A Quick Guide to Marking Students' Papers

1. **Distinguish marking papers (a learning outcome) from grading papers (an evaluation outcome).**

   We mark up papers so that students can learn from our response to their essays. Students seldom learn much of anything from a paper marked up to show all the errors that contributed to a grade (poor students get too many marks, good students too few). So never put marks on a paper just to justify a grade. (In practice, this might mean marking and grading separately and returning them at different times.)

2. **Let students help you decide when to mark their papers.**

   If you stage assignments, you are unlikely to have the time to respond to each stage in detail, and in any case students will not benefit if they see that you will take responsibility for each step. You should give students full responses only when it will do them the most good. If you wait till the end, students are unlikely to pay more than lip service to your comments. If you respond when students have a complete draft, some will use your advice to improve their final papers, but others will have played out the consequences of a poor choice of problem—so that the only truly helpful response is to make them start over. On the other hand, students who find a good problem will benefit from a later rather than an earlier response. So if you respond selectively, discuss with your students what they can expect from responses at various stages in the process, and let them help you decide when each student will benefit most from the time you can give them.

3. **When you don’t respond, students can learn from their peers.**

   To most teachers (and students), peer editing seems little more than the blind leading the blind. If students were good editors, they wouldn’t need our help as much as they do. But if students are generally poor editors, they are usually excellent surrogate readers. So create opportunities for writers to learn what their colleagues understand or not, where they struggle or not, where they resist or not. A student writer can learn a great deal from a colleague’s summary of her argument, especially when the summary is not what the writer expected. She can learn from a colleague’s list of possible objections or alternative
conclusions, if not to identify weaknesses then to have issues for acknowledgement and response. Let students help each other, not by making suggestions (though of course suggestions are welcome), but by analyzing and responding to storyboards and drafts.

4. **Don’t mark as you read.**

The most efficient way to mark a paper is to analyze it before you read closely enough to mark it up. Start by reading the introduction, conclusion, headings, and the opening paragraphs to major sections. If the paper is coherent and reasonably well executed, those elements will constitute the best overview. If the paper is incoherent or poorly reasoned, you’ll see the problem right away. (When the introduction and conclusion are inconsistent, it is usually the conclusion that represents the student’s best thinking—or at least the thinking that has dominated the argument.) Once you have an overview, decided on a tentative agenda for your marks (see #6). Then read the paper carefully enough to pick out specific issues to address. It is generally better if anything more substantial than line editing comes to the student on a separate page, keyed to pages or to numbers in the margins. Students learn better when your response respects the difference between their words and yours.

5. **In marking, less is more.**

The research is clear: for most students, the more you mark the less they learn. If you want to use marking to teach students something they can use in their next papers, you have to select one or two key points and focus on them. (In practice, this means reading and diagnosing the paper *before* you start marking it up; for most teachers this is faster than marking as they go.) If you line edit papers, you do not teach students anything about grammar or editing; you simply teach them that they can demote you to a copyeditor.

6. **Have a learning agenda for your marks.**

As teachers, we all know that students cannot learn everything at once. So when you mark papers, select the one or two most important matters you think that student should work on. Then use your marks to focus the student on those matters and to explain both how to recognize the problem and how to avoid or mitigate it. We don’t help students by teaching them how to remedy all of the errors or infelicities we can
find; we help them by teaching them how to avoid, or at least find and fix, the weaknesses in their papers that are most important and that they are prepared to learn how to fix.

7. **Mark papers “top-down.”**

In general, the problems in a draft cascade downward. A poor problem usually leads to a weak argument; an incoherent argument usually leads to a disorganized paper; a disorganized paper usually leads to poorly crafted sentences. When a writer struggles with the higher-level features of a text, he usually executed lower-level ones less successfully than he otherwise could. So unless you have a specific agenda for an individual student, the best strategy is generally to focus the student on the highest level problems in a draft. Chances are that once the high-level issues are addressed, the low-level problems will disappear; or if not, they will then be more easily fixed.

8. **Don’t penalize good essays by leaving them unmarked.**

Although we all treasure a paper that seems not to need correction, you do not help good writers by returning clean papers that offer only general praise. Use the time you save by not editing to mark up good papers as well. If you cannot find something important that the student should change, use your marks to show students the most important things they should not change. Essays often succeed by accident, and students usually cannot explain even to themselves exactly why an essay worked. Use your marks to teach good students how to replicate their successes next time.

9. **The most effective marks focus on a reader’s response, not on the writer’s success or failure.**

We can criticize a student’s writing in three ways: (1) You put these points in the wrong order. (2) Your paper has its points in the wrong order. (3) I couldn’t see how these points fit together because their order confused me. Not only is the third gentler and kinder, but it reinforces the most important and most difficult lesson any writer must learn: Readers rule!—what matters is not how your text seems to you but how it seems to your readers.

10. **The most effective marks about writing have three parts:** (1) point out the specific issue on the page, (2) articulate the relevant general principle, and (3) suggest a change or, better, direct the student to make a change.
In order for students to learn from our marks, they have to know exactly how they apply to the paper at hand. Your goal should be for them to learn something they can use to improve both the current paper and the next one; so they have to understand not just how to fix this paper but the general principle that they can apply to the next one (this part can usually be a canned response). And in order for them to be able to use our advice, they have to see it in practice or, best of all, practice it themselves.

For example, I became confused when you raised the issue of Alexander Pope’s Catholicism in the middle of page 3, because nothing before this led me to expect that it would be a major issue in your paper. I was able to figure out the connection, but I had to work too hard to do so. Remember that your readers will do a better job of following your argument if they can anticipate (or at least not be surprised by) all of its major themes. So be sure that your most important themes are at least mentioned near the end of your introduction. I think you can probably find a way to mention Catholicism or at least religion in the last couple of sentences of your intro. Give me a revision of just the intro that does that by Monday the 3rd.

11. The most effective marks about argument—“content”—have three parts: (1) point out the specific issue on the page, (2) explain what gives you pause, and (3) make a suggestion or, better, ask a question pointing the student in a new direction. You do not help students if your comments merely correct their misunderstandings or substitute your analysis for theirs. Students learn best when you comment on their positions (both favorably and unfavorably) in ways that share your own reasoning.

For example, You’re right, of course, when you say in the middle of page 3 that Alexander Pope’s Catholicism made him an outsider. That’s a shrewd observation. But I’ve got a problem with saying that it’s the only factor in his attitude toward, as you say, “the rich and famous” (Pope would have called it the “beau monde”). After all, he was a short, unattractive hunchback with only middling family connections and at this point not a lot of money. In view of those factors, isn’t there an even stronger point to be made about Pope’s feelings of being on the outside looking in?