to get a substantial revision out of each and every student. It is for
this reason that a pairing of both suggestion and praise should be used to drive students to
put forth the effort into the revision process. For our purposes, praise can be defined as
any positive commentary written on the draft of student work. For example, the instructor
may like the way in which a student provided a fact to back up his or her argument within
an argumentative essay, so he or she will highlight that positive aspect of the essay by
saying “good support,” or “nice job backing up your opinion on this issue.” But praise
can be even simpler than that; it can simply exist in the form of an “ok” or “good” next to a point of an essay to let the student know that he or she is on the right track at that particular point in time.

The idea of pairing praise and suggestion to obtain the desired result in students’ writing came from several studies and practices conducted in other composition classrooms. I was first encouraged to practice this unique pairing by Donald Daiker’s “Learning to Praise.” Daiker’s essay looks at a 1985 study conducted on the ratio of positive to negative comments written on composition students’ written work by teaching assistants at Texas A&M University. The results were rather astounding when it comes to the idea of praise:

They wrote a total of 864 comments on the essays, but only 51 of them were comments of praise. This means that 94% of the comments focused on what students had done poorly or incorrectly, only 6% on what had been done well (Dragga 1986).[103].

As Daiker kept digging for the ratios of positive to negative instructor commentary in the composition classroom, the results from each level appeared to be rather evenly matched:

The same pattern apparently prevails in high school as well. A study of responses by thirty-six secondary English teachers revealed that although 40% of their end-of-paper comments were positive, the percentage of positive marginal comments was a meager .007% (Harris 1977). (103)

This pattern of negative to positive in instructor commentary does not speak well of composition instructors who are working to encourage students to push their writing to
a higher level. This overwhelming ratio of negative commentary over positive commentary not only points out what students have done poorly, but it also prevents them from staying motivated to work on anything that may be good within the existing piece of writing. Not only is this ratio of negative to positive commentary saddening, but the fact that Daiker notes these ratios are consistent even at the high school level means that students are getting a negative and discouraging idea about writing, their instructors, and the process of revising their work from a relatively young age.

Perhaps instructors’ comments on student writing are reflected in such poor ratios because we, as instructors, feel that what students are doing well does not need to be altered; after all, if they already know how to support their points well and demonstrate their ideas in a well organized and effective manner, why question them? But the major underlying problem with these ratios of positive to negative commentary is that instructors are only marking the easy errors to find. The glaring mechanical errors are the issues within the body of a written work that are fast to correct and easy to spot, so this ratio may be so one-sided because instructors are rushing through the grading process only marking the glaring problems. While these mechanical errors do need correcting, the ideas, organization, and support in student writing are what we, as composition instructors, are obligated to help students improve upon throughout the duration of a writing course, and merely marking the glaring errors does not help the core of an essay.

As stated previously, it was a combination of Daiker’s findings and my own classroom experience as a composition instructor that led me to this focus on pairing praise with suggestion on my own students’ writing. After initially reading “Learning to Praise,” I began to focus on my own grading, and I quickly realized I followed nearly the
same pattern as the negative instructors Daiker speaks of in his piece. Having been deeply impacted by the ratios in his writing, I chose to take a route that would not only build my students’ confidence by focusing on their strong points, but would also highlight the weaker areas with suggestion. Suggestion may not always be what students want to read after receiving their initial graded draft back, but it is these comments that give them direction on the weaker areas of their essays so that they are less fearful of and overwhelmed by the revision process they have, more than likely, come to resent from their high school years on.

It is for the previously stated reasons that the pairing of praise and suggestion should be utilized in the grading of students’ written work in the composition classroom. The errors and problems in an essay can be marked, of course, but by also letting students know when they are headed in the right direction and where they need more work, instructors can bring about significant, beneficial revision from students who may otherwise be overwhelmed and less than enthused by the often tedious and difficult process of revision.

In the following chapters, I will not only look at the current and past patterns of instructor commentary on students’ written work, but I will also focus on the importance of positive commentary alone in the margins of student work. I will then turn to the primary idea of pairing this positive commentary (praise) with the idea of suggestion and how this pairing builds a trust and confidence in students over the course of the semester. Finally, the results of my own classroom experience with this pairing of praise with suggestion and its effect on the student revision process will be demonstrated through the use of student samples and samples of my own pairing of the two ideas across student
essays. There will be samples of both successful revision as well as lack of revision from the composition classroom, and the issue of whether students understand what the word *revision* means will be demonstrated through the samples from student essays.
Chapter 2—The Importance and Benefit of Positive Commentary

As instructors, we cannot help but see the errors first; after all, in most aspects of life, individuals find themselves fixated on the negative surrounding them rather than the positive. It is for this reason that we have to practice restraint with our red pens and learn that sometimes, it is okay to not mark every grammatical, spelling, punctuation, and other mechanical errors littered throughout students’ papers. There are several reasons for the need to practice this restraint, the first being that marking every error may result in students confusing editing with revision. While it may be difficult to draw a line where editing ends and thorough revision begins, this is something that we must work to explain to students so that correcting punctuation and grammar is not seen as thorough revision when working from one draft to another. This line between editing and revision is broken down a bit more specifically by the Odegaard Writing and Research Center:

**Large-Scale Revision:** This kind of revision involves looking at the entire paper for places where your thinking seems to go awry. You might need to provide evidence, define terms, or add an entirely new step to your reasoning. You might even decide to restructure or rewrite your paper completely if you discover a new idea that intrigues you, or a structure that seems to be more effective than the one you've been using.

**Small-Scale Revision:** Small-scale revision needs to happen when you know that a certain part of your paper isn't working. Maybe the introduction needs work. Maybe one part of the argument seems weak. Once you've located the problem, you'll focus on revising that one section of your paper. When you are finished you will want to reconsider your paper as a whole to make sure that your revisions work in the context of the entire paper.

**Editing:** Too often students confuse editing with revision. They are not the same processes. Editing is the process of finding minor problems with a text - problems that might easily be fixed by deleting a word or sentence, cutting and pasting a paragraph, and so on. When you edit, you are considering your reader. You might be happy with how you've written your paper, but will your reader find your paper clear, readable, interesting? How can you rewrite the paper so that it is clearer, more concise, and, most important of all, a pleasure to read?
Instructors, perhaps, should work to explain this distinction from day one. Later, we will discuss possible activities that will aid in making this distinction between editing and revision clearer.

Like the struggle I found myself facing when working to comment on student essays positively rather than just focusing on the negative, Elaine Lees describes this struggle in her own grading of student essays in “Evaluating Student Writing.” It is here that Lees states that though she uses a wide variety of commenting methods to obtain the desired standard of writing from each of her students, she still must restrain herself from focusing on the negative:

Yet the temptation to write a full critique of the paper was difficult to resist. Although for years I heard it said that a teacher need not mark “everything” on a single paper—every laps in a sense, every instance of dead prose, every error in grammar, spelling, or punctuation—I nonetheless clung to the belief that it was somehow safer to do so, as my aunt believes it’s safer to rinse the cups when they come from the dishwasher and iron every pair of Levi’s she washes. A teacher marks things because they’re THERE. (266)

So, breaking out of this mold of believing it is our duty as composition instructors to mark every error is the first step in moving toward the positive commentary I presented in the previous chapter. This is perhaps the most difficult part of the process: breaking the old habit. Just as Lees’ aunt must force herself to stop rinsing the already-clean cup, we must put the lid back on the red pen and read past the minor errors at times to focus on the deeper context of students’ writing. This is difficult not only because it is
habit to correct the errors but also because the thoughts of leaving that misspelling or punctuation error taunt us. We may feel a variety of emotions when choosing to leave something incorrect unmarked, and in my experience, the most frequent emotion is that of worry. I find myself concerned that my students will see I did not mark certain errors and will feel that it is simply because I was not a swift enough instructor to catch the errors, so to err on the side of caution, I find myself marking every error I come across.

One way to break out of the need to mark errors is to go through the written work and only write positive comments on the first read through. This is difficult as it is during the first read through of any student writing that the glaring errors taunt an instructor. When I used this method, I realized that the glaring errors still bothered me, but over time, I realized that there was still plenty of time to go back and correct that comma splice or misspelling. At the same time, I was making sure to tell the student that he or she had nice parallelism or sentence structure. Find something positive, then go back and clean up all the glaring issues that are infuriating and distracting when reading through the essay. Daiker emphasizes that limiting yourself to only positive comments the first time through can be difficult:

Still, an instructor’s conscious decision to praise the work of students is a promising starting point. Sometimes all that’s needed is a gimmick. My own method is to allow myself nothing but positive comments during an initial reading of a student paper; I lift my pen to write words of praise only. Another practice is to ask, just before moving to another essay, “Have I told Melissa two or three things about her paper that I like?” R. W. Reising’s technique is even more
effectively: he has developed a grading form that requires him to write one to three positive comments before he even considers noting a weakness. (107)

The reason composition instructors must focus so much on digging for positive aspects in student writing is because of the detrimental effects negative comments alone can have on those same students. Positive commentary placed upon a student’s written work by a composition instructor serves several purposes. The first, and simplest to understand whether on the level of student or instructor, is the purpose of building confidence in a student. An essay handed back to a student full of red marks causes stress, as we can all attest to, but if it is known that some of these red marks are not negative, we can retrain students to look at our comments with a different filter and attitude. This retraining of students from thinking all marks across their papers are negative to realizing that some are positive is not a rapid process, as most students have been trained from their grade school years to think that the composition instructor or English teacher is going to only mark their errors, so this positive commentary must be specific and justified. Daiker touches on this aspect of how marking only negative comments on student writing psychologically alters students’ attitudes toward writing courses and even future careers:

Praise may be especially important for students who have known little encouragement and, in part for that reason, suffer from writing apprehension. Writing apprehension is a measure of anxiety established through the research of John Daly and Michael Miller (1975b). According to these researchers, the highly apprehensive writer is one for whom anxiety about writing outweighs the projection of gain from writing. Because they fear writing and its consequences,
“high apprehensives” seek to avoid writing situations: they are reluctant to take courses in writing, and they choose academic majors and occupations with minimal writing requirements. When they do write, they use language that is significantly less intense than people with low writing apprehension; that is, they are more reluctant to take a stand or to commit themselves to a position. They try to play it safe not only by embracing neutrality, but by saying less. (106)

This entire concept of “high apprehensives” is very troubling, especially considering that we, as instructors, are at the core of this deep-seated issue for many students. This also means that we are the only ones that can break what Daiker calls this “circular” cycle that gets worse and worse, and we must break it through the use of specific positive commentary to rebuild the already fragile and damaged confidence that has been taken from these students. To be most effective, positive commentary should be specific; instructors must look for very narrow points or facets of the essay that are strong. This means that a general “ok” or “good” jotted sloppily in the margin next to a body paragraph is not ideal. An instructor must instead look for a genuinely successful aspect of the written material, no matter how small or easy to overlook, and make note of that for the student. This does not mean reverting back to focusing on an editing success that the student had; that would be contradicting the point of successful revision, which is ultimately to better the content of an essay. Instead the specific positive commentary we write must center on a well-focused point a student made or a strongly supported assertion within an argumentative essay. This process may be long and arduous, but this is the way to praise students enough so that the revision process is rewired in their minds from a negative, dreadful activity to a positive, less dreadful one.
Unfortunately, many instructors, myself included, have found themselves falling into the habit of making several variations of the same comment across several (or all) students’ essays. This is troubling for a couple reasons, the first being that if all these students are having the same issues with their writing, why are we not addressing these problems and fixing them during our class time? After all, we do not just know these students from seeing their work on our desk and having to drag ourselves to it to grade it; we have in-class time to address the issues they may be having, and if they are all having the same consistent issue, it should definitely be addressed and alleviated during class time. The second major issue with these comments is that they eventually have no meaning; we are merely writing them for the sake of writing them, and this means that students are, most likely, getting as little out of the comments as we are putting into them. Sommers refers to these generic, interchangeable comments as “rubber-stamped” comments in “Responding to Student Writing”:

The second finding from our study is that most teachers' comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text. The comments are not anchored in the particulars of the students' texts, but rather are a series of vague directives that are not text-specific. Students are commanded to ‘Think more about [their] audience, avoid colloquial language, avoid the passive, avoid prepositions at the end of sentences or conjunctions at the beginning of sentences, be clear, be specific, be precise, but above all, think more about what [they] are thinking about.’ (153)

These rubber-stamped comments are sometimes justified and very specific, but when we are writing different variations of them on each student’s paper just to comment
for the sake of commenting or “doing our job,” these comments lose their weight and meaning to us and to the students they are meant to help in the first place. After going through my own graded student essays, I began to watch out for what Sommers refers to as these “rubber-stamped” comments, and unfortunately, there was evidence of these in my own grading. Some of my most common rubber-stamped comments are as follows:

“Elaborate on this point.” I saw this comment on nearly half of the papers I graded last semester, and this comment appeared on the more advanced students’ essays which suggest that I may have written this out of the obligatory need to comment on student work even when the essay was already strong.

“Subject-verb agreement.” This rubber-stamped comment was far less common than the previously mentioned, but after analyzing my use of this comment, I found that I may have written it out of laziness. Rather than explaining on the paper why there was a subject-verb agreement issue, I simply jotted it near the issue and kept reading. That being said, this rubber-stamped comment ultimately helps students work toward successful revision; unlike fixing a comma splice, for example, correcting subject-verb agreement helps the understanding and meaning within an essay, which makes it a more effective essay.

And my least favorite of my rubber-stamped comments includes a one-word question, “Why?” While I showed students what area of the essay the “Why?” referred to, perhaps I could have at least let them know what logical issue or lack of definition was in the essay so that they could expand from there.

The most frustrating realization I have come to from analyzing these commenting patterns in my grading process was that I was not specific. I was just fulfilling my role as
the authority figure in the classroom, and my comments did not help my students as much as they could have had I been more specific and directive.

Thinking back on these comments and the reason I wrote them, I am able to see that these comments did nothing more than make me feel as if I was doing my job as an instructor; they added nothing to the students’ essays, even if students did take these particular comments into account during the revision process, and they did not aim to boost the students’ confidence levels. I am ashamed to find that in aiming to do my job of commenting, I failed at commenting, and ultimately, I was being selfish in my need to feel I was fulfilling my role and job as a composition instructor rather than serving the glaring needs of each of my students. This irony is something I now avoid in my grading, and I try now to be more focused and specific in my commentary in order to encourage a thorough revision.

At the same time, positive commentary must also be justified. This means that as instructors, we must find something *worth* complementing the student on. Positive commentary, like suggestion, can fall into the category of “rubber-stamped” comments, but rubber-stamped comments of praise, unlike those of suggestion, are merely giving the student a moment of encouragement rather than telling the student to correct something with no direction as to how to make that correction or elaboration. This aspect of positive commentary is perhaps tougher than merely being specific because it demands that instructors find something positive in even the weakest and most poorly written student work. We must work to find at least a few strengths, even when it feels as though we are sifting through a very weak essay or report, and this is often a time-consuming task when
working to grade a pile of twenty or thirty student essays. Daiker admits that this is not often a simple task for composition instructors:

But praise, however beneficial as a remedy for apprehension and as a motivator of student writing, is more easily enjoined than put into practice. Dragga notes in his study, for instance, that the four teaching assistants trained in praiseworthy grading all experienced “difficulty in labeling and explaining the desirable characteristics of their students’ writing.” He concludes that teacher training must emphasize explicit criteria for praiseworthy grading. The title of this article implies that praise does not flow readily from the marking pens of writing teachers; it must be learned. (107)

And even when positive commentary is justified, there is another criterion it must meet for it to be as effective as possible for students. This second key factor is that the positive commentary must provide students with some direction. This means that a student must not only know that they did something well, but they must know how or why they did it well. Many students do not have the ability on their own to see which parts of their writing is weak versus which parts are strong, so positive commentary, especially in the stronger areas of a student’s written work, will ideally lead students in the right direction for the upcoming revision process on the weaker areas of their written work. This will also let them know what they are doing correctly or well so that they can build on those already strong skills in future writing.

There are several ways to ensure an appropriate amount of positive commentary is placed on student essays. One such way is to do a read through for the first time only marking the positive points you see within the writing. Penn State University’s English
Department suggests a step-by-step approach to ensuring that the appropriate amount of all commentary, more specifically positive commentary, appears across the essays of each student taking a rhetoric and composition class by providing a bulleted list for new and experienced composition instructors to follow in the grading process:

- It is important first to distinguish between commenting and grading. To feel obligated in our comments to justify why a paper is, for instance, a C+ rather than a B- is to miss the point of commenting in a writing course: writing instruction.

Here is an alternative process for instructional commenting that many instructors find more helpful and satisfying:

- First, read through the whole set of papers quickly, without necessarily commenting. Get a sense of how successfully students responded to the assignment, what they did effectively, where the writing consistently missed the mark. For a class of 24 students this usually takes about an hour, but it can save you more time later.

- Next, with the help of the student’s “topic” or “argument proposal” (assuming you require one), read each paper critically, in your roles as a coach, reader, and editor, making marginal comments (suggestions and directives) as you go. Knowing the point and audience of the paper as you read should give your comments relevance to purpose and audience.

- Finally, look back over the paper: think about what you have been emphasizing while the student worked on this assignment, review your marginal comments, compare the student’s earlier work to this paper – and, then write a summary comment. Here is the place to assess strengths and weaknesses, to note
improvement and make suggestions for continued improvement, and to select what you want to teach this student now. To accomplish all this, reinforce your marginalia, relate the work on this paper to the criteria for good writing, recognize improvement, and suggest what the student still or next needs to work on. (Penn State)

In the first read through, it is suggested that instructors merely get a feel for the essay. This is the method I followed in my grading of student essays. I began, as stated previously, by just doing a quick five to seven-minute read-through of the essay in front of me. I did this for all the essays. I then went back through for a second reading of each essay, this time marking only the positive aspects of the essay. This mostly resulted in one or two-word marginal comments. This took longer than the first read through, but it was a ten to fifteen-minute process. The third and final reading of the essays included all the corrections and suggestive marginal comments for improvement. It also encompassed the holistic comment.

While it is tempting to go through the writing and mark only the negative at first glance, it is the training of the eye to see positive before the negative aspects that will ensure all students are getting some positive commentary to help build their confidence and give them a general direction for the upcoming revision process. This third and final point in the list provided by the University not only emphasizes “strengths and weaknesses” but also transitions me into a point we will discuss at length in the following chapter—suggestion.

I then moved on to the next crucial step in my study, which encompassed data collection. At the conclusion of my grading of each student’s essay, I kept electronic
documents for the holistic comments written upon each essay. I grouped these holistic comments on separate documents by which essay they pertained to, and I was able to then go back through these documents at any point in time to see what positive and negative comments I had written on each student’s essay.

Upon the completion of the semester, I then moved on to analyze the data I had collected. I began by looking at the hard copies of the students’ revisions I kept for the study. Students’ names had been removed from each essay so my analysis of the comments was objective, and I then looked at the holistic comments I had saved electronically to see how the original holistic comment I made to each student on the essay they chose to revise correlated with how their revision of the essay turned out.

Throughout my data collection, one variable that I took into account was how much positive commentary I placed upon my students’ written work. I did this in several ways, including comparing how much positive commentary versus negative was on the papers, what form the positive commentary took (whether it was a simple “good” or “ok” or possibly a longer, more advanced phrase), and whether this positive commentary had any effect on the revision process that occurred after these pieces of writing were handed back to students full of both positive and negative commentary.

The main area where I struggled to make positive comments on my students’ essays was in the marginal comments I wrote upon each of their essays. There are two main reasons for this:

1. I write the marginal comments on my students’ essays when I am actively going through and reading each word of the essay. This means that while I am aiming to
place constructive criticism and positive notes on each student’s essay, the errors are the more glaring and easily corrected issues to comment on.

2. I like to place more positive commentary in my ending, holistic comments on each student’s essay. It is in these holistic comments, when I am not actively reading each word and each glaring error, where I can reflect back and think about how the essay worked and functioned. It is also within these holistic comments when I work to use the “praise sandwich” method of commenting so that I can correct the weaker aspects of the essay as a whole while still reflecting back onto where it had strengths.

The importance of the second reason mentioned above is that criticism can often be taken better by a student when sandwiched between comments of praise. Often referred to as the “praise sandwich” or the “feedback sandwich,” this combination of a comment of praise followed by a criticism and sealed off neatly with another comment of praise is more palatable for students who may not be the most confident writers to begin with, let alone after criticism.

While not the most technical name or definition, the praise sandwich technique is explained well by Family Practice Management:

If you're uncomfortable giving negative feedback, you may want to use a technique commonly referred to as “sandwiching” or a feedback sandwich. The basic recipe for a feedback sandwich consists of one specific criticism “sandwiched” between two specific praises. (Family Practice Management)
Though speaking of this technique of relaying criticism from more of an employee-employer relationship, the basic principle and formula for the feedback or praise sandwich holds true:

The main ingredient of a feedback sandwich is constructive criticism. When it is well timed, well targeted and well said, constructive criticism can help direct growth, motivate staff and offer relief from confusion. (Family Practice Management)

The bread of this “sandwich” then refers to each comment of praise surrounding the criticism, or “the meat:”

In a feedback sandwich, the quality of the criticism and the praise are equally important. Don't use vague, insincere praise as a smoke screen to deliver bad news: “You're a really good employee, but we have to let you go. Don't worry, one of our competitors will snap you up in no time.” This is mixed or conflicting feedback, not a true feedback sandwich. Given that the employee is being fired, it is clear that performance deficits vastly outweigh strengths, so any praise at this time is disingenuous. It is also vague feedback. “Really good” does not tell the employee what behavior to repeat.

Praise, like criticism, should be well timed, well targeted and well said. (Family Practice Management)

Just as in the instructor-student relationship, this spoken of employer-employee relationship requires genuine praise and genuine, specific criticism and suggestion to move the employee more toward the constructive growth that the employer is hoping for.
When looking back at the marginal and holistic comments I made over the course of the entire Spring 2013 semester teaching two sections of composition, I found that my commentary tended to be more negative than positive. While I was not shocked by this, it was discouraging to find that my negative commentary still outweighed the positive, even though I used Daiker’s method of only commenting on the positives during the first read-through; however, this positive-to-negative ratio varied greatly depending on the student whose work I was grading. For instance, stronger students who were able to take comments and suggestion and repair the weaker areas of the essay with minimal probing from me were more likely to receive less negative than positive commentary. On the other hand, students who required more pushing and direction from my comments would have received more negative commentary to help them move in the right direction.

In addition to the essays where the positive outweighed the negative only slightly and vice versa, there were the outliers. These outliers I refer to were either the essays that were either extremely strong and well-written when turned in to me or were very weak and lacking in a lot of content and basic structure. As expected, the positive outweighed the negative on the stronger essays by approximately 75 percent to 25 percent, while this ratio is nearly flipped when looking at the commentary I wrote upon the weaker essays.

While this finding is not surprising, it is disappointing. The reason for my disappointment is because of the difficulty I still find in working to have more constructive and positive marginal comments on those weaker essays where my ratio is often 75 percent negative commentary to only 25 percent positive.
Chapter 3—Utilizing Suggestion: From General to Specific

While we have already discussed the definition and importance of praise when commenting on student work, it is just as critical to discuss the role suggestion plays in the big picture of commenting on students’ work. Suggestion can be defined, for the purposes of this writing, as any comment or probing question made to help students figure out how to work their current, weaker draft into a stronger, more complete final draft. As stated previously, suggestion encompasses those questions and comments that require a further explanation or elaboration by student writers. While suggestion can be as simple as stating “Elaborate on this point,” or “Explain how you came to this conclusion,” this is not ideal. Ideally, suggestion is specific enough that students are not left wondering how they are to even begin to address the mentioned vague comments. For this reason, I worked to give very specific suggestion, but we must first take a look at the sort of general suggestion many students are used to seeing and many instructors are used to providing.

Perhaps instructors provide just enough suggestion to confuse students further because they are looking to pull something out of their students; after all, we want to see students take our suggestions and build on them using their own logic and intellect. By providing general suggestion, perhaps we are able to give these students just enough direction to improve and to help them recognize the areas in which they need to improve without hand-feeding them the content we are yearning for in that initial draft or drafts.

Unfortunately for instructors, general suggestion does not always have the results we desire. We often pass back the marked-up initial final drafts to their respective owners and expect that when we collect the revisions of those final drafts next week in class, we
will read flawless and beautifully thought out and constructed essays. This is rarely the case, and in part, we are to blame. Merely telling a student to “Elaborate” or “Fix the logic” does not always cut it; after all, if students could see the glaring mistakes that we see in their work as easily as we see them, then the mistakes would likely be far less frequent in the first place. This means that these general suggestions are, essentially, nothing more than a tiny “hint” to students as to where and what requires revision, and in a process that is already daunting for the majority of students, we do not necessarily need to be only giving them “hints” at how to get better.

While we will talk about more specific suggestion in the following chapters, I must first clarify that any suggestion, even general suggestion, is better than no suggestion on student work. Sometimes, certain students require less encouragement and direction than others; this is something that individual instructors must gauge based on the relationship he or she has with his or her students throughout a given semester or academic year. For example, there were several students in each of my two courses throughout the study that were motivated, confident, and logical enough to take my general suggestions and make vast improvements from them; this is the ultimate outcome I hoped would eventually come from all my students, but it takes longer than a 15-week semester to build students up to that point. On the other hand, I had students in each of those same two classes that needed me to guide them extremely closely through very specific suggestion in order to barely make improvements through the revision process. This is a very big gap to aim to close when dealing with students of different ages, cultural backgrounds, and educational abilities, and we will talk more about overcoming these challenges in my composition classroom in the coming chapters and summation.
Just as a coach instructs his or her athletes on plays, positions on the field or court, and specific areas in which they need to improve, we, as instructors, must be patient, demanding, persistent, and specific. In the following chapter, we will take an in-depth look at the specific comments I made for my students to give them direction in the revision process without holding their hands too much. I aimed to work as a facilitator and “mediator” between the students and the essays, using positive commentary and strong, detailed suggestion to keep them on a positive note with their essays while working to improve upon it.
Chapter 4—Pairing for Success

Now that the definitions and examples of both praise and suggestion have been given, in addition to samples of how I provide positive commentary and suggestion on student work, it is crucial that we look into the core of this study: pairing praise and suggestion. This pairing is the root of how to help students become more effective writers in the composition classroom and on their own, and it is the pairing of these two elements in instructor commentary that gives students the confidence to write and the direction to write better. It is in this section that I will provide more examples of suggestion and praise that I wrote on actual student papers. Then I will demonstrate how the comments related if at all to the subsequent revision made by the student writer.

In these following bulleted examples, the entire paired comment is shown, but the area of specific suggestion I am aiming to highlight is italicized. These comments were originally written as holistic comments at the end of each student’s paper. Following each example is a brief explanation:

- You make a compelling argument that the police and the University should be separate entities. Work to correct awkward wording and wrong words (such as “there” vs. “their”). Overall, you made good use of sources to support your views, but aim to put your solutions and reasons for not expelling students further up in the essay for readers to see quickly. Good work.

  In this example, I worked to acknowledge the student’s overall strong argument, but I wanted her to take the essay further stylistically and organizationally. She had a definite view on the issue she was discussing, but she did not have a solid structure to the essay.
She needed to place her supporting data closer to the claims they were meant to support, and the essay was a bit weak due to the lack of support for the assertions.

- Good job analyzing this web of lies. I _wanted you to tie this in with the readings we did for class somehow to support your assertion that lying doesn’t get people any further in life_. Also, there were still severe spelling, grammar, and other technical issues in this essay that were marked in the rough draft but not corrected in this draft. I will gladly look over your next paper with you and fix these problems before the final draft is due; this will help your papers greatly. Keep working.

While we had thoroughly reviewed how to quote and use sources to back up one’s argument in class together, the student in the above example struggled to use sources from our class readings to support his opinions. I made sure to bring that aspect to the forefront of my commentary, and I also suggested that he see me earlier during the next essay to work on the technical issues he still had remaining in the essay. If the student was to come see me before the final draft of the next essay, he and I could read over it and he would have been able to see what requires revision or simple editing.

- Nice work analyzing lying. There were some editing and wording issues throughout the essay that could’ve been fixed with another round of revision. _Also, a stronger thesis statement would have helped the organization of the essay a bit. Good job making use of the readings and tying in real-life examples of lying to illustrate your points, but work to push this further_. Good start.
This student needed to write a stronger thesis statement to keep his essay tied together more fluidly. He also needed to work on organization and elaborate further on the real-life and reading examples he provided to support his assertions.

In working to provide enough effective suggestion for my students throughout this study, I knew that the suggestions had to be extremely specific. The above examples not only worked to address the essays as a whole within the first sentence of the holistic comment, but they also broke down the specific areas that still required work and expansion. This addressing of the specific areas requiring attention and further work gave my students direction for the revision process, which is something many of my younger students drastically needed. In my courses, anywhere from 75 to 80 percent of students were new, young college freshman who had never experienced writing on an analytical and thorough level beyond the formula often given by middle and high school English programs, so this specific suggestion was the only means to help these students see what I meant in my hopes for what their essays could become from draft to draft.

The other major aspect and hope that results from thorough and specific suggestion on students’ written work is that students will not make the revisions for the instructor solely in the hopes that it will earn them a specific letter grade; the idea of suggestion and revision is much more than that. My hope from using the above-mentioned form of suggestion is that students will accomplish two things:

1. Students will make the revisions necessary for the essay’s improvement because they care about the quality of their writing.
2. Students will begin to learn from these suggestions where their own writing may already be lacking, and they will be able to identify this prior to handing in even a first draft.

It is necessary to elaborate on each of these two ideal outcomes further because this is the ultimate purpose not only of this study, but of all composition instructors.

The first point, which is to teach students that they should aim to make these changes for themselves rather than just to please the instructor, is perhaps the tougher of the two points. Students live in a very grade-driven society, so the ultimate goal is usually to obtain the highest grade possible on any given assignment in any course, composition or otherwise. This mold, however, is what needs to be broken if students are to begin to write with pride and become proud of the improvements they can make on their own. It is for this reason that even though I am as specific as I can be in my suggestion, I work to not let my opinion shine through at all; through suggestion, I attempt to lead students in the right direction without telling them the way I would like to see the revision made. Students, ideally, would realize that there is no one right or wrong way to revise, and they would eventually learn from suggestion that there are several options for how to revise. Rather than simply answering suggestive questions I place in the margin about certain areas or aspects of the written work, students are forced into the realization that a particular area requires more information or more clearly stated information, but they must work to accomplish this with their own opinions and voice. I do not want students to write to please me; I want them to write to please themselves, which is precisely what makes this point so difficult to achieve.
While getting students to worry less about their grades is not the solution to the problem, it is difficult, at the college level, to break them of the idea that grades come first, even if obtaining the desired grade comes from writing in the way an instructor wants you to. After all, grades remain important when judging how a student did during his or her educational career, but I attempted not to perpetuate this idea that the letter grade and numerical score were all that counted at the conclusion of each essay. What I wanted students to see was how much their final essays had improved in comparison to their earlier drafts, and this was a difficult task.

The second point is that students may learn to recognize these areas of weakness and error patterns in their writing before I even comment on an initial draft. Approximately 50 percent of my students made the same errors over and over throughout the course because they were not working toward this very point; they looked at the suggestions, told me in a revised draft exactly what, in their minds, they thought I wanted to hear, and then put it out of their minds until they got back their final draft with a grade on it. But the ultimate goal for this study was for students to see how the revision process worked and to not make those same errors in the rough draft of the next essay.

For example, many students seem to overgeneralize their statements, specifically in essays requiring they take a stand or argue one side of an issue. After getting back several drafts with suggestions to, “Be more specific,” or “Be careful not to overgeneralize,” and even, “Elaborate and support your opinion further,” they would respond to the suggestion, but make the same careless mistake in the first draft of another essay. For instance, several students claimed in their argumentative essay that the University should dismiss students less than 21 years old who are caught consuming alcohol, even on a first
offense. After making this claim, they provided no support; there were no statistics stating the number of underage drinkers the University catches each academic year, and there was no information about what other universities of equal size do in these instances. After suggesting to students that they “support opinions further,” no data was provided on the final drafts.

Students also made careless errors repetitively. Confusing words like “there” and “their” were marked in the drafts of one assignment, but the same error would appear in the draft of the next assignment weeks later. This pattern suggested to me that my students were responding to suggestions merely to please me, so I had to work to push them to understand the points that were lacking in their writing. While one or two misused words were far less of a concern in this study than a missing thesis statement in one paper and another missing thesis statement in the next paper, the goal here was to get students to find the areas requiring improvement on their own; after all, identifying overgeneralizations or lack of support would help them to be able to alleviate the content-centered problems, such as a lack of a thesis statement, from appearing even in their rough drafts in the future. Unfortunately, not an overwhelming number of students accomplished this ultimate goal. Perhaps this is because students were merely trying to get through their obligatory college writing course with just enough to pass, but for those that did learn to identify the weak areas in their own writing, the improvement in the content of their essays, and subsequent improved grades on these essays, was worth the extra effort of learning to understand how to work with the suggestion I provided. While unsuccessful revision was prevalent in students’ essays, we will look at examples of successful revision in response to suggestion in the next chapter.
In addition to all the positive commentary, corrections, and suggestions that I made across a student’s essay, I also chose to write a holistic comment at the end of the entire essay (some examples are those shown above to also demonstrate the pairing of praise and suggestion within the holistic comment), which falls directly in line what Penn State’s English Department recommended in their third bullet point listed above.

Of all the comments I make on students’ work, this is perhaps my favorite because it ties all the positives and negatives together into one neat little comprehensible package. Utilizing this form of praise and suggestion in paragraph format allows me to have a deeper discussion with my students in order to tell them exactly where I see the paper now and where it can go in the future if they choose to take the suggestion and praise in the margins and put it to good use to produce another draft.

Unlike the one-to-two-word comments of praise and suggestion we have gone through examples of throughout this work, my holistic comments are much more in-depth, as noted above. I practice pairing praise and suggestion most strongly in this area of my commentary because I know that realistically most of my students flip to the last page of their graded essays when I hand them back and only peer at the final letter grade. My hope with these comments, however, is that because I list them above the letter grade, they will take a few moments to read through the four to eight sentences I have specifically written to them to see what they can do to get better and more comfortable at writing. Some examples of my holistic commentary are necessary for the understanding of how I pair praise and suggestion when speaking directly to my students, so we will take a look at a few different holistic comments from past graded essays, and I will point out the praise and suggestion within each one.
In order to understand where all of these holistic comments came from, I must first establish that after the grading of each set of essays, I kept a document listing each and every holistic comment I made for the purposes of using them as samples for this study. Throughout the course of my Spring 2013 class, my students wrote five essays: Personification, Descriptive, Lying and Deception, Argument and Persuasion, and a final revision of an earlier essay. These essays were of varying lengths, with the first essay—the Personification—being the shortest in order to ease them into the semester of writing at the college level.

The holistic comments at the conclusion of each student essay differed from my marginal comments in several ways:

1. The holistic comments were much longer and looked at the essay as a whole piece of writing, while the marginal comments focused more on individual words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs.

2. The holistic comments utilized the “praise sandwich” technique encompassing both positive and negative in one comment, while the marginal comments were typically either positive or negative.

3. The holistic comments were much longer than the individual marginal comments, which were meant to make quick corrections and suggestions throughout individual pieces of the essay.

For our purposes, I will state which essay each holistic comment came from, but I did not include the grade with these comments because I want the focus to be on the comments themselves rather than on the letter grade. The written comment I made by hand on the student essay is typed below in italics while the reasoning and information
regarding that comment is immediately below it in standard text. (The following examples are offered:)

“Nice job personifying the object. I would’ve liked to see more objective observation in here about the surroundings, but good work overall. Be careful not to get too “preachy” in the closing sentence of the essay, and there are some editing errors that could’ve been corrected with another round of careful revision. Maybe tell us more about location and individual paintings on the rock to add a better mental image.”

The above comment is from the personification essay assignment. I began with the positive commentary and then transitioned to suggestion so that the student would not stop reading if he or she felt the entire comment was too harsh a critique of his or her approach to the assignment.

“Good job personifying the bench. You gave the object a solid story and described it well. I would have liked to see a bit more detail about the bench’s surroundings—what did the buildings look like, etc. there were some minor technical issues, and remember to divide the piece into paragraphs when shifting topics radically. Overall, good work.”

The above comment also stems from the personification essay. The main difference between this comment and the former is that I sandwiched suggestion between two positive comments because the overall quality of the essay was stronger than the first example.

The following two examples were from the second essay of the course, which was a longer, descriptive essay:
“Good job describing the day at the hospital. While you describe the day chronologically, the essay has a lot of run-on sentences, misplaced conjunctions, and technical issues. It’s also lacking a lot of sensory details that would help readers visualize the day. Keep working.”

As is obvious from the less-than-positive sandwiching of the suggestive comment, this holistic comment pertained to a much weaker essay. That being said, I was able to find positive aspects on my first read through, praising the overall description rather than critiquing the weak technical aspects of the essay.

“Great job describing your first day at work. You had a lot of nice similes and details in here to illustrate your experience, but work to clean up your editing (especially sentence fragments). I like your conclusion which goes against your initial fears and doubts—good work.”

This comment was from a stronger essay, so I was able to make the minor suggestion to specifically clean up the fragments, but I was able to honestly end the comment with a positive statement, which I find ideal.

The third essay was an analytical essay based on class readings that all related to lying and deception. This essay was initially a struggle for my students as they had to learn to tie in readings seamlessly with their own analysis:

“Nice job analyzing lying. You used good personal and historical examples to justify and illustrate your points on lies, and you also used Twain’s piece to support your assertions.”
Keep in mind, though, that you could’ve gained even more credibility by using more of the readings. Also, work to fix the editing issues in the essay. Overall, good work.”

I specifically suggested to this student that he needed to utilize more of the readings as backing for his assertions. Having said that, I was still able to tell him that this was some good work on a bit more of an analytical piece, which was out of the students’ comfort zones at that point in the semester.

“Nice job analyzing lying. You used real-life examples and the class readings to support your opinion, but the editing and grammar issues in the essay held it back a bit. Work to fix these during the revision process. Also, work to conclude with a stronger ending paragraph. The essay currently raises more questions than it answers in the conclusion. Good start.”

This essay was the weaker of the two, and the student needed to know that she needed to answer the points she was raising for the essay to come full circle and be effective. There was less positive commentary in this comment than I would have liked, but I could not justify fabricating false compliments and instead gave an overall “rubber-stamped” statement at the very beginning of the holistic comment.

The next, and final essay before their major revision, was the argument and persuasion essay, which was, by far, the most daunting task the students had to complete last semester, as evidenced by the following examples of comments:

“This essay has many errors. Aim to rework the unclear sentences, fix the misspellings and wrong wordings, and create a more formal/academic tone. You also need a stronger thesis statement early in the essay to help the overall focus
and organization. That being said, you made good use of the Grossman reading. Keep working.”

Unfortunately, there was much more suggestion in this comment than there was praise. I attempted to help my student’s mood after reading this comment by encouraging him or her to keep working.

“Good work demonstrating your argument about college not being for everyone right away. Work to fix your sentence-level issues and create a more formal/academic tone by limiting the use of cliché phrases and personal pronouns. Nice job using the Bird reading, but aim to correct the sentence errors; they take away from the quality of the overall essay.”

This comment came from a much stronger argumentative essay, and the holistic comment demonstrates that immediately by praising the student. That being said, there was plenty of room for suggestion following that, mostly involving suggestion for how to improve surface-level issues. This contradiction between what this specific holistic comment focuses on versus what most holistic comments focus on comes from the strong organization and focus that already existed within this student’s essay prior to my commentary and grading of it.

While there was a fifth essay students completed at the end of the semester, it was a much shorter revision of an earlier piece of writing from the class, and we will look at these examples in the coming chapters. This is the core of the study to demonstrate the ultimate outcome of revision from the praise and suggestion I provided my students.

As you can see, though, some of the above examples are more positive than others, I do make sure to at least offer some praise where it is due, regardless of what the
final grade on the essay was. This is a tactic I saw as crucial because these holistic comments are often the most in-depth conversation I have with my students, not counting office hours, so I want to make sure to build trust and security while still enabling myself to tell them what areas they are lacking in.
Chapter 5—The Outcome of Praise and Suggestion

In order to fully see the scope of this study and whether the method of pairing praise and suggestion had its intended outcome, we must take a look at some real classroom examples that my own students produced throughout the 15-week spring semester. I must first begin with the prompt students were asked to respond to for the initial drafts of their essays. In order to show the full scope of the final result of the revision, it’s crucial to note that the students’ final essays were a revision of one of their three earlier essays throughout the course of the semester. I will give an overview of the initial prompts that students were presented with for each of the essays, and it is when I show real examples of their revisions of these essays that I will elaborate on which initial prompt the revision resulted from.

It is also important to note that students had the choice to revise any of their three essays. They could have, ideally, based their choice to revise upon the grades they received on these earlier essays; for example, a student would most likely choose to revise the essay he or she did the worst on throughout the semester. Students’ selections on what to revise, however, were not always this logical; some students chose to revise the essay they enjoyed writing the most, and some, unfortunately, chose to revise whichever essay they felt would require the least amount of effort. The following three prompts were three out of the four essays students were required to write in my course, starting with a personification essay:

Personification Essay

Personification is the act of attributing human traits to animals or inanimate objects. Objective observation and writing focuses on description. Subjective writing, on the other hand, focuses on emotional response and opinion.
For this first essay of the semester, you will be personifying an inanimate object on campus utilizing the objective and subjective observation skills we have been studying and practicing. To begin this essay, select an item; it can be something large, like a statue or building, or something as small as a pen. Whatever you select, it must be something on the YSU campus.¹

This first essay was, by far, the most informal and shortest of all the essays students had to write throughout the semester. I utilized this essay to ease them into their first semester of college writing, to gage where each of their abilities stood, and to teach them to use observation in their work.

The second essay students could choose to revise for their final essay was their initial descriptive essays. This essay came after the personification essay because I wanted them to learn to use their newfound objective and subjective observation skills to show me something. The following prompt was the assignment I gave the students when beginning their descriptive essays:

Descriptive Essay

“Description is be defined as the act of capturing people, places, events, objects, and feelings in words so that a reader (or listener) can visualize and respond to them,” (Flachmann 51).

For the last few weeks of class, you have been reading and studying various examples of descriptive writing. Writers have taken you into prisons, onto porches during humid summer evenings, and into strangers’ homes in the woods in order to describe something you can’t see, smell, touch, hear, or taste for yourself. Descriptive writing has taken you into scenes that you wouldn’t have had the opportunity to experience had these writers not provided them for you.

Instructions:

¹ The rest of the Personification Essay assignment asked students to go to the location and observe the object they have selected, use their subjective and objective observation skills to personify the object, and to utilize other writing skills, such as humor, to make the essay entertaining. The criteria for the grading of the essay, as well as the due dates, were also provided.
For this assignment you will be the writer describing a scene. Select a specific scene from a significant moment in your life. It may be the first moments at a new job, an important game that your team won over a rival team, or your first day of college. The essay can be about any significant scene, but whatever scene you do choose, show it to me using descriptive techniques.2

The final essay students were able to select to revise for their final essay of the semester was a more analytical essay. The issue I asked them to analyze was something familiar to nearly everyone: deception and manipulation. I selected this topic as the focus of the essay because it tied in with several of the readings I had students working with. It also required them to utilize the text within their own argument in the essays, which was a good transition into their fourth essay of the semester (an argument and persuasion essay). The following prompt was what was given to students prior to beginning their analytical essay on lying and deception:

Deception and Lying

Over the course of the last few weeks, we have been focusing on the acts of lying, deception, and misrepresentation. For this essay, I want to hear what you think about these acts. Make an argument as to when and to what extent lying, deception, and misrepresentation may or may not be appropriate. Throughout your argument, consider the consequences of engaging in deceit and of not engaging in deceit. I want you to focus on both aspects of this. If lying and deception are not utilized, what are the possible outcomes? What are the alternative choices to the lies and deceit? Provide real-life examples that are appropriate for the purposes of this essay and our course as a whole. In addition to focusing on the consequences for individuals possibly involved in the lies and deceit you discuss, also work to focus on the consequences involved for society at large, if applicable.3

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2 The rest of the Descriptive Essay assignment asked students to show me the single scene they were talking about using descriptive techniques such as the five senses—sight, smell, touch, hear, taste—and other creative techniques we’ve covered in class thus far. Students were also provided with a list of “refresher” descriptive pieces we had read in class, but were advised NOT to base their essays off of these writings.

3 The rest of the Deception and Lying assignment sheet asked students to quote material from the five related readings they had encountered and discussed in class. Students were supposed to go back and consult these readings for support or examples when crafting their essays.
As can be seen from the assignments above, each of the essays I assigned to my composition students was rather specific. I did this for several reasons, the most important reason being that I wanted students to know what I expected from them. Another reason was that I wanted students to develop strong rough drafts so that they had a solid basis upon which to build their revisions later in the semester.

At the time I assigned these three essays, students did not know that their final assignment for the semester would be to improve upon their initial final graded drafts. I did not notify them of this aspect of the course until it was close to the end of the semester and they had received their grades on each of these three essays. My reasoning for constructing the course in this manner was not to hide from students exactly what their final assignment would be; it was to prevent them from letting the final assignment impact their performance on the equally as important earlier essays. For example, I didn’t want a student waiting until the last possible moment to write one of these three essays knowing that they would later have the opportunity to improve upon it; I wanted quality work on these essays even on the first draft they handed to me (which, in the eyes of my students at the time, was the final draft).

Several weeks before the semester’s end, I assigned students their final task of the semester. Shown below is the assignment sheet students received:

Final Essay

For your final essay of the semester, you will be doing a small revision of one of the three essays you wrote throughout the course of the semester. You can choose to rewrite part of your Personification Essay, part of your Descriptive Essay, or part of your Lying Essay. Whichever essay you select to revise, work to revise based off of what the essay was lacking in its original final draft form. Take into account instructor comments to you and what you see when you go back and read this work that you have not visited in a while.
(What I mean by a “small” revision is that you are not required to rewrite the whole paper; instead, rewrite 2 full pages of the essay so that you can really work to improve that smaller section of the essay.)

How I recommend you begin this essay is to base your choice upon which essay you received the lowest grade on overall. Read the essay aloud to yourself and see how it sounds; is it too informal? Are you missing word endings? Do you have repetitive run-on sentences? Look for problems that were not corrected in the original final draft earlier this semester.

The goal of this final essay is to come away from this course with a solid grasp on what goes into the revision process and to have a polished piece of writing that had more than a simple rough draft and final draft to it.

**Grading:**

This essay will be worth 50 points. I will grade you based on how well you meet the requirements of the assignment. This means I plan to see significant revision, not just the rewording of sentences and changing of punctuation marks to make the essay appear a bit different than it originally did.

In addition to the focus on the content, I will also be grading based upon overall organization, sentence structure and variation, and paragraph development. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation will also be taken into account. After two previous drafts of this essay, these technical aspects should be very clean.

- Essay must be typed, Times New Roman, 12-pt. font, double-spaced, 1-inch margins
- You must turn in the original, graded final draft of the essay along with the new draft you are doing for this assignment so that I can see the revision process.
- Final draft due May 2 at the start of class

***Points will be deducted for all late assignments.

What must be made clear after presenting the three assignments and the final assignment of the semester is that students were asked to do a “small revision” so that they would all be completing approximately the same quantity of writing for the final essay regardless of which essay they chose to revise.

It is also pertinent to note that while my study was of the revision between an initial final draft and a revised final draft, students had to take part in a peer review
session between the rough draft due date and the final draft due date on each of the three essays shown above. In the peer review sessions in my composition classroom, students were placed into groups of three and then asked to read each of their classmate’s essays within their small groups. After reading each of the essays, students were prompted with questions that forced them to think critically about the text their peer wrote. The following is an example of the peer review sheet I provided to my students when in the process of writing their deception and manipulation essay:

Peer Evaluation Sheet
Lying, Deception, Misrepresentation Essay

Writer:

Reader:

1. Where in the essay is the thesis statement? Is the thesis early enough in the essay to establish the writer’s point and direction of the essay effectively? Does it summarize the direction the writer is heading for the remainder of the essay?

2. What is the writer’s view on lying? Is this made clear throughout the essay? Does the writer take a strong stand on his or her view of lying and deception, or is the writer unsure or too “wishy-washy?”

3. What are some examples the writer provides to back up his or her opinion on lying? List some of the stronger examples here. Is there enough valid support for the opinion of the writer, or is more support necessary?

4. Does the writer utilize the readings from class to elaborate or support his or her point? If so, which readings and where in the essay? If not, where can the writer insert points from the readings to make his or her argument stronger?
5. Did the writer provide real-life scenarios involving lying and deception? Were these adequately supported and thought through, or were they casually tossed in and unrelated to the remainder of the essay? Did these examples or scenarios provide good context for the argument being made in the rest of the essay?

6. Specify at least one way the essay can be improved.

This peer review sheet was tailored very specifically to the deception and manipulation analytical essay the students wrote, and each of the peer review sheets I provided students was assignment-specific. The reason these peer review sheets seemed to work effectively was because students gave their peers direction; the use of these sheets gave students the strengths and weaknesses within their essays so that they had the opportunity to correct these weaker areas before handing me a final draft.

While there was quite a bit of hesitation at the start of the semester with the peer review sessions, by the halfway point of the course, students were enjoying peer review sessions and writing honest, constructive feedback on one another’s drafts. In order to ensure that the peer review sheets were being completed in a fair and constructive manner, I collected them along with the initial draft and the final draft of the essay when each of the essays was due. This allowed me to look at how students’ essays transformed, or didn’t transform, based on what peers told them on the peer review sheets.

Turning our attention back to the final essay assignment, it is important to point out that I specifically asked students to do a “small revision” of one of their earlier essays. My rationale for having students do a “small revision,” as I wrote on the assignment sheet, was that if all essays were not the same length when entering the revision process, the majority of my students would have chosen to revise the shortest essay of the
semester. I did not want the length of an essay to impact a student’s final performance in my course for the semester, so this seemed like a reasonable option that would start all students on the same footing, as much as possible, for the last assignment of the course.

Another reason this revision was a shorter piece was because students had, one class session before giving them this final assignment, turned in a larger, five-page argumentative essay to me, and I wanted them to work on a two or three-page final draft more diligently rather than just throwing together another five-page assignment at the last minute. This shorter final assignment, I had hoped, would encourage students to work more closely with their own text to make it cleaner, more concise, and stronger as a piece of writing, even if it was only a piece of a whole essay they originally turned in. I also saw the two or three-page limit as a less intimidating quantity of material for students to sort through when figuring out where to begin and how to go about revision.

The following examples contain what I considered successful and substantial revision from the previous draft of the essay I had originally received when the assignment was due earlier in the semester. Following the successful revision example will be an author’s note, which I had each student write to tell me what they chose to revise, why they chose to revise it, and what errors or issues they found within their own written work. The original portion of the same essay will follow the author’s note, and I will also reproduce the comments I wrote on the original essay to show how these comments led to the revised version (these comments will be displayed electronically, as well, to the right of the text). My comments on the finalized revision are also to the right side of the italicized portion of the revision. The examples will be numbered for clarity and will be in italics to distinguish it from my own comments on the revision process:
Example 1: Revised sentence

Beneath Wick Avenue, down two shaky elevators and three flights of stairs to the sticky-warm basement of Bliss Hall is where I have been left to rot for the remainder of my pathetic life.

Example 1: Original sentence:

Beneath Wick Avenue, down two shaky elevators and three flights of stairs to the sticky-warm basement of Bliss Hall is where I have been left to slumber for the rest of my days.

Example 2: Revised sentence:

Dangling over all the art students’ heads as they go to attend their sculpting classes as nothing but a mere pair of human legs.

Example 2: Original sentence:

Being reduced to nothing more then a mere pair of human legs, dangling over all the art students’ heads as they go to attend their sculpting classes.

Example 3: Addition to essay:

Along with me and my disgusting intestine counterpart is a large sculpture that almost reaches the ceiling of the stairs. This one is much more appealing than my neighbor, containing bunches of tall blue pipes that lead downwards to small plastic containers full of different substances. On the wall of the staircase parallel to my own is another figure creating the shape of a suspended chair made of tiny colored sticks that have been thrust into the wall.

The above three examples are all from one student revision of the personification essay and fall under the realm of more sentence-level revision rather than revision of the
full content of the essay. This particular student was a strong writer from the first day of class; however, he still had a lot that he could improve upon throughout his personification essay, even after the revision process. The reason I included this sample under the successful revision category is because this student read through the content of his essay and worked to make significant changes to clarify what he meant; however, this still qualified more as sentence-level revision rather than revision to the entire content of the essay. Because of the nature of the personification essay, the students who chose to revise this for the final essay, including the student in the above examples, did not necessarily choose to switch topics; rather, most students who revised this essay chose to revise at the sentence and paragraph-levels for more focused areas of clarity. While merely trying to do well at the revision process does not make for a successful revision process, this helped the essays greatly. Ultimately, I would have liked to see more content-based revision of the essay as a whole; however, the sentence-level changes in the above examples were still significant because the changes proved that the student took the time to find issues within parts of the essay which is a step in the correct direction toward significant revision.

While the student did go through the paper to correct errors, clarify information, and reorganize areas for his final revision, it is evident that there are still areas requiring work. For example, in example 2 above, the student still has a fragment that looks to be caused by a typo, but I placed this under the successful revision category because of his rearranging of the material for what is a bit more clarity in the sentence. He also still has an error in example 3, which was an addition to the original draft of the essay, when he uses the word “thruster” instead of the word “thrust.” While these issues do require
 editing, my definition of successful and substantial revision was not just fixing the mechanical errors; instead, I wanted students to look at content, organization, and clarity in their writing, so this student’s mechanical errors on his final revision were less of a concern to me than the revising he did to get the essay to the final draft.

In order to see the full scope of how the student went about the revision process, it is important that I present the holistic comment I made on the student’s original draft. This holistic comment utilized the “praise sandwich” technique and gave him some suggestion on how to strengthen the essay further for the final draft:

Holistic comment:

Good job personifying the leg sculpture. You included some good detail, but I wanted even more—perhaps elaborate more on the surroundings and the fellow piece of artwork, for example. Also, you had some sentence fragments throughout the essay that require editing. Overall, good work.

This student took my advice from the holistic comment, especially when he added the full paragraph in example three, and he also elaborates much further on the original, vaguer points he made in the original paragraphs shown above. Below is the student’s Author’s Note explaining, vaguely, the process he went through to come to a cleaner final draft of the essay:

Author’s Note:

The essay I’m using for my final revision is my personification essay “Legs”. I choose to do this essay because it was the shortest and my favorite paper I wrote all semester. I also felt I had the most freedom to write creatively with this essay and will easily be capable of making changes to sentences. I choose to do the
entire essay because of its length and felt I could easily make changes as I go through the paper again. I began my revision by first making any changes in punctuation and fragmented sentences that were revised for me and going through the comments. Then went through the entire essay a second time and made my changes to whole sentences and ideas. The major patterns in my paper was mostly the repetition of minor comma punctuation errors and a few fragmented sentences.

Revision, in my eyes, was a success in the above example with this student not only because of the added, clarified material in the revision, but also because he acknowledged in his author’s note that when he went back and reread his work from earlier in the semester, he was able to see that the essay was lacking in certain areas. This is the key point that I had originally hoped my praise and suggestion would help and encourage students to see, and I was more than impressed that this student was able to see this with minimal pushing from me. What was even better about this student’s author’s note was that he made specific mention of the process he went through in revising his essay; he first tackled the more minor punctuation and grammar issues, and he then went through for content and sentence structure. This type of process is something students need to understand in order to tackle the revision process without becoming too overwhelmed. The student chose to tackle the more superficial issues on his original draft of the essay in order to get them out of the way; he then felt comfortable moving on to revise the core material of the essay including sentences and thoughts that he noticed may have been lacking.
This student’s process for revision is not unlike the process I went through in grading student essays throughout the semester; just as I had tackled the minor issues first, the student first corrected the punctuation issues. On my final read-through, I would tackle the issues with the substance of the essays and the problems in logic and reasoning, and that appears to have been what this student did in his final read-through of this essay when revising.

The following examples are another display of successful revision and will follow the same format as the above example. On these examples, my comments can be seen as well as comments made on the original draft of the essay by the student:

**Example 1: Revised section:**

*It is one of the smaller buildings found on Youngstown State’s campus. This building is placed on a corner next to the book store. It is made out of brown brick, has many different entrances and exits, and has five floors. The building I am located in is the Lincoln building where math is the main subject taught.*

**Example 1: Original section:**

*The building that I am located in is one of the smaller buildings found on Youngstown State’s campus. This building is placed on a corner next to the book store. It is made out of brown brick, has many different entrances and exits, and has five floors. This building has bathrooms on every floor; it also has an elevator and stairs. The building I am located in is the Lincoln building where the subject math is mostly taught to college students.*

**Example 2: Revised section:**

*The building that I am located in is one of the smaller buildings found on Youngstown State’s campus. This building is placed on a corner next to the book store. It is made out of brown brick, has many different entrances and exits, and has five floors. The building I am located in is the Lincoln building where math is the main subject taught.*

*Comment [S7]:* has

*Comment [S8]:* STUDENT COMMENT: It

*Comment [S9]:* STUDENT COMMENT: On a corner next to the bookstore.

*Comment [S10]:* STUDENT COMMENT: Delete

*Comment [S11]:* STUDENT COMMENT: The main subject taught.

*Comment [S12]:* STUDENT COMMENT: But other subjects are taught there.
I share a room with long wooden tables neatly lined up with uncomfortable grey chairs made of hard plastic and metal in each row. There is one computer and a table for the teacher or professor to put their things on. There is a place to hang your items found on the plain boring white wall right next to the door.

Example 2: Original section:

I share a room with long wooden tables that have two sections that are all neatly lined up in four rows and six grey chairs in each row making a total of eight tables and forty eight grey uncomfortable chairs made of hard plastic and metal. There is only one computer in the room and a table for the teacher or professor to put their papers, bags, pencils, and books.

Example 3: Revised section:

When listening to the teachers' or professors' lessons, it could be kind of boring sometimes listening to the same lectures over and over again, with no way out. Being an old brown chalkboard can be quite overwhelming. I may be an old-fashioned chalkboard stuck on the wall that has been at Youngstown State University for quite some time, but students and teachers get a lot of use out of me. When I am being used, I am filled with joy and excitement like I am worth something and useful even though I am old and have been used over the years. When I am not being used, I feel useless, depressed and lonely, especially at night when no one is there and it is rather dark and scary. I am a brown old chalkboard and you could find me in the Lincoln building.

Example 3: Original section:
When listening to the teachers or professors lessons it could be kind of boring sometimes listening to the same lectures over and over again and there is no way for me to escape it all. Sometimes being an old brown chalkboard can be quite overwhelming.

I may be an old-fashioned chalkboard that has been at Youngstown State University for quite some time, but students and teachers get a lot of use out of me, such as being able to teach a lesson and to explain how you have received you answer or to even write notes and important key ideas. When I am being used, I am filled with joy and excitement like I am actually worth something and that I am useful even though I am old and have been used for many many years. But, when I am not being used, I feel useless and depressed, and very lonely, especially at night when no one is there and it is rather dark and scary. I am a brown old chalkboard that has been used over the years, and I am placed in the Lincoln building in room three hundred and four located in Youngstown State University.

The student in the above examples did a lot of editing and revising on her own from the original draft of her personification essay to the final draft, and in order to see the scope of suggestion she had from me, it is again important to see the holistic comment from the original draft:

**Holistic comment:**

*Good job giving the chalkboard a voice. I would have liked to see a more cleanly edited paper with a bit more specific verbs to make the piece read stronger;*
however, you did a great job with objective observation throughout the paper.

Overall, nice work.

While the student did clean up many of the editing issues I mentioned in the original holistic comment, she did not fall into the trap of confusing editing with revision. She did do a significant amount of editing, as can be seen from her comments stating “Delete,” but she also plucked at the core of the essay and the areas that required significant cleaning up for clarity in meaning. For example, one of my suggestions in the holistic comment was to utilize more specific verbs to make the essay read stronger. The student, however, did not utilize this suggestion, but much like the student in the first three examples we saw, she chose to focus more on the sentence-level clarity and organization issues. Still, I consider this successful revision for the scope of this assignment due to the focus on overall organization and for the added clarity for readers.

The student also acknowledged how she went about this revision process in her author’s note:

Author’s Note:

1.) The essay that I decided to revise was the personification essay. I decided to revise this essay because I felt that I found a lot of errors and that it had the most potential. I liked this essay the best I actually enjoyed doing it.

2.) I started from the beginning through the end because the paper was only two and one half pages. By the time I was finished editing my paper I barely had two pages left to rewrite.

3.) When revising my paper I went through it and read it out loud changing the things that didn’t sound right. I also said what I was trying to say in a shorter
way instead of rambling, and I took your advice and fix the things that you commented about. I fixed punctuations and grammar mistakes.

4.) I did find common errors that I make such as grammar and punctuation mistakes.

Like in the first student example, one of the major issues this student found to correct during her revision was grammar and punctuation issues, but she also made sure to read her essay as a whole, aloud, to herself to see the areas of awkwardness that hindered the essay’s ability to read clearly. She, for some reason, chose to utilize some of my comments and ignore others, such as the comment to use stronger verbs. Perhaps this choice was intentional by the student; maybe she felt that the sentence-level revisions she made rendered the use of stronger verbs less crucial, or perhaps I should have put specific examples of stronger verb substitutions in the holistic comment when I mention this to the student. Either way, the student did follow a process that worked for her to revise her essay, and this was successful revision for the requirement of this final assignment.

While the above examples are what I consider to be more successful, it is crucial for readers to see where my comments did not have the desired effect on the outcome of the student work. Several examples of what I consider to be an unsuccessful revision process are as follows, in the same format as the successful examples above:

Example 1: Revised section:

I jumped off my couch and started asking a million questions to see what I should do. We eventually agreed on me meeting him up at the hospital, but he didn’t know where the hospital was. He told me to call his mom to get the directions, but when I called her she told me she left the directions at home, so she didn’t really know
where she was going either. I told her I would look up the directions on my
computer since I was still home and I would text her. She thanked me, we hung up,
and then I looked up where we needed to go. The directions on Google maps were
the most confusing-sounding things I have ever read in my life, so my mother
explained to me that I just needed to go the same way to Little Italy but at the
intersection I should turn right instead of going straight.

Example 1: Original section:

I jumped off my couch and started asking a million questions to see what I should
do, we eventually agreed on me meeting him up at the hospital but he didn’t know
where the hospital was. So he told me to call his mom to get the directions, but
when I called her she told me she left the directions at home so she didn’t really
know where she was going. So I told her I would look up the directions on my
computer since I was still at home and I would text her. She thanked me, we hung
up, then I looked up where we needed to go. The directions on Google maps were
the most confusing-sounding things I have ever read in my life, so my mother
explained to me that I just needed to go the same way to Little Italy but at the
intersection I should turn right instead of going straight.

Example 2: Revised section:

I finally found a place to park, and I called Greg to see where I had to go, but he
was going in to see his dad at the same time so he just told me the ward the he
was in. I didn’t really understand what he said, I just understood cardio; it was
just some confusing word. I walked in the main door and followed the signs that
said main line. There was a green line on the floor that I was following until I
found a directory. I found one maybe thirty seconds later, thank God, right next to the elevators. I found the name Greg said and went up to the third floor. Once I got there, I followed more signs but then came to these weird doors and I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to go through them or if only employees were allowed. So I found my way back to the elevators and walked down a different hallway. I remember walking through the hallway and all the memories of being at the hospital for my grandpa when he had cancer.

Example 2: Original section:

Once I finally found a place to park I called Greg to see where I had to go, but he was going in to see his dad at the same time so he just told me the ward he was in but I didn’t really understand what he said. I just heard cardio the it was just some confusing word. I walked in the main door and followed the signs that said main line. There was a green line on the floor that I was following until I found a directory. I found one maybe thirty seconds later, thank God, right next to the elevators. I found the name Greg said and went up to the third floor. Once I got there, I followed more signs but then came to these weird doors and I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to go through them or if only employees were allowed. So I found my way back to the elevators and walked down a different hallway. I remember walking through the hallway and all the memories of being at the hospital for my grandpa when he had cancer.

This student was one of the weaker writers in my course, and this is evident not only in the original draft, but also the final draft. The student really did not utilize too many of my suggestions, and, unfortunately, there were so many issues in this essay that it was
difficult to mark them all. The student’s lack of understanding of the revision process, as a whole, is also evident in the author’s note:

Author’s Note

I am revising my descriptive essay because I believe it has the most errors on it than any other essay I have done. I have revised the first and second pages since it looks to have the most mistakes with run-ons and comma errors. I have fixed all of the notes you put on the page and some other ones I noticed while reading through it. Commons errors I found throughout all of my papers was the comma errors, the always get me.

While she acknowledged that she fixed all the errors that I marked and some other minor issues she found while rereading, she only corrected those surface issues that I marked, such as misspellings and comma issues, rather than content and clarity issues. It was these types of lazy, surface-level revisions that discouraged me. It was also the issues within the author’s note itself that led me to the conclusion that this particular student did not invest the time into the revision that I had anticipated, even though the following holistic comment I had made on her original draft gave her, what I thought, was enough direction to lead her in the right direction for the revised version:

Holistic comment:

Good job describing the day at the hospital. While you describe the day chronologically, the essay has a lot of run-on sentences, misplaced conjunctions, and technical issues. It’s also lacking a lot of sensory details that would help readers visualize the day. Keep working.
The other aspect of this that was extremely disappointing as an instructor was that this student’s essay was a revision of her descriptive essay, and neither her original nor her final drafts include any detailed description, which I had acknowledged specifically in the holistic comment on both drafts of her essay. The entire purpose of this assignment was lost in this essay, and it was difficult to see that the student was unable to notice this when going back and rereading for the revision process. We had covered sensory details greatly over the course of the first three weeks of the spring semester; this is what the students’ first two essays (the personification and the descriptive) relied upon, but even with in-class samples and individual writing and reading activities, this student still did not appear to understand what I meant by sensory details. In retrospect, I wish this student would have come to me to ask what I meant if she did not understand the comment; clarifying this missing aspect of her essay would have helped the revised draft greatly.

Another such unsuccessful example of revision is as follows:

Example 1: Revised section:

Studies even show that having a college degree makes for better eating and exercising habits. In some cases, a person with experience and no college education may be overlooked for a job promotion.

Example 1: Original section:

Studies even show that having a college degree makes for better eating and exercising habits. People that do not have a college education but have the experience will and can be overlooked for a promotion versus someone with a college degree.
Example 2: Revised section:

In this day and age, you cannot even turn on the television without seeing at least three to five college commercials

Example 2: Original section:

In this day and age no one can even turn on the television without seeing at least three to five college commercials.

Example 3: Revised section:

Someone may argue that these factors alone prove that having a college degree has more of a positive effect than a negative one, but in this paper I will try to present both sides of this matter, efficiently.

Example 3: Original section:

But the task is not impossible. I have firsthand knowledge on the difficulty of juggling schedules and deadlines. The road is hard and may take longer to complete, but you just have to think of the outcome and remember the benefits that will come with a college degree.

While this student attempted to revise a few areas of the essay, such as the thesis statement I originally questioned in her original draft, her revision did not adequately answer the questions I raised about the essay. The goal of this essay was to make an argument for one side or the other, and she stated, even in her revision, that she planned to justify both sides of the argument, thus, not fulfilling the requirement of the assignment. She failed to take a stance on the issue, which is something we had practiced in class in smaller writing assignments, but for some reason this student did not transfer this practice of taking a side into an essay which required her to take a side.
Like the examples demonstrated from other students above, this student also elaborated in her author’s note on how she went about the revision process:

*Author’s Note:*

*I chose to revise my argument persuasion essay I worked really hard on that paper but I felt that it could’ve been better. I decided to revise the whole essay because it was a bit choppy. I removed some small sentences and I also reworded others. I found a lot of errors that I couldn’t believe I made.*

This student, as is even evident from the issues within the short author’s note, did not put the proper amount of time and analysis into her revision; she thought that simply answering some surface questions that I raised on the essay would suffice as a full-scale revision. The original holistic comment I wrote on the student’s draft, again, was one that I thought would lead her in the right direction for revision:

*Holistic comment:*

*This essay lacks a strong focus. The thoughts appear scattered and poorly organized. A stronger more focused thesis can alleviate this problem. Also, make sure you meet all the requirements of the essay—you had no direct quotations in here, and three were required. Keep working.*

The failure of the student to meet any of the basic requirements in the assignment before or after the revision even with my direction from marginal and holistic comments means that she did not put the time into the assignment in its beginning or ending stages. While she made some editing changes to the original draft immediately above, the overall issue with her original draft was the lack of focus and jumping from topic to unrelated
topic. This was not addressed in an efficient manner, which is why this revision was, overall, unsuccessful.

After looking back at students’ original drafts and revisions of those drafts, I found that the in-class discussions, readings, notes, and activities that I had very carefully designed to build into the longer essays did not instill the outcomes in students that I was intending. It appears as though much of the practice we did was completed in class and then forgotten, which I may be able to alleviate in future composition classes through the use of quizzes or more short in-class writing assignments later in the semester that correspond with material taught at a much earlier date. Refreshing past skills may remind students of what is crucial in each form of essay they are assigned.

Another pattern I have come to notice through analyzing these essays is that it seems as though students selectively chose which comments they wanted to utilize and which they felt they could ignore; they almost created their own hierarchies within the comments. If a student, such as the student in the first examples of unsuccessful revision, did not feel comfortable adding stronger verbs, she simply revised what she wanted and perhaps chose to ignore this comment; perhaps in her mind, the revision she did was enough to counteract the lack of strong, focused verbs. The same goes for the student who chose to revise her argumentative essay; she lacked focus and data to back up her claims and make them credible, but she chose not to correct these issues in her revised draft, which appears to have been a conscious decision due to the direct nature of the marginal comments made on the original draft.

Through seeing many drafts of essays and corresponding revisions, there are several areas where I see I can help future composition students to improve upon their
original drafts and, more importantly, their revisions toward final drafts. In the following chapter, I will look at activities that will help students to understand the process of the revision more fully so they will embrace, rather than loathe or fear, the process.
Chapter 6—How to Improve the Reasons for not Revising

Now that I have presented my study, I must state my findings regarding why revision works in some cases and not in others. There were several key factors within students that I found patterns of in my two small groups of 25 students, and these traits are worth noting because they had a direct correlation with the amount of revision that came from my praise and suggestion on essays. These traits include lack of motivation, confidence, life experience, and an inability to see how one’s writing fits into a larger context.

The first, and least surprising, trait I noticed that greatly impeded the ability of students to revise no matter how much praise and specific suggestion I provided was a severe lack of motivation. While this is not a shocking discovery to anyone who has worked as a composition instructor, or as an instructor in any discipline, for that matter, this lack of motivation was something I thought I could alleviate by building students’ confidence with praise and encouraging them to make specific changes with suggestion. This was not the case. As it turns out, my ideas about how motivating of a factor my commentary were rather lofty, so this lack of motivation in students resided regardless of my encouragement and direction.

While most of my students were motivated enough to at least pass the course and do as well as they had hoped, the main question I find myself left with after this study is why students would work hard enough to at least pass the course and choose not to put the additional effort into the revision process. Ultimately, putting a bit of extra effort into the revision process would only ensure a passing grade for the course, so this lack of motivation on this specific aspect of the writing process eludes me.
Another factor that held many students back (perhaps more students than the lack of motivation factor) was fear and lack of confidence. It seems as though students are used to being criticized heavily in their past writing courses, so by the time they reach a college composition classroom, their confidence is fairly low. Rather than breaking the confidence of students through commentary, however, we should be working to build that confidence while simultaneously critiquing the areas that do require improvement. As stated in Robin Martin’s “Rhetoric of Teacher Comments on Student Writing:”

The purpose of teacher commentary on student writing exceeds the goal of improving the paper. More importantly, successful revision skills improve the writing self-efficacy beliefs of the student, contributing to greater confidence and thus to increased prowess in writing. (Wiltse 130–31)

This vicious cycle is something that has to be consistent, though. It will take more than positive commentary on a single draft of a paper to undo what may have broken a student’s confidence in the past, so we must be consistent with the pairing of praise and suggestion in order to prevent the lack of confidence from simply returning. According to Martin, this consistent pairing of praise and suggestion will have a positive domino effect:

In turn, self-efficacy beliefs are strong predictors of motivation; with confidence in writing should come the motivation to write. Wiltse discusses the hypothesis that positive experiences with revision reduce the student’s paralyzing apprehension about writing (131). According to Treglia, an additional aspect of the usefulness of teacher commentary is the development of students’ thinking skills and personal investment in their writing (82–83). Teacher comments should
prod the student to think more deeply about the logic and meaning of the content. These acquired thinking skills facilitate expression of thought and ideas.

Teachers’ comments should also foster the students’ ownership of their writing. When students are invested in their work, they will be self-motivated and ultimately create a better product (Treglia 71–72). (Martin 19-20)

This newfound confidence and pride in one’s writing will, ultimately, encourage students to write and revise to their best ability rather than simply working to meet the minimum requirements listed on the assignment sheet. According to Martin, this cycle of confidence will lead to pride which will, in turn, lead to better overall writing and revision.

I group lack of motivation and confidence together when I speak of students’ reasons for not revising because they are directly tied to one another; students who were very self-conscious of their writing were fearful to write long essays for me, or for any other class and instructor, for that matter. This means that even though I provided them with some comments of praise, letting them know what they did well and how they did it well, they may have still been too fearful of the writing process to take any leaps and bounds when utilizing my comments for the revision process. This ultimately resulted in weak revised drafts from these students, which was disheartening since building students’ confidence is key to helping them become better writers in the future.

The third key factor that led to a lack of revision was a pure lack of experience with the task at hand. For some students, the idea of turning in an essay meant the task was completed, no matter what condition it was in. These students have grown accustomed to writing down the thoughts and logic required to answer the prompt,
turning in the essay, and never looking at it again (with the exception of perhaps flipping through the pages searching for a final grade once the essay is returned). While seeing this trait and behavior in several of my students was frustrating to me at first, I realized that I cannot hold this behavior solely against the students; this is our fault too. We have to encourage students to understand that writing is not a one-time process that goes quickly; the more we write, look away, come back, and revise, the better the outcome will be. But students taking their mandatory freshman writing course do not want to hear that writing is a process you build on and improve upon continually; they want to write their essays once, as quickly as possible, and not touch them again.

It’s hard to blame students for this third trait because this may have been the model that their past writing instructors gave them. Perhaps there was not time in those composition classrooms for multiple drafts, peer reviews, and revision activities. After all, we are all limited by time with the students to do the tasks we want to do. Nonetheless, this is still frustrating, yet I will demonstrate what I will do to teach this ability to students who are unfamiliar with it in my future composition classrooms.

SuEllen Shaw of Minnesota State University Moorhead also touches on some possible explanations for severe lack of revision from composition students in “Writing Matters.” Based on John Bean’s Engaging Ideas, Shaw states:

Educator John Bean (2001) in Engaging Ideas attributes students’ inability to revise to two main causes: First, some students may literally not be able to imagine viewpoints other than their own and consequently are unable to anticipate the objections a reader may have to the position they have taken. They have trouble “decentering,” and imagining their writing from any other perspective
than their own. Developmentally, not having read or lived enough, they aren’t ready for the thought required in meaningful revision . . . (1)

Here, Shaw presents a much different explanation for the lack of revision we see from typical composition students; these students simply do not have enough life experience to see the full scope of what their piece of writing can become. This is a difficult quality to blame students for; after all, this life experience is something that should come at a later time in their lives, but this does not mean that we cannot push them now to think about things from more of a global perspective through readings dealing with issues they are not typically faced with in day-to-day life or prompts that require them to think critically about a real-world issue. This inability to “decenter” is something that, ideally, will come with time and maturity, but this is something we can begin to groom students for through our own course materials and by suggestions that probe for further understanding.

Shaw goes on to speak about how students not only are focused too narrowly when writing, but also how they typically do not see the role or purpose of their writing in the larger picture:

A second reason students resist revision, Bean notes, may be that they do not understand that their small piece of writing is a part of a much larger whole, that it is joining a larger conversation, even if it’s just the conversation of their own classroom. As such, the piece of writing must recognize opposing views, for example, or acknowledge existing interpretations and go beyond those to present alternative or new interpretations or additional data. Or they may not recognize format expectations until they are carefully pointed out to them. Mature writers,
on the other hand, understand those expectations for the writing, recognizing their writing as part of an on-going discussion that has rules and conventions for its participants. Mature writers also recognize that they can address just so many of the issues at one time, and therefore, they write multiple drafts or they revise constantly on screen as they write. (1)

What Shaw has taken from Bean’s text are viable reasons for students to choose not to revise based on any instructor’s suggestions, and these reasons, along with the reasons provided in Martin’s writing, parallel the reasons for lack of revision that I found in my courses.

As mentioned previously, the final, and perhaps most difficult, issue that I found throughout the course of this study was that many students do not appear to understand the difference between basic editing and revision. While this distinction, again, is not always clear to students in the beginning, this breakdown is something we must work to help them understand for future courses that involve writing skills.

The original goal with the pairing of praise and suggestion throughout this study was to encourage students to have the confidence to revise, but unfortunately for some students, praise and suggestion alone was still not enough to overcome lack of motivation and fear.

When teaching this course in the future, I plan to use the same method of pairing praise and suggestion in order to obtain strong work and strong improvement from my students. What I plan to do differently in the future, however, is to take the time to practice revision in the classroom rather than just describing it to students. Perhaps if I was to have placed an essay on the overhead projector and gone through to demonstrate
an active revision, students would have seen how to go about beginning this process. But this method of teaching revision was something that, for some reason, did not occur to me throughout the course and my study, and it is something, I believe, could have greatly impacted my students’ ability and understanding of the revision process. As I go through the process of modeling revision for students, I will also demonstrate the differences between editing and revision for students to see clearly. This distinction between the two is, again, a fine line that students may initially have trouble drawing, but with practice as a group in the classroom setting, we can discuss why certain aspects are considered editing and others are considered revision.

In addition to modeling revision as an active process for my students to witness in future classes, I also plan to have students do revision throughout the course of the semester more regularly. For in-class assignments, I will provide students with shorter, less daunting, pieces of text that require revision. Students will have 15 to 20 minutes of class to make these pieces of text better. As we begin the semester, students can demonstrate revision on these texts in whichever way they choose; this will give me a good understanding of how thoroughly each student understands what revision is and how to go about it. We will then work collectively; I will take individual revisions up to show the class, and we will give constructive praise and criticism where it is due. This method goes along with my praise and suggestion method of commenting on student work, and it will also aid students in getting more suggestion than just mine. Perhaps an activity that is interactive between students and instructor in the classroom will encourage students to learn to look at writing, and most importantly their own writing, from more than just their own, or my, perspective. They will hear different methods of thinking
about revision and will learn that there are multiple ways to go about changing and improving upon writing; this is something they may not have been able to get from just seeing my comments of praise and suggestion in the margins of their essays.

The final change I plan to make for revision assignments in the future is to have students complete a revision of a more analytical paper. I plan to change the focus to this form of essay rather than personification or descriptive essays because that way students will be able to focus their revision on organization, focus, and structure within essays rather than focusing on smaller changes, such as simply adding additional descriptive language and reorganizing sentences. This type of revision on analytical essays will show students how to revise gaps in logic and organization rather than simply furnishing their essays with additional language, as some students did in the above samples. The core of the analytical essay will be of the utmost importance in the revision rather than focusing on individual sentences and words only.

As an individual who hoped for a 100 percent success rate (though unrealistic), the fact that many students still chose not to revise regardless of how much work I put into praising and suggesting on their essays is an extraordinarily frustrating concept. I enjoy teaching my students, and I had the lofty ideal in my mind that this course would have been just as enjoyable for them; but not everyone loves writing, and that is perhaps why the study was not exactly what I had anticipated.

After completing the study and analyzing the results, I am left with one main question: Why didn’t praise and suggestion work on the students who needed it most? After all, there were a couple students who came in knowing what revision meant.
Whether they chose to ultimately do it or not was another story, but I aimed to really help all the students, especially those who came in struggling, with this crucial skill.

The answer to this final question I am left with after the study is simple: On their own, praise and suggestion wasn’t enough for students unwilling to build on drafts or who didn’t know how to revise. This is a difficult and discouraging answer to something I built up for months, but this is the reality of the composition classroom, and conducting this study, at the very least, familiarized students with the basic workings of revision if they decide to take it on with motivation and confidence in the future. That, as writing instructors, is what we can hope for all our students after they leave our classroom for the final time.
Works Cited


January 25, 2013

Dr. Jeffrey Buchanan, Principal Investigator
Department of English
Ms. Suzanne Starheim, Co-investigator
UNIVERSITY

RE: HSRC PROTOCOL NUMBER: 077-2013
TITLE: Effective Commentary on Student Writing: Pairing Praise with Suggestion

Dear Dr. Buchanan and Ms. Starheim:

The Human Subjects Research Committee of Youngstown State University has reviewed your response to their concerns regarding the above mentioned protocol and determined that your protocol now meets YSU Human Subjects Research guidelines. Therefore, I am pleased to inform you that your project has been fully approved.

Please note that your project is approved for one year. If your project extends beyond one year, you must submit a project Update form at that time.

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Human Subjects Research Committee and may not be initiated without HSRC approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the Human Subjects Research Committee.

We wish you well in your study.

Sincerely,

Cathy Bieber Parrott
Chair
YSU Institutional Review Board

CBP: cc

Cc: Dr. Julia Gergits, Chair
Department of English

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