Appendix E: Dimensions of Commenting
Many issues are involved in writing good comments. Some of those issues are summarized below as different “axes” of commenting. The commenting extremes are shown for each axis, but no attempt is made to indicate where comments should fall along each axis: that judgment is a point for discussion. The axes are not orthogonal and the list is not exhaustive. Some examples are based on an article about commenting by Kerry Walk of the Harvard Writing Project; others are based on my experience.

**Personal**
Comments focus on student. Comments focus on writing.
“You write clearly.” “This paper is written clearly.”
“I’m disappointed (in you.)” “This paper isn’t as focused as your first.”

**Directive**
Comments tell students Comments point out
what changes to make. problems and give
suggestions for addressing them.
Qs or comments indicate problems and leave it to
the student to decide how to address the problems.

**Form vs. Function**
Comments focus on form Comments focus on content.
“This paragraph needs a topic sentence.” “The main point of this paragraph isn’t clear.”
“The discussion is too short.” “You need to support these claims with evidence.”

**General/vague vs. Specific**
“My style needs some improvement.” “Vary the lengths of the sentences.”
“When the discussion is too short.” “Combine the sentences as shown.”

**Scale (e.g. large-scale structural issues, small-scale wording issues):**
Comments focus on issues at only one scale. Comments focus on issues at a variety of scales.

**Focus and number**
Comments address all problems. (Many comments per paragraph.) Comments focus on the few most important issues. If the paper needs major revision, comments focus primarily on the relevant large-scale issues, not on details.

**Organization**
All comments are presented identically, regardless of importance. Important comments are emphasized, for example by being included in a summary or written in a different color.

Other dimensions include pos./neg. feedback, tone (collegial vs patronizing), & legibility.