How to Give Positive Feedback on Student Writing

Alex Shevrin Venet

Literacy

If your corrective feedback is very detailed but your positive comments are quick and vague, you may appreciate this advice from teachers across the country.

By [Alex Shevrin Venet](#)

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"Nice work." "Great job." "Powerful sentence." Even though I knew they wouldn't mean much to students, these vague and ineffective comments made their way into my writing feedback recently. As I watched myself typing them, I knew I was in a rut.

My critical comments, on the other hand, were lengthy and detailed. Suggestions and corrections abounded. I realized that I was focused too much on correcting student work and not enough on the goal of giving rich positive feedback.

As a writer, I know how hard it is when the negative feedback outweighs the positive. We all have things to work on, but focusing only on what to fix makes it hard to feel that our skills are seen and appreciated. My students put so much work into their writing, and they deserve more than my two-word positive sentences.

I wanted out of the rut, so I turned to my favorite professional network—teacher Twitter—and asked for help. "What are your favorite positive comments to make about student writing?" I asked. Here are some of the amazing responses and the themes that emerged from more than 100 replies from teachers.

Give a Window Into Your Experience as the Reader

Students typically can't see us while we're experiencing their writing. One genre of powerful positive comments: insights that help students understand how we responded as readers. Teacher Amy Ludwig VanDerwater shared these sentence stems, explaining that "commenting on our reading experience before the craft of writing is a gift":

- This part really moved me.
- I laughed out loud when I read this line.
- Your writing makes me think...
- You opened up a door in my mind.
- Now I am questioning...
- Now I am connecting to...
- Now I am remembering...

On a similar note, Virginia S. Wood shared: "I will tell them if I smiled, laughed, nodded my head, pumped my fist while reading their work, and I'll tell them exactly where and why."

I used Wood's advice recently when I looked through a student's project draft that delighted me. I wrote to her, "I have the biggest smile on my face right now. This is such an awesome start."

Giving students insight into our experience as readers helps to connect the social and emotional elements of writing. Positive comments highlighting our reading experience can encourage students to think about their audience more intentionally as they write.

Recognize Author's Craft and Choices

Effective feedback can also honor a student's voice and skills as a writer. Pointing out the choices and writing moves that students make helps them feel that we see and value their efforts. Joel Garza shared, "I avoid 'I' statements, which can seem more like a brag about my reading than about their writing." Garza recommends using "you" statements instead, such as "You crafted X effect so smoothly by..." or "You navigate this topic in such an engaging way, especially by..." and "You chose the perfect tone for this topic because..."

Similarly, seventh-grade teacher Jennifer Leung suggested pointing out these moments in this way: "Skillful example of/use of (transition, example, grammatical structure)." This can also help to reinforce terms, concepts, and writing moves that we go over in class.

Rebekah O'Dell, coauthor of *A Teacher's Guide to Mentor Texts*, gave these examples of how we might invoke mentor texts in our feedback:

- "What you're doing here reminds me of (insert mentor text)..."
- "I see you doing what (insert mentor writer) does..."

O'Dell's advice reinforced the link between reading and writing. Thinking of these skills together helps us set up feedback loops. For example, after a recent close reading activity, I asked students to name one lesson they had learned from the mentor text that they could apply to their own writing. Next time I give writing feedback, I can highlight the places where I see students using these lessons.

Another teacher, Grete Howland, offered a nonjudgmental word choice. "I like to use the word 'effective' and then point out, as specifically as I can, why I found something effective. I feel like this steers away from 'good'/'bad' and other somewhat meaningless judgments, and it focuses more on writing as an exchange with a reader."

Celebrate Growth

Positive feedback supports student progress. Think of positive comments as a boost of momentum that can help students continue to build their identity as writers. Kelly Frazee recommended finding specific examples to help demonstrate growth, as in "This part shows me that you have improved with [insert skill] because compared to last time…" As teachers, we often notice growth in ways that our students may not recognize about themselves. Drawing out specific evidence of growth can help students see their own progress.

Finally, I love this idea from <u>Susan Santone</u>, an instructor at the University of Michigan: When students really knock it out of the park, let them know. Santone suggested, "When my students (college level) nail something profound in a single sentence, I write 'Tweet!' 'Put this onto a T-shirt!' or 'Frame this and hang it on a wall!'—in other words, keep it and share it!"

These ideas are all great starting points for giving students meaningful positive feedback on their writing. I've already started to use some of them, and I've noticed how much richer my feedback is when positive and constructive comments are equally detailed. I'm looking forward to seeing how these shifts propel student writing. Consider trying out one of these strategies with your students' next drafts.