

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 -----→ Qs or comments indicate
what changes to make. problems and give problems and leave it to
suggestions for the student to decide how
addressing them. to address the problems.

Form vs. Function

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

General/vague vs. Specific

“Your style needs ←----- “Vary the lengths -----→ “Combine the sentences
some improvement.” of the sentences.” as shown.”

Scale (e.g. large-scale structural issues, small-scale wording issues):

Comments focus on issues ←-----→ Comments focus on issues
at only one scale. at a variety of scales.

Focus and number

Comments address all ←----- Comments focus on the few most -----→ 1 comment
problems. (Many important issues. If the paper needs per paper
comments per major revision, comments focus
paragraph.) primarily on the relevant large-
scale issues, not on details.

Organization

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

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