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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Flash Feedback*, by Matthew Johnson. In this excerpt, you'll discover one of the time-saving tenets for delivering more powerful feedback in less time.

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Time-Saving Tenet #2: Use More Targeted Feedback

Two things we know very clearly about feedback is that it has the biggest impact when it is

- Given regularly (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 36)
- Received as soon as possible by the students (McGee, 2017, p. 20)

It makes a lot of sense that regular feedback given shortly after a task is completed would have a larger impact than intermittent feedback received weeks later, yet in most classes the latter is far more common than the former. This is because when feedback comes exclusively in time-intensive scribbling through the margins of papers—the standard and only feedback mechanism for a great many classes—it will inevitably be significantly delayed and intermittent.

If we want to get feedback to students regularly and quickly, we need to begin utilizing other, faster forms of feedback in the place of some of those extensive margin notes. Useful feedback can be given in a multitude of ways to a multitude of different writing assignments and moments in the writing process, after all.

This book looks at these different ways and times to give feedback (including margin notes), but I want to start with the one that I use the most often—targeted feedback—which is feedback focused specifically on helping students build or refine a certain skill. Targeted feedback works so well because when we focus solely on one skill, our feedback can be both meaningful and fast, often given by the next day or even within the class period itself. This speed also allows us to give feedback much more regularly, which a University of Chicago literature review argued as “[an essential practice] for creating a school or classroom culture where success is perceived as possible” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 38).

To see targeted feedback in action, consider this assignment from a unit I teach on commas, colons, semicolons, and dashes (see Figure 1.2 for an example; you can download this and much more from the companion website at resources.corwin.com/flashfeedback).

This assignment generally comes after the students have gotten pretty comfortable with these punctuation marks, meaning my goals when I assign this are to

- Assess each student’s understanding of these punctuation marks
- Redirect any students who have misconceptions about any particular mark

When it comes to responding to this assignment, I keep my eyes fixed on these goals, and my responses focus solely on assessing punctuation usage and clearing up misconceptions. By keeping my feedback targeted, I can read and respond to an entire class-set in well under half an hour by following this process:

1. If I want to return this type of targeted assignment in the same class period, I schedule it before an established block of drafting and/or reading time. This is important because while my responses will be fast, they won’t be instantaneous, and I don’t want students sitting around waiting for me. My rule for students in these situations is simple: Once students finish the assignment, they roll right into the reading or writing.

2. When students finish, they share their paper with me via a Google Doc, and I quickly scan each paper using the find function (Command-F) to highlight the elements (colon, semicolon, dash, commas) that I’m looking for. If students are writing by hand, an alternative to the find function is to have them highlight or

Punctuation Write

Please write a one-page, double-spaced paper in the genre of your choice and on the topic of your choice. Somewhere in the paper you should correctly and thoughtfully use the following punctuation:

- At least two dashes
- At least two colons
- At least two semicolons
- At least four different types of commas

The grade will be earned purely on the usage of this punctuation. Here is the rubric:

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Points Possible</u>	<u>Points Earned</u>
Thoughtful and correct use of at least two dashes. No dashes are misused.	2	—
Thoughtful and correct use of at least two colons. No colons are misused.	2	—
Thoughtful and correct use of at least two semicolons. No semicolons are misused.	2	—
Thoughtful and correct use of all commas; four different types of commas are used; no commas are misused	4	—

FIGURE 1.2 • Targeted Writing Assignment—Punctuation

underline each time they use a comma, colon, semicolon, and dash. The whole idea is that as the one assessing them, I can use these visual markers to help me instantly find the targeted areas, allowing me to move at maximum speed.

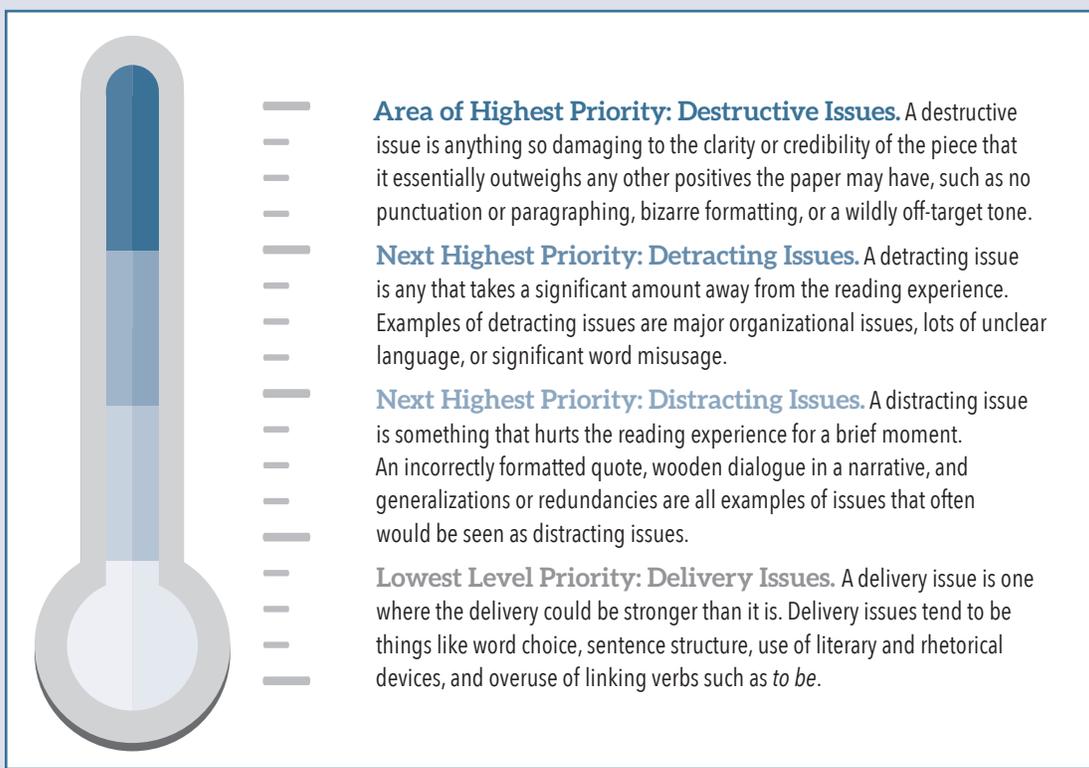
3. I then fill out the rubric with the points earned. In doing that, I simply take away one point for each misused comma, colon, semicolon, or dash. If a student has no errors, I give them full points and quickly move on. Because my secondary goal is to help redirect any misconceptions about the punctuation marks, if a student does have an error or issue, I will highlight the error, too. I do not fix the errors because doing this takes more time and is not ideal for learning because I would be the one doing the work, not the student.

4. Finally, I require students who made errors to fix them. I generally strive to give students class time to revise and the opportunity to regain all lost points, because I have found that this added incentive, time, and access to me are key if I want students to move forward in earnest. As I mentioned above, I also don't make the changes for them, as I want them to go through the internal grappling that is necessary to learning something at a deep level. Of course, I do provide resources for them to find the right answers. They can access the resources from class (visit the companion website at resources.corwin.com/flashfeedback to see the punctuation tutorials available to them), conference with partners, and come to me if they have exhausted other resources and are still stumped.

Targeted feedback comes with many advantages. It allows for more consistent and timely feedback while also adding little or ideally nothing to the paper load that I take home with me. With this assignment, even in my biggest classes, the students can do it, get timely personal and meaningful feedback, and revise if needed within the confines of class time. Also, even though I write nothing, the feedback is focused and clear. Students know exactly what I expect them to do, what they got right, and what they missed, and the results are often stunning. One or two targeted assignments such as this can move the needle on something like comma or colon usage more than I used to see in an entire year of putting corrections and comments in the margins of larger and more globally assessed polished writing pieces.

The Scale of Writing Concerns: The 4 Ds

Chapter 2 discusses in greater detail how the topics we discuss in feedback should match the needs of the student, but a good rule of thumb is to mark like a teacher. This means only mark as much as the students can actually learn and focus on the areas of highest need. For my part, while there is no one progression of writing instruction that has been proven to work perfectly for every student, there is a scale of concerns that I keep in mind when deciding what I will comment on. When reviewing student writing, I ask myself: Is this a destructive, detracting, distracting, or delivery issue?



It is important to remember that this is a rough guideline, not a polished rule. Also, the categories can be fluid. Sometimes linking verbs or sentence structure can significantly detract from a paper while tone or organizational issues don't always seriously damage a piece. Also, sometimes we might comment on things such as a student's effort or growth. Still, thinking through the impact the issues have on the reader usually helps me know what to tackle now and what to focus on at a later date.

In a world where 50% of comments are potentially misunderstood and student defensiveness is set on a hair trigger, taking an approach called Describe-Evaluate-Success with feedback offers protection against both issues. The concept behind Describe-Evaluate-Success is that we should start each piece of feedback with a brief, neutral description of what we noticed, then we move into some form of evaluation of what we observed, and we end with providing steps the student can take toward success (Hart-Davidson, 2014). In the case of the comment on voice, it might look something like this actual comment I gave a student last year:

I notice that most of the paper is written in an academic tone and then you refer to Kate Chopin as “a badass” in the conclusion. This statement, while funny and maybe true, wasn’t consistent with the voice of the rest of the paper and served as more of a distraction than a strong ending. In your revision, is there a way you can get across what an amazingly strong person Chopin was while keeping your tone consistent?

On the surface, both this comment and one before discuss voice, but that is where the similarities end. While the first comment could easily be misconstrued (*what does he mean by voice? Is it my sentence structure, word choice, ideas?*), having to describe the issue first forced me to get to the root of the issue, which was her word choice and tone. Further, by starting with what is written on the page instead of starting with my judgment of her choices, the odds are far better that the student won’t feel as judged, making her more open to the feedback. In fact, when I shared the comment above with the student, she laughed out loud at the fact that she called Kate Chopin a “badass” and said, “Yeah, maybe not the right word,” with a giant smile on her face. Further, the impact of the comment was apparent when her new revised conclusion had replaced “badass” by referring to Chopin as “unique,” “recognizable,” and capable of creating “female characters of varying, but never mono-layered, complexity and depth.” Figure 2.4 shows some examples of how to rephrase common teacher comments using the Describe-Evaluate-Success Model.

COMMON TEACHER COMMENTS	DESCRIBE-EVALUATE-SUCCESS VERSION
“Your topic sentences don’t work. Make sure they set up the topics of the paragraphs and the paragraphs stay focused on those topics the entire time.”	“I notice that this topic sentence talks about how homework can contribute to student stress, but most of the paragraph talks about how students don’t get enough sleep. This drifting of topics throughout a paragraph is something I’ve also seen in other paragraphs. Readers generally look to the first line of a paragraph for the topic, so I would like you to go through and make sure the topic at the start and end of each paragraph are the same.”
“Your wording in this could be stronger. Try to incorporate more vivid and interesting words.”	“In this climactic scene you refer to yourself as scared, happy, and excited. These words are a bit broad and really common, meaning that we don’t get a full sense of how you feel in that key moment. Try replacing these with words that are more specific and unique that can better express how you felt.”
“Your flow in this paper is choppy than I’d like. Work on improving your sentence structure to make it flow better.”	“The vast majority of your sentences are shorter than ten words. This gives your writing a choppy feel at times. A way to improve your flow would be to have more sentence length variation. I suggest getting this by combining some sentences and adding more details to others.”

FIGURE 2.4 • Describe-Evaluate-Success Model