Tips for Commenting on Student Drafts

- **Make comments about the *paper*, not about the *student*.**
    - o A statement like "you are not a strong writer" can paralyze students as they approach a new writing task. It also sets you up as an adversary rather than a teacher.
- **Offer choices rather than a single correction.**
    - o Instead of writing: "This is how you can fix this sentence," try offering a few options: "I can imagine you adjusting this sentence by writing x or y. Which best represents what you meant?"
- **Avoid fix-it shop language.**
    - o Rather than saying, "this is wrong," use language that is clearer and helps the student see how to adjust based on the rhetorical situation and/or audience they are facing.
    - o Urge students to consider their context. Example: "I'm not sure the audience would understand this phrase. How can you rephrase this so that the audience will understand?"
- **Avoid making generalizations or being unclear about your expectations.**
    - o A statement like "you need to work on language" is difficult for the student to understand. They are left asking: where? why? how do I do that?
    - o Instead, be very specific and home in on only 1–3 specific areas for them to address.
- **If you find yourself cringing and wanting to circle every error on the page after one paragraph, stop yourself and read the whole draft through, first focusing on meaning.**
    - o This prevents you from spilling a great deal of red ink on paragraph one, getting exhausted, and then struggling through the rest of the essay.
    - o Instead of commenting on every language issue, choose only a few. Frame them as future goals. Example: "Moving forward, I'd like to see you work more on subject/verb agreement."
- **Try not to use BUT language.**
    - o When you say something like, "these are great ideas, **but** the language needs work," students fail to see anything that comes before the dreaded BUT.
- **Try to separate comments on higher order concerns (e.g., ideas, arguments, organization) from lower order concerns (e.g., syntax, grammar, style).**
    - o For example, 80–90% of the grade is based on higher order concerns; 10–20% on lower order concerns.
- **Remember that academic English is no one's native language.**
    - o Your students won't absorb and correctly use academic English after one paper, or even after one semester. (And none of us did, either.)
    - o Taking this into account, remember that you are not responsible for "fixing" the student's language so that it conforms to academic English standards. (So, pressure's off!)
- **If you can, find ways for a student to incorporate elements of his/her language *intentionally* into the draft rather than focusing solely on eradicating them.**
    - o There is a difference between intentionally and unintentionally incorporating less-common words or phrases into drafts. Understanding how to bring language from two discourse communities together intentionally can be empowering for students as they learn to successfully *code mesh*, not just *code switch*. It keeps them from bifurcating their identities and allows them to share, with some intentionality, some part of their home language with you.