

# Feedback Follow up: The Influence of Teacher Comment on Student Writing Assignments



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## Abstract

The research used the written work of 62 students in a beginning media writing class over the course of one semester to determine if the location, type, or absence of written teacher comment on the students' papers made any difference in the amount and type of revisions made to those papers. Each of the four classes was given one of the following treatments on one of the classes' four major assignments during the course: marginal and end comment, marginal comment only, end comment only, and oral comment only. For this quasi-experimental study, the revisions were classified as additions, deletions, substitutions, or rearrangements. Results showed that only deletions were significant between the four treatments. Marginal and end comment and end comment only were similar, as were marginal comment only and oral comment only. Marginal comments only resulted in the fewest revisions. Marginal and end comments, end comment only and oral comment only had approximately equal numbers of revisions. Generally this study showed that students revised more successfully when given specific comment that included suggestions or strategies for making revisions. The students also revised frequently in response to oral comments.

## Introduction

Writing improvement is becoming an increasingly important topic at most universities. Feedback from potential employers and research repeatedly shows that college students' writing abilities are below expectations (Lindner et al., 2004). Several universities have implemented writing-intensive course requirements for undergraduate students that will ultimately require faculty in all disciplines to provide additional writing opportunities in their curriculums (Univ. of Florida, 2004. The Gordon Rule; Texas A&M Univ., 2004. Writing Intensive Courses at Texas A&M Univ.; Martin and Burnett, 2003).

For agricultural education and communication programs, this focus frequently takes the form of service courses that teach writing skills (Kansas State Univ., 2004; The Ohio State Univ., 2004; Texas A&M Univ., 2004. Core Curriculum; Univ. of Florida, 2004. Agricultural Education). As the demand for

seats in courses that teach writing skills continues to grow, instructors try to balance the need to provide students with feedback on their writing assignments with the amount of time it takes to provide that feedback. While writing instructors from all disciplines generally agree that revision is one of the best ways to encourage students to improve their papers, few know what comments or what type of comments are most likely to help their students revise successfully.

Research into revision and how and why students revise their texts has long been part of composition literature. So has research into teacher comment on student texts. However, there is little work that brings the research areas together. This study may provide a link between these two important areas of research.

Composing a piece of written discourse has long been considered a non-linear, recursive process (Britton, 1975; Rohman and Wlecke, 1964). Later researchers built on this model describing composing as a continuous loop where any element may follow any other element (Bridwell, 1980; Faigley and Witte, 1981; Flower et al., 1986; Sommers, 1980).

Although the recursive nature of the process is not in question, an actual definition for revision is less clear. Several definitions use only the etymological definition of "seeing again" (Boiarsky, 1980). Sommers (1980, p. 380) defines revision as ". . . a sequence of changes in a composition changes which are initiated by cues and occur continually throughout the writing of a work." Drawing on all these definitions, the operational definition for revision used in this study refers to the additions, deletions, substitutions, and rearrangements of units of meaning that students make in their texts in an effort to convey better their intended meaning to an audience.

Teacher comment is another key area of composition research. Much research shows that teacher response can have a major impact on a student's attitude toward the text and toward writing in general. De Beaugrande (1979) claimed that if students see grammar, punctuation and spelling as priorities in teacher comment, then those are the errors they will repair. Miller (1982) suggested two separate sets of teacher comments one on content and the other on writing problems. Murray (1979)

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advocated doing away with comment completely and using one-on-one conferences to provide feedback to students. Peterson et al. (2004) suggest that the type of paper plays a role in the type of comments teachers provide. Narrative papers receive a greater percentage of editing-related comments and persuasive papers tend to receive a greater percentage of revision-related comments (Peterson et al., 2004).

Besides types of comments, other research examines the quality of those comments. Lynch and Klemans (1978) surveyed students about their responses to teacher comment and found that students responded more positively to comments that not only told them what was wrong with a paper, but why. Straub (1996) explored directive versus facultative comments on student texts and the potential control the comments represented. In general composition researchers agree that the goal of teacher comment on papers is to wean students away from criticism from the teacher and toward forming their own ability to review and revise their texts.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to determine how the types and location of teacher feedback on a group of student texts influenced the revision choices that group of students made to their texts. The research objectives were to determine if the location of teacher feedback influenced students' revision choices and if the type of content or type of teacher comment influenced those choices.

## **Methods**

The subjects in this study were 62 students enrolled in media writing classes at a land grant institution in the South. Each of the four classes studied had enrollment limits of 16 students and the students were primarily juniors and seniors majoring in journalism or agricultural journalism. A few students were either minoring in journalism or planned to obtain teaching certification in journalism. The majority of the students were female (69%), which reflects a nationwide trend in communication departments. The classes met four times per week during the 16-week term. The Monday and Wednesday lecture sessions covered techniques in news writing and textbook material on different types of news stories, as well as some basic information on methods of writing. The other two weekly class meetings were 75-minute lab sessions. The students used Microsoft Word software for all of their assignments. Besides the lab periods, students had access to the computer-equipped classroom through the work day and had access to their own computers or other campus computer labs throughout the semester.

Data was collected from the students' four major writing assignments. The four assignments were as follows: (1) Write a pair of short, one-paragraph leads

from a choice of assigned fact sets; (2) write a news story from a short speech and question-and-answer session presented by a guest speaker; (3) write a news story about a coming event on campus or other item of the student's choice that quotes at least one source (i.e., they had to go interview someone and write the story); and (4) write a short feature story on a topic of their choice that quoted at least two sources and required additional background sources. Students wrote for both print and broadcast media. The teacher comments and the revisions students made on these assignments provided the data for this study.

Students had the option to revise one of the two versions of each of the major assignments. If the students opted to revise one of their papers, the grade they received on the original paper counted as two-thirds of the grade on the final paper. The grade on the revised paper counted as the remaining one third. This method encouraged students to make their best effort on the original paper. The students' grades on the revised papers would not be lower than the original grade they received, although the grade could remain unchanged. For purposes of this study, only the papers that the students opted to revise were analyzed.

Each of the four classes received four different methods of instructor feedback with a different method used on each of their four major assignments. The comment methods were marginal and concluding written comments on their papers, marginal comments only, concluding comments only, and only oral comments to the class as a group. When revising their papers, the students were required to return the graded original paper along with the revised version.

To protect the students' identities and to eliminate any chance of bias associated with any particular student, each student was assigned a random number, and an uninterested third-party placed this number on the students' texts and then cut off the students' names and course section numbers. To preserve the regular classroom environment during the study, the students were not told about the study until the end of the semester, after the last paper had been turned in. The students received a written explanation of the study and the use of their texts (anonymously). At this time they were offered the chance to have their papers removed from the study. None of the students selected this option. This study met all university requirements for human studies research and all necessary forms are on file with the university's research office.

After the student texts had been collected they were sorted by assignment and teacher comment type (marginal and end, marginal only, end only and oral only comment). The texts were sorted numerically for ease in coding and an index card was established for each student number. These cards provided a method of tallying the number and types of revisions on each text. The data from these cards provided the basis for the statistical analysis in this study.

## Feedback

Structural revisions made by the students in a second, revised paper were compared to their original, graded papers. Structural revisions in this study were additions, deletions, substitutions, and rearrangements (Sommers, 1980). These structural revisions were examined at the level of units of meaning that may or may not correspond to the physical division of paragraphs within the text. According to Rodgers (1967), paragraph divisions frequently do not correspond with units of meaning within a text, and he suggests that a “stadia of discourse” is a better unit than the somewhat arbitrary paragraph indentation. The “stadia,” according to Rodgers, is a sentence or group of sentences that contain a single topic which may or may not be contained in a single paragraph. This idea is particularly important when working with journalistic writing. Paragraphs in a newspaper or on an audio script are frequently shorter to accommodate the requirements of the newspaper's narrow columns or the readability for a television or radio reporter. The variable of interest for this study was units of meaning, sentences or groups of sentences that share a common topic.

An ANOVA was performed on the revision data that, in effect, combined the four classes into a single group for statistical purposes (Ott, 1988). This method is appropriate because the students were not assigned randomly to the classes used in the study. The analysis examined the four treatments (marginal and end comment, marginal comment only, end comment only and oral comment only) and the four revision types (additions, deletions, substitutions and rearrangements) to determine if there were any significant differences between the treatments and the outcomes. In the analysis, differences with  $p < .10$  are considered significant. This significance level was used to help offset Type II error that could easily result from the relatively low number of subjects, the imprecise measurement methods, and the exploratory nature of this research (Lauer and Asher, 1988). Next, using percentages and graphs, the data were analyzed for similarities and differences among the combination

of treatments and the resulting revisions. A naturalistic inquiry method was used to examine the relationship between specific instructor comments and the specific revisions that resulted from that comment (Lincoln and Guba, 1984). To analyze the data, teacher comment that was written on the student texts or given in the oral comments were recorded and written on individual index cards. The cards were sorted into groups of those with similar meanings using Lincoln and Guba's (1984) method. The groups were then cross checked and again collated into groups by meaning or the problem they addressed. Seven groups were established, each of which addressed a different aspect in the texts (Table 1). At this stage in the study there was no differentiation made between oral and written comments, as those distinctions were covered in the quantitative phase of the study.

**Table 1. Teacher Comment Categories and Examples**

<i>Positive Comment</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good</li> <li>• Good, imaginative</li> <li>• Good focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally good story</li> <li>• Nice flow</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good start and ID</li> <li>• Nice start</li> <li>• Handled well</li> </ul>
<i>Overall Quality of All or a Section of Text</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need sound bite</li> <li>• Need second source</li> <li>• Jumps around</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus is a little loose</li> <li>• Editorializing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ending is weak</li> <li>• Lead is weak</li> <li>• Story lacks coherence</li> </ul>
<i>Material That Does Not Belong in the Text</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too much jammed in</li> <li>• Don't force too much into one sentence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doesn't go in story</li> <li>• Too much background</li> <li>• Last paragraph isn't necessary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does this fit?</li> <li>• This is fluff</li> <li>• Not really needed</li> <li>• Cut some</li> <li>• Needed?</li> </ul>
<i>Material that is Out of Place</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rearrange</li> <li>• Don't overload lead</li> <li>• Move up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Out of place</li> <li>• Doesn't fit well</li> <li>• Stuff doesn't go here</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is news?</li> <li>• Transition needed</li> </ul>
<i>Wordiness or Over Length</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too long</li> <li>• Wordy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wordy phrase</li> <li>• Too much</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Way too long</li> </ul>
<i>Wording or Sentence Needs Work</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tighten</li> <li>• Awkward</li> <li>• Smooth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rework</li> <li>• Redundant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overused word</li> <li>• Vary sentence structure</li> </ul>
<i>Meaning is Unclear</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add specifics</li> <li>• Add more detail</li> <li>• Explain</li> <li>• Show, don't tell</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Such as?</li> <li>• Definition is needed</li> <li>• Means what?</li> <li>• Confusing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vague</li> <li>• Unclear</li> <li>• Misleads</li> </ul>

## Results and Discussion

Analysis of the teacher comment types resulted in seven comment types: positive comments, overall quality of all or a section of text, material that does not belong in the text, material that is out of place, wordiness or over length, wording or sentence needs



work, and meaning is unclear. Student responses were examined based on each comment type.

“Positive comments,” as might be expected, did not result in a lot of revisions, although some students did revise some of these sections of their texts. All of the revisions resulting from these comments were improvements. Comments on the “overall quality of all or a section of the text” asked for big changes. Generally student response to these comments was deleting or substituting material in their texts, which is not surprising because the comments frequently related to coherence or focus. Again, the student revisions associated with this comment were generally improvements, but in some cases deleting material weakened the story.

Student responses to the comment that to “material that did not belong in the text” also resulted in deletions. Students tended to act more frequently on some of these comments than others because a few of the comments offered more specific instructions (“Doesn't go in the story” vs. “How does this fit?”). Therefore, some of the comments were not acted on by the students, probably because of uncertainty of how to solve the problem (Flower et. al., 1986). Generally revisions made in response to this comment group improved the student texts. “Material that is out of place” comments related to organization problems in student texts and usually suggested that the material belonged in the story, just not where the student had placed the information. As expected, students generally opted to rearrange their texts in response to this comment. Specific comments in this category resulted in more revisions that improved the texts than did less instructive comments (“Move Up” vs. “Out of place”). Students responded frequently to the less specific comments by removing the material.

Comments on “wordiness” and “wording or sentence needs work” problems frequently resulted in students deleting material from their texts. However, many students did a good job of combining sentences and paragraphs to tighten up the text and reduce the paper's overall length. Getting just the right word can be a particular problem for student writers and comments in this area included “awkward,” “choppy,” or “vary sentence structure.” Responses to these comments frequently resulted in fine tuning rather than fixing structural or coherence problems. Many revisions in response to these comments included combining sentences and altering sentence structure. A few resulted in deletions, but there were more substitutions used in response to this comment than to other comments. Again, the more specific the instructions, the more often the students revised successfully. “Unclear meaning” comments usually refer to the need for more information including specific detail or other clarifications. Some of the comments went so far as to ask for specific numbers or other specific information, others were “vague” and “confusing.” Revisions

resulting from this comment group varied including deletions and additions. The quality of the students' revisions also varied.

Results from the qualitative portion of this study indicate that the more directive the teacher comment on student texts, the more successful student revisions will be on the text. Students tended to respond to teacher comment if they knew how to make the requested change or improvement. If they did not know how to make the change or how to improve the text, they frequently deleted the material or ignored the comment. According to Spandel and Stiggins (1990), students frequently misread instructors comment and fail when they are trying to revise their texts. Occasionally students would substitute material, which ultimately resulted in a few additions. There were few rearrangements and those changes were usually in response to a specific comment to alter the order of ideas in paragraphs.

In response to one of the main questions of this study, teacher comment “Does influence the choices students make in revising their texts,” and a second question “Does the lack of teacher comment influence student revision?” Indications from the qualitative portion of this study are that students are even more likely to make revisions in the absence of written comment when oral only comment is presented. As with the other student responses to teacher comment, students perceive a benefit from revising their texts based on the incentive of an improved grade.

The F test included all 64 of the students in the study combined into one large group. This option was chosen to maintain the natural classroom environment as much as possible. The data were coded by treatment and by revision outcomes. Based on this analysis, the only significant outcome at  $p < .10$  was deletions. A Scheffé S test showed that marginal comment and oral comment only treatments were similar for deletions, as were marginal and end comment and end comment only treatments. However, marginal comment and oral comment only treatments were significantly different than marginal and end comments and end comment only treatments. This means that the students' responses to each pair of treatments were similar, but that they responded differently to the treatments not contained in each pair.

The significance of deletions and the relationship between the two pairs of treatments provides several options for interpretation. Flower et al. (1986) suggest that if students do not know how to address a problem, they will frequently delete the material. That is likely the case in this study. Second, the similarities between responses to marginal and end comment and end comment only suggest that students may be reading and interpreting these comments in much the same way. The same should be said for the other pair of treatments, marginal only comment and oral comment. Examining the means of

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these two treatments, .38 for marginal only and .51 for oral only, indicates that students made fewer deletions on average in response to these two comments than for the other comment pair. Deletion means for marginal and end comment and end comment only were .74 and .81 respectively. The students made more deletions based on these two treatment types. One obvious similarity between these two treatments is that they both include comments on the students' texts. This may indicate that students either read these comments more often or that they somehow responded to these comments differently than they did to marginal only comment or oral only comment at least when it came to making deletions in their texts.

Although the F test showed a significant difference for only deletions, the descriptive statistics associated with the various treatment totals are worth discussion. Of the 307 total revisions by type made by students in this study, 109, or 35.62%, were deletions; 85, or 27.28% were substitutions; 59, or 19.28%, were additions and 55, or 17.32%, were rearrangements. Total revisions broken down by teacher comment location (Table 2 and Figure 1)

were marginal and end comment, 83; end only comment, 80; oral only, 83 and marginal only, 61. The primary difference is in the revision types, with deletions showing a much higher incidence than substitutions; additions and rearrangements are fairly even at the lower end of the range. The high number of deletions is not unexpected (Flower, et al., 1986)

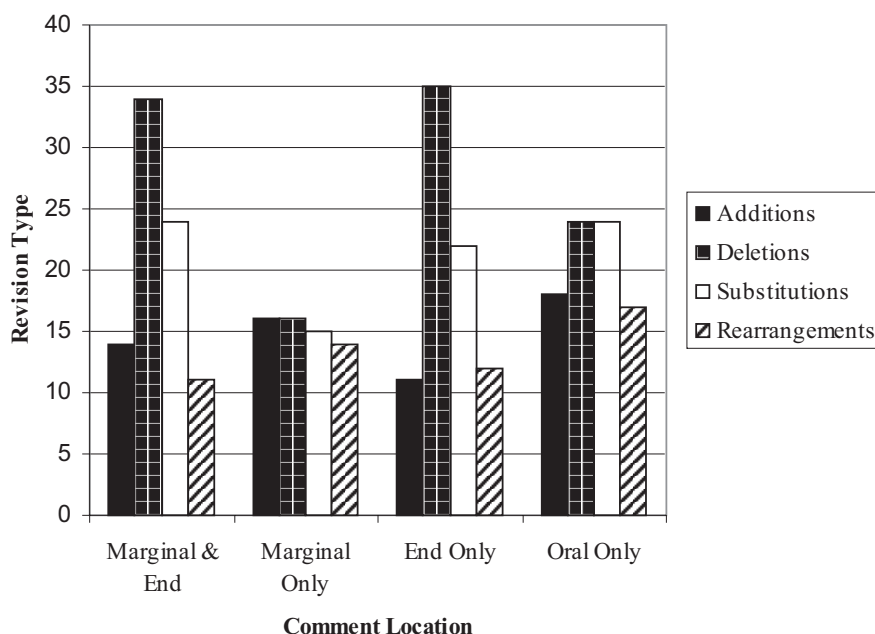
Comparing comment location by revision type also provides an interesting discussion. For marginal only comment, there was a relatively low overall number of revisions and an even distribution (16 additions, 16 deletions, 15 substitutions, and 14 rearrangements a range of 2). One possibility for this relatively low number of revisions with this comment location relates to the lack of space available for providing feedback. Another reason may be that students do not read these comments. Bolker (1978) suggested that students dissociate themselves from teacher comment because they fear disappointment. Also, while end comment often points out problems in a text, it is frequently tempered with positive comment and is sometimes less directed at a specific point or error in the text (Smith, 2004).

Oral only comment elicited a relatively large number of revisions (18, 24, 24, and 17 a range of 7). This number of revisions is somewhat higher than anticipated at the outset of the study. One of the theories was that students receiving only oral comment on their texts would revise less because of the somewhat fleeting nature of the feedback. However, information on the audio tapes of the oral comment sessions suggests one reason for the unexpected strength of this response. The written notes for these sessions look, for the most part, like a laundry list of what was wrong (and occasionally right) with the class' texts. However, the audio tapes of these sessions include not only the comments on the problems, but usually examples of all or most of the problems pulled from student papers. The instructor did not return the students' texts until the end of the class period in an attempt to keep the students' attention on that day's material. Therefore, when

**Table 2. Revisions by Teacher Comment Location**

	Marginal & End	Marginal Only	End Only	Oral Only	Totals
Additions	14	16	11	18	59
Deletions	34	16	35	24	109
Substitutions	24	15	22	24	85
Rearrangements	11	14	12	17	54
Totals	83	61	80	83	307

**Figure 1. Comment Location by Revision Type**



the instructor went through the comment list, the texts were readily available for discussion. No student names were mentioned, but the students did ask questions and apparently, from the number of revisions on their texts, were able to make use of the information.

## Conclusions and Implications

Based on the results of this study, teacher comment influences student revision choices and the more directive the teacher comment, the better chance the students will revise their texts successfully. This agrees with Flower et al. (1986), Newkirk (1981) and Shuman (1975), but this study builds on their work by providing specific illustrations of teacher comment that offers problem identification and revision strategies paired with actual student revisions.

The placement of written teacher comment does have some influence on student revisions. In this study, there were more total revisions associated with oral only comment than the other three types. The previously mentioned audio tapes indicate that the oral comment sessions frequently included multiple examples of a problem and multiple solutions. These additional examples may be part of the reason for the additional revisions. Another possibility may be Bolker's (1978) suggestion that students fear teacher comment and, because the oral comment is less direct, it is therefore less threatening and students are more apt to listen. Oral feedback may help build a sense of community rather than force students to view problems in the texts as theirs alone.

The combination of research methods used in this study added strength to the conclusions of both portions of the research. For example, deletions were the only statistically significant response in the experimental study. This outcome could be explained more clearly using results from the naturalistic inquiry portion of the study. Matching specific teacher comments with specific revisions revealed that many of the comments suggested or hinted at deletion as a revision option. Also, the results of both portions of the study pointed to the importance of more detailed teacher comment either in the form of more revisions associated with concluding comments on the texts or the more frequent and more successful revisions from specific comments on the texts.

Several alterations would enhance future studies using this method. First, the use of Rodger's (1967) stadia of discourse for identifying changes in the texts was a little too coarse for the revisions involved. Reviewing changes at the word or phrase level would be potentially more accurate. Identifying a way to limit the variety of teacher comment statements by using a check sheet or other method would better focus the naturalistic inquiry portion of the study and help further identify which comments elicited successful revisions from the students.

Implications for future research include further

examination of oral comment as a feedback method on student papers. The potential time savings for writing instructors, as well as the possibilities of greater improvement in student writing make this an important area for future study. Continued evaluation of written comment would also be extremely valuable. Careful evaluation of written comment location and content could lead to better writing and better use of instructor's time. Finally, one of the major goals of providing comment on student texts is to help the students learn to internalize the ability to evaluate their own texts. Identifying feedback methods that can help students learn to evaluate their own writing more successfully will enable them to become better writers.

Agricultural Communications programs frequently offer writing courses as either part of their curriculum or as a service to their colleges. Providing efficient and timely feedback on these papers is an increasing challenge as faculty work toward tenure or promotion with ever-growing student demand. Refining our methods of providing students with feedback on their papers will ultimately improve our students' writing ability while still making the most efficient use of faculty member time and resources the best of both worlds for all concerned.

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