Terminal comments on first-year writing students' essays: a case study of the complexity of students' revision decisions

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Terminal comments on first-year writing students' essays:
A case study of the complexity of students' revision decisions

by

Sheryl Diane Isaacson McGough

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication)

Major Professor: Margaret Baker Graham

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1998

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Sheryl Diane Isaacson McGough

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: CASE STUDY OF TERMINAL ESSAY COMMENTS

Written comments on student papers fulfill several purposes: They forge relationships between students and instructors; they testify to the teacher’s authority; they justify grades; and they facilitate revision and improvement of the text. In spite of George Hillocks’ findings that commenting on student papers is generally ineffective, composition instructors continue to write marginal and end comments on the essays they evaluate. In their 1982 watershed works, Brannon and Knoblauch and Sommers contend that the teacher’s role in commenting is not to assume authority over the student’s text. Rather, the teacher’s primary role, like any reader, is to consider the writer’s ideas. Their works have compelled instructors to comment with increasing care and respect for student writers.

After the publication of Janet Emig’s “Lynn, Profile of a Twelfth-Grade Writer” in 1971, the focus of composition pedagogy as well as composition research shifted to an approach to writing as a process (Freedman 3). Lester Faigley points out that one of the effects of the writing-as-process movement of the early 1970s has been a change in the way instructors grade student writing: The emphasis in evaluation has shifted from justifying grades to coaching the student writer in revising his or her work (395). Underscoring Faigley’s point, Onore asserts that “Process pedagogy requires a change in the relationships . . .
between students and instructors" (231). Freedman concurs, as evidenced through her definition of teacher response to student writing as "collaborative problem solving," where effective response requires "teacher experts [who] must collaborate with learning writers with the aim of helping the writers become independent" (7-9). In light of the desired collaborative aspect of the student/teacher relationship, students rather than instructors can be given authority over the text. Onore criticizes the traditional notion that "only instructors can say what is recognized as improvement in student writing" because "meaning-making requires individual ownership of a text" (232). Thus, the instructors' response to student texts necessarily reflect notions of authority, community, and collaboration.

With such contradictory advice in mind, the contemporary college composition teacher usually pens comments throughout the student essay, concluding with an end comment that falls into one or more of three primary genres: judging, responding, or coaching (Smith). As such, instructors spend precious time and energy evaluating student essays, and researchers have invested months and years exploring the effects of teacher comments on writing students' progress.

Problem

The research to date has focused on data derived from instructors' observations and experiences, while little research has explored the attitudes and practices of students after they receive instructors' comments. For instance,
Freedman places the focus of evaluation on the teacher’s input rather than on the student’s output. In the 1987 publication of her study on “Response to Student Writing” Freedman investigates what “successful teachers know and do and how their actions affect their students” (4). Richard Straub, in 1997, asked students to react to types or styles of teacher comments, but his research stopped short of asking students what they actually do with the comments they like and dislike.

I assert that the vast amount of time first-year composition instructors dedicate to writing comments on student papers is well spent only if we can discover which comments students are apt to use and which comments students are likely to disregard and why. In response to this issue, I pose the following general questions: (1) How accurately do students read and interpret comments? (2) Do students apply comments as they revise? (3) Do students apply the comments in such a way as to resolve targeted problems?

In this chapter, I discuss my approach to exploring students’ use of end comments and the development of my specific research question.

Approach

I approached my exploration of students’ use of end comments by reviewing advancements in composition studies theory on evaluation. I inquired whether first-year university students used comments as instructors who wrote them might have imagined. There are three reasons I explored first-year writers within composition studies: (1) First-year writers are in a stage of
adjustment and development wherein evaluative commentary might be expected to yield observable results, (2) Composition studies offers a vast theoretical and practical framework on which to base my exploration, and (3) As a master's student in English with an emphasis in rhetoric and composition, I am greatly interested in the ways in which composition theory works and does not work in classroom situations.

I explored students' use of teacher comments through a case study of four first-year university writers. The study was designed to determine whether or not the students were able and/or willing to apply instructors' written comments to resolve targeted problems as they revised previous essays and composed subsequent essays. With a team of experienced raters, I analyzed and recorded students' successful and failed attempts to resolve problems identified by comments on a series of drafts for four essays written by the students. As the students' instructor, I conducted the investigation as a participant-observer in the classroom. In addition to the analysis of students' papers, I asked students to provide written interpretations of the teacher comments they received, and I audiotaped student-teacher conferences on their evaluation of the comments. The four student subjects believed they and their classmates were participating in a study of composition evaluation, but they did not know their work was specifically investigated or what aspect of their performance was scrutinized.

Without the objectivity derived of numbers to show significance and reliability, qualitative research has been deprived of equal status with quantitative research. Lauer and Asher identify qualitative studies in
composition as merely the first step in a series of investigations that eventually leads to discovery of the cause-and-effect relationship revealed only through quantitative research (23). In fact, the overall lack of generalizability of results may be the single most disempowering characteristic of qualitative research.

On the other hand, qualitative studies, such as my case study, are “more suitable than quantitative studies for addressing certain questions about culture, interpretation, and power” (Lindlof 10). Case study allowed me to uniquely and thickly describe the acts of communication I observed in the students’ essays.

North characterizes qualitative study as an account which can be consulted, as contrasted with the passing events of quantitative study (277). Case study and ethnography help us not only to know what happened, but also to understand what happened. Through case study, I was able to get the “perspective of the ones doing the performing” (Lindlof 17), to know what each student writer did and why he or she did it.

Further, it is my view that results of case studies, in a way different from quantitative studies, are inevitably generalized—sometimes by researchers ourselves, but just as often by the readers—as they recognize their own behaviors and characteristics and their students’ behaviors and characteristics in the qualitative studies. Each of us—one instructor in Ames, Iowa, one in San Diego, California, another in Oxford, Ohio, and so on and so on, until we number in the hundreds and, perhaps, thousands—makes happen the transition from results that represent “once” or a “few” to results that describe “usual” and “many.” It is precisely because of this extension that reports of case studies and ethnographies
excite and inspire. Indeed, case study and ethnography continue to emerge as valuable research tools because the readers generalize from the results in ways that are, ironically, individual and unique to each of them. More and more, qualitative (or descriptive) research is used to uncover knowledge about composition studies.

Despite Hillocks' claim, recent research seems to confirm that students do, indeed, read teacher comments, and comments that are focused, positive, and respectful may lead to a gain in student writing ability (Brannon and Knoblauch, Freedman, Onore, Robertson, Sommers, Straub). While Straub identifies comments that students are receptive to and others they disdain, his work did not confirm that students use comments they like any differently than those they disliked. I recognize the possibility that students might apply both the comments they like and those they dislike. Further, it is possible that students might not apply either type. If such is the case, efforts merely to identify the types of comments students seem to like are misguided.

**Research question**

In response to studies that discuss whether students read teacher comments, I asked whether or not students understand and apply what they have read within those comments. It does not matter whether instructors can identify and, therefore, fashion comments that students like if students misunderstand those comments, thereby misapplying them, or whether the students choose not to use them at all. In other words, may we assume that,
because students "feel good" about the end comments on their papers, they will put the comments to good use? The preceding inquiries led me to develop the following research question: What types of comments do students apply so as to resolve targeted composition problems? If instructors can know which comments students will use and which comments students will disregard or misuse, then instructors can more effectively use the time they spend marking composition students' papers. Ultimately, I hope this case study will provide one more key for answering the question Nancy Sommers asked in her watershed work of 1982: "Do teachers comment and students revise as the theory predicts they should?" (149).

Thesis organization

I approached my analysis of students' use of teacher comments first by reviewing literature about instructors' marginal and end comments on first-year composition students' essays. Second, I explored data I collected through written feedback to me, audiotaped interviews, and both preliminary and final drafts of essays by four subjects in two English 105 composition classes. Most of my study was dedicated to the interpretation and discussion of results of this study as they related to the efficacy of instructors' end comments on student essays. Occasionally, I investigated students' use of marginal comments to achieve greater clarity about the decisions students made.

In chapter two I discuss the nature of evaluation as well as past research on effective commentary. I summarize composition experts' theories on
comments that students might like and use. In chapter three I discuss my methodology. Chapters four, five, and six report the results of my research. In chapter seven, I explore the implications of this case study.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW: EVALUATION OF STUDENT COMPOSITION

Instructors handle hundreds of student papers each semester—evaluating, ranking, responding. In an effort to make clear what it is that instructors do when they grade student compositions, Peter Elbow defines ranking as “summing up one’s judgment of a performance or person into a single, holistic number or score. We rank every time we give a grade or a holistic score. Ranking implies a single scale or continuum or dimension along which all performances are hung” (187). On the other hand, Elbow sees evaluating as “the act of expressing one’s judgment of a performance or person by pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of different features or dimensions. We evaluate every time we write a comment on a paper or have a conversation about its value . . .” (188). In accordance with Elbow’s definitions, as the words occur throughout the report of my study and this thesis, “evaluation” will be synonymous with written commentary, while “grade” will be synonymous with rank or holistic score.

In defending his preference for evaluation (again, a synonym for written or oral commentary), Elbow cites three distinct problems with ranking: (1) Ranking is inaccurate or unreliable; (2) it gives no substantive feedback; (3) it is harmful to the atmosphere for teaching and learning (188), as students “get so hung up on these over simple quantitative verdicts that they care more about
scores than about learning” (189). In accordance with Elbow’s criticism, many other composition theorists in the past twenty-five years have embraced the use of teacher commentary.

Even if we support process theorists, grading will always be a part of evaluation. In reality, nearly thirty years of documented grade inflation has put increasing pressure on writing instructors and students to be mindful of the quality of the writing product not simply the amount of effort that goes into the writing process. The result of the conflict is that grading papers is more complex now than it has ever been.

The practitioner lore

Like Elbow, as instructors turned increasingly to evaluating in conjunction with ranking students’ essays, they began exploring the usefulness of the comments they and others wrote. Much of the early work in composition studies amounts to what North calls “practitioner lore.” Lore, according to North, is “the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and belief in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught.” Practitioner lore has form and logic; the form is experiential and the logic is pragmatic (North 23). Currently, it comprises a vast body of knowledge in our discipline (North 23).

Erika Lindemann argues that “writing instructors must consider whether or not they should even invest their time in commenting on students’ work” (228). Lindemann believes instructors should comment on student papers, but
only under two circumstances: "(1) if the comments are focused and (2) if
students also have opportunities actively to apply criteria for good writing to
their own work" (228-229). Lindemann recommends that, in order to be useful,
comments must be made on preliminary drafts, not finished work. She asserts
that "If comments are to have any effect, students need opportunities to
incorporate them" (233). Concerning end notes on final drafts, Lindemann
allows that "subsequent papers are more likely to show improvement if you
explicitly define what you think needs work and how to go about it" (235).

Freedman defines teacher response to student writing as "collaborative
problem solving," where effective response requires "teacher experts [who] must
collaborate with learning writers with the aim of helping the writers become
independent" (Freedman 7-9). Collaborative problem solving is not limited to
preliminary drafts of students' compositions, but may certainly extend to their
final drafts as well. Sommers advocates that end comments should differentiate
between first, second, and final drafts; comments that direct revision should
focus on different issues than those that focus on the next assignment.

Much of the research has focused on what instructors speculate is valuable
(Straub 92-93), but few studies ask students for their feedback. Michael Robertson
contributed to composition's practitioner lore when he raised concerns about the
universal style of teacher commentary. In reviewing his Princeton colleagues'
long end comments (comments Robertson deemed appropriate since they
consisted of positive remarks that could lead to student action), he says he "began
to feel that we had all missed the point. These students had written earnest, in
many cases urgent, communications. And we had ignored what they were saying and focused exclusively on how it was said. Our comments were interchangeable" (88).

Lindemann, also, condemns “comments that simply point out errors or justify a grade” because they “tend to ignore the student who reads them” (227). Sommers agrees that “most instructors’ comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text” (152). And Smith has observed that comments have become so predictable that they now fall into genres that students recognize. Terminal comments usually begin with praise, moves to negative evaluation or coaching, and end with either coaching or positive feedback (261). She worries that, by virtue of their recognizability, the comments affect students as impersonal and insincere, and, therefore, they are ineffective.

Further, Sommers believes that the teacher’s corrective marks amount to appropriation of the student’s text by the teacher. Such appropriation “takes the students’ attention away from their own original purposes; [therefore] students concentrate more . . . on what the teachers commanded them to do than on what they are trying to say” (151). Sommers explains that “We read student texts with biases about what the writer should have said or about what he or she should have written, and our biases determine how we will comprehend the text . . . instead of reading and responding to the meaning of a text, we correct our students’ writing” (154).
Brannon and Knoblauch criticize classroom writing situations because "the reader assumes primary control of the choices that writers make, feeling perfectly free to 'correct' those choices any time an apprentice deviates from the teacher-reader's conception of what the developing text 'ought' to look like or 'ought' to be doing" (158). As a result, Brannon and Knoblauch, like Sommers, fear that students learn "the teacher's agenda is more important than their own" (158). Instead of focusing on student errors in written work, Brannon and Knoblauch believe the focus should be "on the disparity between what the writer wanted to communicate and what the choices residing in the text actually cause readers to understand" (161).

While the fore-cited practitioner lore has value, it is not scientifically rigorous. North explains that almost anything can become part of practitioner lore—all that is necessary is that "the idea, notion, practice, or whatever be nominated" (24). Once an idea becomes part of lore, it is permanent.

Lore's various elements are not pitted against one another within the framework of some lore-specific dialectic, or checked and re-checked by Practitioner experiments, so that the weakest or least useful are eliminated. Indeed, lore can—and does—contain plenty of items that would, were they part of some other system, be contradictory... All Practitioners are aware, at some level, that what they know is chock full of such seeming contraries. What makes them acceptable, of course, is lore's experiential structure. (24)

Empirical studies, then, become important to composition research for their systematic inquiries. My research is particularly grounded in the empirical inquiries into evaluation of student essays, specifically teacher comments.
The empirical studies

The body of empirical studies of composition evaluation, while growing, is much smaller than that of practitioner lore. Its systematic logic and form, however, yields reliable results not inherent to practitioner inquiry. Unfortunately, the results of early studies of teacher commentary were somewhat unsettling: Hillocks, through a 1982 meta-analysis, initially concluded that “The results of all these studies strongly suggest that teacher comment has little impact on student writing” (165). On the basis of their research into students’ treatment of instructors’ comments, Marzano and Arthur also concluded that commenting on student essays is a futile exercise: “either students do not read the comments or they do not attempt to implement” them (11).

Hillocks later claimed that “when comments are focused and tied to some aspect of instruction, either prewriting or revision, they do increase the quality of writing” (168). However, in a quantitative study of teacher commentary, based on 300 randomly selected papers, Connors and Lunsford discovered that “Over 59% of the initial and terminal comments were grade justifications, ‘autopsies’ representing a full stop rather than any medial stage in the writing process. In contrast, only 11% of the papers with such comments exhibited commentary clearly meant to advise the student about the paper as an ongoing project” (213).

Connors and Lunsford found that “teachers seemed unwilling to engage powerfully with content-based student assertions or to pass anything except ‘professional’ judgments on the student writing they were examining . . . In
some way, then, teachers seem conditioned not to engage with student writing in any personal or polemical ways” (214). Yet more recent empirical studies show end comments on final drafts may be useful.

In a 1997 groundbreaking investigation of students’ feedback, Straub surveyed 172 college freshman through a forty-item questionnaire about their preferences for teacher comments. The students all read one essay; then Straub presented them with a range of comments that twenty instructors had made on that single essay. The students rated their preference for various comments on a four-point scale, indicating they definitely preferred, preferred, did not prefer, or definitely did not prefer each of the comments.

Straub learned that students seemed to want comments on their ideas, development, and organization as well as on their wording, sentence structure, and correctness. Straub found that students reacted unfavorably to comments that criticized their ideas only when they perceived that the comments “tried to foist the teacher’s views on the writing” (101), and they reacted unfavorably to comments that criticized their word choice only when they were seen “as reflecting the idiosyncratic preferences of the teacher” (101).

Straub’s research also revealed that the “more specific and elaborate the comments, the more students preferred them. Clarity was a given; students did not respond favorably to any comment that they saw as unclear, vague, or difficult to understand” (102). Students were also receptive to comments framed as questions (109). Further, students were against having problems in their writing pointed out in highly judgmental ways or through harsh commands,
such as “Don’t just generalize. Support your ideas with evidence and facts” (106). Although students valued praise, “the students most preferred comments presented as advice and comments that offered explanations (107).

**Answering the challenge**

While Straub’s work is enlightening, his subjects were not placed in a real classroom situation. The students he interviewed were not reacting to comments directed at their writing, and they did not have to make revision decisions using the comments they ranked. Indeed, Straub recommended that “Future studies might take up any number of questions, such as how students react to comments made on their own writing in actual classroom settings . . .” (113). The study that I conducted was one attempt to answer Straub’s challenge. As a systematic, empirical study, my research adds valuable and sorely needed knowledge to composition’s exploration of evaluation.
This study is important for what it reveals about the effectiveness of teacher commentary in improving student writing. Most instructors and researchers assume that, if students read the comments on their essays, the students can and will apply comments in a constructive manner. Prior to such application, however, students must understand and retain the directions or suggestions provided in the comments. The major part of this study, therefore, focuses not on whether students read evaluative comments, but on what meaning they assign to such comments and how they apply or fail to apply that meaning toward building their writing skills.

I approached this general issue by describing the decisions of student writers in response to end comments penned on preliminary and final drafts of assigned compositions. I investigated four first-year university composition students to explore the following research question: What types of comments do students apply so as to resolve targeted composition problems? I explored this question by examining students’ writing, as well as their written and oral feedback to me, for evidence of their revision decisions related to written comments on earlier drafts. I could not, of course, draw any firm cause/effect conclusions; there were too many uncontrolled variables at work here. But I wanted to explore what relationships were possible between the comments
provided to the subjects in this case study and the writing and revision decisions they exhibited.

In this chapter I describe the methodology I used in this case study. Sections of this chapter include the following descriptions: a rationale for studying first-year student writers, composition classes, subjects, researcher’s role, and design of the study.

Valuing first-year composition students’ writing

Though I could have studied several different types of writers (advanced level business writers, technical writers, and others), because I am a composition instructor with a continuing interest in pedagogy I chose to study beginning university writers based on the numerous possibilities for improvement in such writers. I chose to study writers in English 105, a second-semester course in a required two-year composition sequence of first-year students at a large midwestern state university. Studying decisions of first-year writers has the immediate pedagogical purpose of analyzing usefulness of marginal and end comments. By understanding how students apply or disregard teacher comments, instructors are in a better position to write comments that help students improve writing skills.

Studying first-year writers in classrooms is also beneficial for students. Classes that require essay examinations and project papers provide students an opportunity to share their knowledge in a more individualized manner than do classes that require students to pass objective tests. Students who have received
effective comments on previous writing assignments are better prepared to compose effective papers for instructors and peers throughout their academic careers and, indeed, in their future professional careers.

The research environment

My position as an English 105 instructor allowed me to study student writers in two classes I taught during the spring semester 1998 at Iowa State University. The classrooms, both in Macintosh computer labs, were located in Roberts Hall on the Iowa State University campus. The selection of these classrooms was based upon necessity: As a participant-observer, I needed ready access to the research location. Also, the student subjects attended class twice weekly in the location for fifteen weeks. As such, the familiar surroundings were conducive to a sense of routine, thereby allowing students to behave more naturally. Both classes used the same syllabus, texts, and assignments. Students wrote two introductory papers in the first four weeks of the semester that were not included in the study. Delaying the start of the study allowed students to settle into a comfortable routine before the commencement of the case study, thereby creating as natural a research environment as possible. Over the final twelve weeks of the class, the students wrote two argumentative papers over a controversial topic and two rhetorical analysis papers that were central to the research.
Subjects

Using theoretical construct sampling, I selected four first-year composition students as the subjects for this study: one male and one female from each of two English 105 sections of twenty-six students. To guarantee confidentiality, I gave all the subjects pseudonyms—Andrea, Derrick, Erroll, and Maddie. All students in both English 105 sections knew that the classroom was the setting for a composition research project. Because I did not want the four subjects to feel self-conscious or privileged, I did not inform the classes that only four students' work was analyzed until the end of the study. I requested a signed human-subjects permission form from all (fifty-two) students during the first week of class, and all but two students complied. Those two students who denied my request did not include the four who were eventually identified as the case study subjects.

The subjects were eighteen or nineteen years of age and were native speakers of English. In addition, the four students all had taken English 104, the first class of the two-course composition sequence at Iowa State University, in the fall 1997 semester, earning grades ranging from B to C+. The high school class rank for the subjects ranged between 59 and 69, and they all scored mid-range to upper mid-range on their ACT-English examinations, with scores from 20 to 25. The subjects declared intended majors in the sciences, business, or agriculture—which is typical of students at universities of science and technology like Iowa
State. While this is not a quantitative study, I believe that the loose “control” of this selection method allowed me to better treat these subjects as a homogeneous group.

Students in this case study received similar grades on papers three and four, the first essays used in this research. Thus it appears the selection criteria used above did produce a group of students with similar writing skills.

Admittedly, I did not have the resources to administer a battery of psychological tests to the subjects to determine their homogeneity. However, the criteria I used to select the subjects are common and generally accepted by composition specialists. Also, I was not able to choose the pool of students from which my subjects were selected: I had to use the students assigned to my classes. Initially, I focused on ten students, then restricted the number to six, and finally to four because of issues such as late papers and reluctance on the part of students to cooperate fully.

Further, I did not use a control group in my research for ethical reasons. To draw a cause-and-effect conclusion about the subjects’ use of comments, I would have had to compare their revision decisions against a group that received no comments. If the study revealed that comments seem to help writers as they revise, the control group, receiving no written feedback from me, would have been at a distinct disadvantage and their grades would probably have reflected the disadvantage. I could not conscientiously put the students at risk in such a manner.
The researcher's role

My role as researcher in the classroom was that of participant-observer. In other words, as the subjects' teacher and discussion leader, I will took on the perspective of an insider. While I did not intentionally manipulate the environment under observation, my presence and activities in the classroom certainly affected the environment. I therefore used three faculty members as controls: They acted as expert raters of my comments and my interpretation of students' use of them.

My interpretation of the students' texts constituted the greater part of the data for my study. Because knowledge is "a social construction, a collaborative search, interpretation, and reinterpretation of complex acts in context" (40), Lauer and Asher recommend that researchers triangulate data collection procedures as a means of gaining multiple perspectives. In an attempt to alleviate some of the bias that must result from my status as a participant and an observer in the research location, three expert raters (themselves composition instructors with many years' experience) assisted me by reading the preliminary drafts, my comments, the revisions, and the final drafts. Through random selection, I assigned each rater a series of first and second drafts from each of the four subjects. Each subject's papers were read by two raters in addition to myself.

The raters read my comments and identified the suggestions I had made that students either implemented or ignored. For the most part, the raters also affirmed that the things I identified as problems were problems. Occasionally, they pointed out lapses, the importance of which I will return to later.
Design of the study

Data sources

The main focus of my analysis was the first and any subsequent drafts of four essays from four student participants. Since students were not required to revise the last two essays written during the semester, most subjects chose not to rewrite essays five and six in the study. Before returning any essays to the students, I made four copies of each of the subjects' papers. Those essays were, in sequence:

- first argumentative essay (essay assignment 3)
- first rhetorical analysis essay (essay assignment 4)
- second argumentative essay (essay assignment 5)
- second rhetorical analysis essay (essay assignment 6)

After the raters read each of the assigned preliminary and revised drafts for four assignments, they wrote feedback for me. When I later analyzed the data, I used such feedback as verification that my observations were accurate.

In addition to the feedback from the expert raters, I required written feedback to me from each of the four student subjects. After I inscribed comments on and returned each draft to students, I directed every student in the class to write a brief paragraph that stated, in the students' own words, their understanding of only the end comments. Specifically, I told the students, "Write a paragraph that tells, in your own words, what you understand me to be saying in the end comments I wrote. Tell what I say you need to do when you revise." While the feedback from only the four subjects was analyzed for the
study, I read the feedback provided by all students. The feedback to me from non-participant students at times helped me formulate questions to ask participant students during conferencing.

I held student conferences upon returning some of the essays to the students. The conferences were held with all fifty-two students after the first submission of essay three and four were returned, complete with comments, so no students would suspect their work was the focus of the study. I conferenced again with only the four subjects after I returned the revised (or second and final) submission of essays three and four. At this point, with the semester almost over, the students had already submitted a first draft of essay five, and they were working on essay six. Because time was short with the approach of finals, and because no students' new work would be substantially affected by their knowledge of their positions as subjects, I did not attempt to conference with all fifty-two students on essays five and six. During the audiotaped conferences with all students, in which I asked as many open-ended questions as possible, students addressed their writing concerns and progress. I encouraged them to ask me questions about the written commentary they received, and I asked them how and why they made the writing and revision decisions that were evidenced in their papers.

The evaluation process

Students turned in the first submission of each essay as though it were a finished product ready for grading. I evaluated the papers, in Peter Elbow's sense of the word, marking lines that contained mechanical errors with only a check
mark in the margin and penning comments in the margins and at the conclusion of the essay. I marked a “U” on a paper that was unsatisfactory and required the student revise it for a grade. I marked an “H” on a paper that was at an honors level—those student authors did not revise. All other papers bore no indication of the grade. I informed students that papers without an “H” or a “U” were in the B to C range and they could decide whether or not they wanted to revise. (No student was required to revise essay six, but I gave them time during the final examination period to revise it if they desired.) After students revised, I gave their essays a letter grade. If students did not revise by a predetermined deadline, I converted their “H,” or “U” to an “A” or “D” respectively, and I permanently recorded a grade I had previously penciled in for the papers that were “C” and “B” range. To consider the role that evaluation may play, I also considered the grades students received on individual papers.

**Turnaround time**

Once I returned the first submission of any paper, we started the next unit and the next paper assignment. I gave students deadlines for the revisions of each paper: The deadline for revision of essay three was one week prior to the deadline for the first submission of essay five (both argumentative essays.) The deadline for revision of essay four was one week prior to the deadline for the first submission of essay six (both rhetorical analysis papers). In this way, students had final comments on essays three and four before essays five and six were due.
Commenting style

As both Hillocks and Lindemann recommend, the end comments I finally inscribed on preliminary drafts were focused, while I hoped the end comments I wrote on final drafts helped students set goals for future work. My marginal and end comments, in part, responded to students' ideas, and I made every effort to resist appropriating the students' texts unnecessarily, as Sommers warns against. Finally, I made an effort to consider the preferences of student writers surveyed by Straub as I wrote comments, especially the preference for suggestions over directives and for questions over statements. However, I found it easier to write questions as marginal comments and directives as terminal comments.

Once I wrote the comments on the students' papers, I returned them to the students. The next step in my research was to investigate how the students used the comments as they revised and wrote subsequent essays. To do this, I requested the students give feedback to me. I also categorized and counted the comments I made and the changes students made, and analyzed the students' revision decisions.

Analysis of students' reading and understanding of comments

I analyzed the students' written feedback to me to determine two things: (1) Are subjects mindful of the comments written on their papers, or, more specifically, have they read and attended to the comments? (2) Are the students' interpretations of the comments' meaning the same as the meaning I intended?
Exploration of the subjects' use of terminal comments

I explored how the subjects applied comments from each category by comparing the comments I made on their first and revised submissions of each of four essays with the changes they made in their texts. In order to do so, I categorized areas of commentary from copies of the students' essays that bore my comments. I based the categories around those identified by Smith and Straub. My comments fell into these general areas:

- Engagement with students' ideas or claims
- Praise for effective writing, conscientious completion of the task at hand, and creativity
- Discussion of students' writing skills in four categories—organization, content, expression, and correctness
- Suggestions for alleviating current written communication problems
- Goal-setting advice for future improvement, including suggestions for alleviating persistent written communication problems

"Engagement" is a label I used to describe my written dialog with students; when reading students' essays, I tried to engage with their ideas or claims and "speak" to them. For example, if Erroll said that children become violent because of parental neglect, I attempted to engage him by writing a comment that asked him whether he believes the parents should be prosecuted. I did not expect him to alter his paper in any way; I intended only for him to realize that I was thinking about what he has said and not just grading his work.
As I categorized the comments as targeting organization, content, and expression problems, I realized the artificiality of the boundaries between the types sometimes created ambiguity. For instance, when I advised a student to take a strong stand on an issue related to his topic, was I targeting an expression problem (more specific language was needed)? Or was I targeting a content problem (content that explained where he stood on the issue was needed)? When these ambiguities arose, I reviewed the context of the essay, recalling my in-class discussions, their reading assignments, and the students surrounding text before I decided which category best suited a comment.

Once I categorized the comments on the subjects' papers, I analyzed the frequency of each type. I rarely give space to correctness issues in end comments, and I found only a few papers where I specifically mentioned correctness. Such minimal data rendered exploration of that category meaningless, so I did not include it in my analysis. At the same time, I found that nearly all my end comments were either suggestions or goal-setting advice in and of themselves. Therefore, I decided not to include suggestions and feedback as separate categories.

If an end comment contained a reference to content and expression, I counted one comment for each of the two categories. For example, the following terminal comment contains both a content and an expression comment for a total of two comments.

Firmly establish your thesis at the beginning and keep echoing it throughout your argument. This will reduce confusion for your reader. Also, concentrate on using explicit language.
If an end comment specifically pointed out two problems within one category, I counted one comment for each. For example, the following terminal comment contains two independent comments from the same category for a total of two comments.

Your introduction would benefit from a statement that reveals your stand on the issue and a forecast of your paper. Also, the support you provide sometimes works against the argument you seem to be making.

I also used copies of marked student essays to determine if students might apply my comments in ways that resolved problems in their writing and to determine if new problems surfaced in subsequent drafts. In other words, the copies of student essays and comments provided me the opportunity to analyze the students' error patterns and progress. Nonrevised essays five and six did not impact my research, for I desired to use only the first submission of both essay five and six to compare writing decisions therein to the terminal comments on essays three and four respectively. Specifically, in one step of the analysis, I investigated whether students attempted to incorporate end-comment advice on the final draft of argumentative essay three into the first draft of argumentative essay five. I explored whether students attempted to incorporate end-comment suggestions from the final draft of rhetorical analysis essay four into the first draft of rhetorical analysis essay six. I also analyzed whether students attempted to apply the advice from end comments written on the first submission of an essay into their revisions. I relied upon the expert raters' feedback to me to verify that my observations were accurate.
It was only from students' feedback to me, however, that I was able to postulate that their progress resulted from willing and able application of the comments or that their floundering resulted from the inability or unwillingness to apply the comments. I explored how four students demonstrated their understanding of marginal and end comments by comparing their written feedback to me with the comments I made on their papers and noted any discrepancies. In conference, I asked students if they had read and understood the comments I wrote. I then asked them if they could apply the suggestions I made.

Finally, I compared the revised drafts of essays three and four against the attempts they testified they had made to revise. I also compared the first draft of essay five (the second argument) with the comments I made at the end of essay three (the first argument) to determine if the students carried forward advice. I compared essays six and four in the same way for the same purpose. I focused primarily upon end comments, but I did not wholly exclude analysis of marginal comments.

Analysis of students' revision decisions

I compared the students' written feedback to me, which testified to their reading and understanding of the comments, to the revisions they actually made in their texts, with an eye to detecting patterns of application of and/or disregard for the comments. I further compared the students' descriptions of comments that were problematic or helpful against their revised essays with the goal of detecting other patterns of application and disregard.
Finally, I compared the results of my analysis. I examined the comments to verify if students resolved problems that my comments pointed out or if they resolved problems I did not address. I tried to determine if—when the students read the comments as well as understood them—they also successfully alleviated the problems or enhanced the strengths indicated. Further, I compared the resolution of problems and enhanced skills to the students' interview estimations of useful, preferred, confusing, or vague comments. Finally, I explored the students' sustained use of end comments from one essay to the following essays. In the next chapter, I discuss results of this study of how end comments influence first-year writers' revision decisions.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: STUDENTS’ REVISION DECISIONS

I have thus far attempted to find ways to explore students’ writing decisions through a case study. This exploration relates to the larger issue captured within the scope of the research question: What types of comments do students apply so as to resolve targeted composition problems? The results of this study offer descriptive information about the frequency of students’ use of terminal comments according to types of comments as identified by Smith and in light of the coexistence of supporting marginal comments. In this chapter, I discuss results of revision analysis in relation to three issues mentioned earlier: (1) How accurately do students read and interpret comments, (2) Do students apply comments as they revise, (3) Do students apply the comments in such a way as to resolve targeted problems?

How accurately did students read and interpret comments?

I first compared students’ descriptions of the end comments on their papers against the comments I wrote. I then interviewed students to determine whether the comments were generally meaningful. I found that the subjects often accurately read the comments on their essays.

In written feedback to me, students skipped over portions of terminal comments only two of twelve times when they provided me with written descriptions of the comments. Maddie’s feedback to me on the comments I
wrote on essay three mentioned content problems, but she did not reference the expression problems I targeted:

I need to put my argument [sic] into the end of the first paragraph so that the anecdote and the argument tie together and the reader knows why I put in that anecdote and how it relates to my argument.

This is potentially explained by the fact that I glossed over the expression problems when I wrote:

As you revise, “clear” up some unclear sentences I’ve pointed out. More substantively, try to work the main concept of your argument into the tail end of your creative introduction.

Derrick, too, supplied feedback to me that suggested he might have inaccurately read an end comment. He confused the wording of one, as the following example shows.

The end comment:

Firmly establish your thesis at the beginning (by the end of the intro) and keep repeating it—echoing it—reiterating it—throughout your argument. This will reduce confusion for your reader.

The student’s interpretation as evidenced through written feedback to me:

You stated that I tackled a lot of information that could be very persuasive, but that I have to revise two objectives. I’ve got to establish my thesis at the beginning and end of the intro [emphasis added]. I also have to concentrate on using explicit language because I’m getting myself in trouble with certain phrases.

Although the written feedback to me from Derrick indicates he misread the comment in the example, when he revised, he added a clear thesis statement at the end of the introduction but not at the beginning. Thus, it would seem he reread the end comment during the revision process, and upon his second reading, he interpreted the comment correctly. On the whole, however,
students' written feedback to me indicated that they usually read the terminal comments on their papers accurately.

Interviews with students, however, yielded inconclusive results as to the students' interpretation of comments. The students said they understood the suggestions I made, such as Andrea, who said the end comments she received made sense. Erroll said he understood all the terminal comments on his paper, and he usually blamed the lapses I perceived in his revision on time constraints rather than on interpretation problems.

On the other hand, it became apparent that sometimes students believed they understood my intention, when, in fact, they did not. For example, Maddie said she understood everything I wrote. During an interview, however, Maddie expressed confusion about a comment pertaining to content problems on her first rhetorical analysis paper, and she said more specific direction would have helped her analysis of audience and purpose. I will discuss this example in detail in chapter five.

It appears, then, that students are able to accurately read comments; that is, they can mimic them. It is not clear, however, how accurately they interpret the comments. If anything, it seems that comments may be misunderstood by students at least part of the time.

Did students appear to apply terminal comments as they revised arguments (essays three and five)?

The research interviews were most useful for revealing the attitudes students bring into the revision process. As we will see, some students testified
that at times they just decided not to apply comments. However, in-depth analysis of the students' revisions indicates that, more often, students seemed to use all kinds of comments. Further, at no time did students make changes unless they were recommended.

What kinds of comments appeared to produce results on revision of arguments (essays three and five)?

Table 4.1 on the following page summarizes the students' revision decisions as they rewrote essays three and five—their arguments. Because I addressed organization only once in terminal comments, there is not enough information to discuss its relevancy. The remaining findings show that, in the areas of response/praise, content, and expression, the subjects usually attempted to apply the advice they read in the comments. Although they tried to use the comments, the students' revisions were not usually effective. Also, at no time did students make changes that were not recommended by the instructor.

*Elements of praise and engagement are sustained*

When revising argumentative essays (essays three and five), the students retained text that I praised or through which I engaged with their ideas or claims. It is possible, too, that the elements were simply glossed over: Students changed only elements that I explicitly identified as needing change; since praise does not require the student to make changes, the praised elements may have been sustained merely by default (see Table 4.1).
Table 4.1
Revision of Argumentative Essays Three and Five

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment Category</th>
<th>Number of Terminal Comments</th>
<th>Attempted Application</th>
<th>Effective Application</th>
<th>Accompanied by Marginal Cues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The comment that was used to effectively resolve the content problem was not accompanied by the marginal cue here indicated.

Expression comments are helpful when they are cued by marginal notes

Terminal comments on expression seemed helpful, but those comments were accompanied by marginal comments that guided the writer’s revisions. For instance, the end comments mentioned things like “‘clear’ up some unclear sentences I’ve pointed out” and “your expression of ideas could be more concise, and I’ve pointed out several of these spots.” These comments, accompanied by marginal cues, brought about effective revisions. On the other hand, the suggestion in this specific end comment

The argument could benefit from a strong statement of your thesis on p. 1. It’s implied through a question you ask, but I wasn’t sure that your point is that students should abstain during Veishea until I had read the entire piece.

was not accompanied by a marginal cue. Andrea applied the comment, but her revision was not effective. Instead of relying on end comments, Andrea said she preferred to focus on responding to marginal cues as she revised because they
were more helpful: "I always know exactly where it needs help" (see discussion in the previous section). Thus, we must consider that marginal comments alone may be sufficient to produce improved expression on argumentative essay revisions.

Students apply marginal cues ineffectively on organizational changes

Students had difficulty revising organizational problems that were identified by marginal cues. In essay three, Derrick attempted to improve two organizational problems identified by marginal comments. The first problem occurred when Derrick began explaining the motivation behind the sentencing of drug offenders in the middle of a paragraph that began with this topic sentence:

The overriding issue with mandatory minimum sentencing is prison overcrowding.

In an effort to resolve the problem, Derrick deleted three sentences that referred to drug kingpins in that paragraph. The decision was fairly effective. However, his next attempt at applying the organizational comment was not successful. In a later paragraph, Derrick discussed drug kingpins for the third time. My marginal comment asked a question:

Derrick: You discussed the drug trade earlier. Why did you decide to hold this information back until now?

When he revised, Derrick mangled the paragraph. The result was a less coherent, less cohesive essay than the one with which he began. In fact, he created a new organizational problem (three repetitive sentences in rapid succession) when he revised.
While Derrick’s attempts at revising were obvious, I could not detect Erroll’s attempt to revise according to the advice he received in a marginal comment. In essay three, the first argument, Erroll wrote the following paragraph:

Many minor offenders have been placed in prison for a ridiculous number of years. “Seventeen out of every one hundred federal prisoners are in prison for marijuana crimes, and even more in state prisons” (Landers 2). “This prison space should be used for rapists, muggers, and other dangerous criminals” (Landers 2).

In response, I supplied the following marginal note:

The topic sentence here is still misleading. Readers have been prepared by it to read a paragraph about the numbers of years in prison sentences. Instead, you discuss the severity of crimes.

The text of Erroll’s second submission was identical to the original submission.

Content comments appear to be used, but not effectively

Content comments targeted two problem areas more than any other:

With one exception (see the section on Maddie in chapter six), students either failed to relate the significance of their evidence to their main point, or they introduced opposition that totally undermined their arguments. For example, when Andrea revised, she made a point to add sentences that brought her main idea into view, but the sentences were tacked on to existing paragraphs and not smoothly integrated. Derrick did not recognize and refute the opposition in his first argument, essay three; when he wrote essay five, he recognized the opposition but gave it too much power.

All in all, these findings show us that expression problems may be best addressed by marginal comments, since students seem to rely upon them for the most effective revision. While the students did not effectively use content and
organization comments when they revised, I know that they, indeed, read the comments and attempted to use them. Based on their decisions to revise nothing unless prompted by a comment, I suspect that without comments I would have seen little to no revision at all.

What kinds of comments produced results on revision of analyses (essays four and six)?

My findings show that the subjects appeared to apply the advice they read in the comments on their rhetorical analysis papers, essays four and six (Table 4.2). Because I made only one terminal comment targeting organization, I do not have enough data to discuss its relevancy. However, as with the argumentative papers, at no time did students make changes that were not recommended by the comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revision of Analysis Essays Four and Six</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment Category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elements of Praise and Response Are Sustained

Again, students retained text that I had praised or responded to by asking questions that engaged with their ideas or claims. As with the argumentative essays, however, such “decisions” may have been without direct correlation to their value and more directly related to the tendencies of students to make no changes unless the teacher asks them to.

Expression comments are helpful when they are cued by marginal notes

I made no terminal comments pertaining to expression on the first submission of the rhetorical analysis drafts: Expression is a second priority for me because analysis is a new genre for most first-year university writers and simply understanding and producing appropriate content is a major first step for students. Although I did not use terminal comments to discuss expression, I think it is important to discuss marginal expression comments here because the subjects’ treatment of them is relevant to their subsequent composition decisions. Subjects fared well when revising expression problems on their analysis.

While this success rate is not as high as the rate on the argument papers, where students received both marginal and terminal comments on expression, there still seems to be a correlation between marginal cues and improved expression between drafts. The fact that the students’ success rate on the analysis assignments was lower than that on their argument papers may have much to do with their nascent knowledge of the genre and the specialized vocabulary it requires.
Content problems persist

Students regularly attended to content comments, but their revisions were not very effective here either. For instance, when I wrote to Erroll that he needed to come up with a clear sense of what the author under analysis was arguing, he set about to revise accordingly. "I ripped out about half the paper," he said. His revision was much better than the original submission; however, his paper was still far from successful. Specifically, Erroll misunderstood the argument and summarized when he wrote his first analysis paper, essay four. When Erroll revised essay four, he accurately interpreted the argument, thus improving his content. However, he still summarized in lieu of analyzing.

Although students' attempts to apply comments were frequently not successful and sometimes not apparent, we must be careful not to dismiss a failed attempt as no attempt. For example, Andrea said that when she got essay four back and read the marginal comments, she purposely tried to work the suggestions into her paper. However, she said she held back while addressing some of the comments pertaining to her content decisions because she feared her paper would become too long.

A: ... I always think that if I try to answer all the questions, then I'll have too much information there, and then it will become too long ...
I: Too long for who? What?
A: Ummm. Like for this one, I think I had too much information ... I'm afraid I'll put too much information in and I won't have it all down to one specific thing or two specific things. Because I always have the problem of having too much stuff ...
I: And not developing them enough? Because you're supposed to have a few topics and develop them in depth.
A: Right. 'Cause I think I'm going to have too many things that I'm just going to be talking a little bit about.
Curious about the source of her concern, I pushed a little further. "Too long for who? What?" I asked her. She explained:

I'm afraid I'll put too much information in and I won't have it all down to one specific thing or two specific things. Because I always have the problem of having too much stuff.

Andrea might have been remembering class discussions where I cautioned students that they should consider all the aspects for analysis and choose only two or three of the most promising to include in the essay. If so, classroom discussion would have undermined rather than supported my written comments, leading to the failure of her revision approach.

It seems, then, that these students used marginal comments to improve their expression as they revised rhetorical analyses. While the results of their attempts to apply content and organization comments were somewhat disappointing, they still made changes. Since the subjects did not make any changes without my advice, the comments must have helped them as they rewrote their essays.

*Students did not apply some comments*

My analysis of revisions of argumentative essays and analysis essays indicates that 75 percent of students applied my comments that suggested changes. However, twenty-five percent did not. I attempted to explore their possible reasons when I interviewed Andrea.

It appeared that Andrea did not apply two comments as she revised her first analysis (essay four). On the first page of her essay, I wrote the following marginal comments, which she did not appear to apply during her revision:
• At this point, you are simply telling Awalt’s story—you need to replace it with analysis—discuss how readers might react to his credibility, what they need in order to believe him.

• This section is similar to the idea you have in your invention sheet about the readers’ receptive minds. Are you sure it isn’t the spark of a credibility discussion? Why would he bring up this opposing situation to the one he focuses on?

I discussed her revisions with her and then asked:

I: Do you ever come across comments that you just decide to ignore?

A: Sometimes. Not usually. I try to take most of the comments because they help. Or in some way they could be helping me... I didn’t answer all those questions we were talking about [referring to marginal comments on version one]; I just didn’t really want to answer all of them. Because it just seemed to be more to write.

Erroll, too, said he ignored an end comment that targeted a content problem. The comment from essay number three, Erroll’s first argumentative paper, follows:

As you revise, take a strong stand on an issue related to your topic. What specifically are you arguing in regard to prison overcrowding? In the first paragraph are some opinions, but you reverse yourself with the phrase “on the other hand.” You seem, therefore, to be arguing that we need to build more prison cells—as your phrase “it would be better to increase prison space” implies. If so, your essay needs to address ideas connected to building cells: the costs, the intended use, the objections, the benefits.

Erroll’s revised version of this paper includes a more obvious statement of his stand on the issue. However, there is no evidence that he revised the content.

When I asked Erroll if he understood and used the comment, he said he understood it. However, Erroll revealed he might be reluctant to engage in any substantial revision task, probably due to considerable time constraints. He said:

“See, this is one of the rush papers. I had four tests that week... Sometimes it seems it’s gonna be easier just to start from scratch than it is to... to tear the whole paper apart and put it back together.”
Erroll told me he chose not to use comments focusing on content on his first analysis paper too, because “this was one of the ones that I was rushin’ to do, so . . .”

Finally, in my interview with Derrick, he said he did not know how to change an expression problem targeted by this end comment on essay three, the first argumentative essay:

... When you must quote, keep it brief and gradually lead in to the quotes, using phrases like: “According to Jim Smith, an expert in law enforcement,” . . .

He further told me that he thought the way he introduced the quotes worked well, and he said he knew of no better way to approach the “problem.” The faculty raters of my comments agreed with Derrick. I reconsidered my advice and discovered that he, indeed, was right. His lead-in to quotes and use of them was appropriate. (I discuss this problem in detail in chapter six.)

The discussion thus far has focused on those occasions when students did not appear to apply comments as they revised. However, my exploration revealed that many times, the subjects many times appeared to apply comments as they revised and wrote future essays. The results of the next portion of my study suggest that students do pay attention to the end comments on their essays.

Interpretation of results: Students’ revision decisions

The results of this study offer some important insights into the subjects’ revision decisions.

• The subjects did not make changes to argumentative and analysis essays that were not identified by me as needing revision.
• The students apparently read the comments, but they misunderstood some of them.
• Students, such as Derrick, seemed to have the capacity for judging when comments were flawed, and they resisted the advice therein.
• The subjects apparently relied more upon marginal comments than terminal comments when they addressed expression problems.
• Terminal comments suggesting revision of content, expression, and organization seem to be generally ineffective in promoting successful revision.

In chapter five I will investigate the subjects’ composition decisions as they engage future writing projects. Of special interest will be the comparison of previously targeted problems with newly targeted problems.
CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF COMMENTS ON SUBSEQUENT WRITING PROJECTS

To this point, I have investigated students' revision decisions between drafts of their argumentative essays (essays three and five) and between drafts of their analysis essays (essay four and six). My exploration is my attempt to answer, in part, the research question: What types of comments do students apply so as to resolve targeted composition problems? Thus far, the research question has been answered only in terms of resolution of composition problems as seen between drafts of the same essay.

Of equal interest to instructors is the way in which students appear to incorporate or fail to incorporate advice from one set of essay drafts into another, subsequent, writing project. The results of this portion of the study offer descriptive information about the frequency of students' use of terminal comments according to types of comments as identified by Smith. Because the texts under analysis bridge assignments, there are no coexisting, marginal cues to guide the students' composition process.

To explore this aspect of the research question, I first categorized the types of end comments that appeared on the first and final submissions of essay three, the first argumentative essay, and of essay four, the first rhetorical analysis essay.
I then surveyed the subsequent compositions in each genre to ascertain which, if any, previously targeted problems recurred.

Because the two genres, argument and analysis, require different skills, the types of comments pertinent to each might vary considerably; therefore, I did not endeavor to draw comparisons across the genres. Also, because some comments on essays three and four were not applicable to essays five and six, I did not use all the end comments from the previous essays in this portion of the investigation. Therefore, the numbers of engagement, expression, content, and organization comments used in this analysis are different from those used in the preceding analysis of chapter four.

What kinds of comments produced results on subsequent essays?

Table 5.1 below quantifies the students' subsequent composition efforts. My findings suggest that the subjects resolved content problems, targeted by comments in essays three and four, when they wrote the preliminary drafts of essays five and six. The subjects also resolved two of their three previous organizational problems. However, they were not able to carry forward successfully the comments on essays three and four that signaled expression problems. With the exception of two incidents, previous comments of praise and response were essay-specific, so those comments are not included in this analysis.
Table 5.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terminal Comment Category</th>
<th>Number of Comments</th>
<th>Effective Application of Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content: From Argument Essay 3 to Essay 5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content: From Analysis Essay 4 to Essay 6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression: From Argument Essay 3 to Essay 5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression: From Analysis Essay 4 to Essay 6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization: From Argument Essay 3 to Essay 5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization: From Analysis Essay 4 to Essay 6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding comments targeting content problems

In argumentative essays three and five

The comments targeting content problems that were carried forward in the argumentative essays (from both drafts of essay three to the first submitted draft of essay five) pertained to the following areas:

- Repetitious content
- Noncontroversial thesis/Inappropriate support for the thesis statement
- No demonstrated relationship between thesis and evidence

An example of repetitious content can be found in Derrick's first argument (essay three): His content became repetitious when he revised his first submission. My comments asked him to revise for cohesiveness, but when he altered his text, this was the result:
Mandatory minimum sentencing attempts to sentence drug offenders to long jail terms. It doesn't depend on whether or not they were previously convicted of any type of drug-related crime. Mandatory minimum sentencing was designed to incarcerate drug kingpins for lengthy periods of time. Because of this, anyone who commits severe crimes is able to receive a lengthy minimum sentence.

Mandatory minimum sentencing was designed to incarcerate the worst drug kingpins.

The terminal comment I wrote on the final submission of essay three advised Derrick to carefully reread his work whenever he made changes. When he wrote essay five, his second argument, he made no errors that resembled those above.

Erroll's first argument about prison overcrowding (essay three) exemplifies a problem with noncontroversial thesis and inappropriate support. Erroll had a problem with a noncontroversial thesis in his initial submission; he took no decisive stand on an issue—he simply reported on the topic. In response to a comment that asked him to develop a thesis that took a stand (an ambiguous comment that could be interpreted as either a content or expression issue), he revised by writing the following sentences:

I feel that the "get tough on crime attitude" is unnecessary. I feel it would be better to increase prison space and keep our citizens safe.

However, Erroll did not adjust the content of his argument to fit his newly formed thesis. The body of his paper covered early release and inappropriate imprisonment of minor offenders, but he did not discuss the pros and cons of increasing prison space and safety issues.
In response to Erroll's new dilemma, I wrote:

Now, you have a new problem. Your paper must focus on your topic and issue as announced in your thesis. In other words, your paper should discuss why and how we can increase prison space. Instead, you discuss prison terms.

Erroll could not revise essay three again, but he did have the chance to use the advice when he wrote essay five, the second argument. In fact, the evidence in that subsequent argument effectively supported Erroll's thesis statement.

Andrea's evidence was appropriate for her argument, but she did not remind the reader of how the evidence related to the main idea as she wrote. For example, Andrea's thesis statement was that students should not drink during the Veishe celebration. Her text discussed all the hazards of alcohol consumption: One paragraph discussed medical problems associated with drinking, another discussed the increased likelihood of smoking that drinkers face, still another discussed the costs. However, at no point did Andrea remind readers that these discussions supported her argument that students should abstain during Veishea.

When Andrea revised, she appeared to apply ineffectively the advice in my comments, as discussed earlier in chapter four. On the other hand, when she composed the second argument, essay five, she more successfully integrated her main idea throughout her essay. Specifically, Andrea tied her thesis statement or paraphrased versions of her thesis statement (television is the major contributor
to kids’ violent acts) into more than half her essay’s paragraphs using sentences and phrases such as:

Considering this, it is not surprising that children are becoming more violent.

and

Not only does TV violence change the way young people act . . .

*In rhetorical analysis essays four and six*

When the subjects composed their second analysis essay, essay six, they seemed to attend effectively to previous content comments (found on each of two drafts of essay four). The previous comments targeted the following problem areas:

- Summary of argument instead of analysis of the rhetorical elements
- Argument of the issue instead of analysis of the rhetorical elements
- Failure to identify target audience, purpose, contextual issues

On the other hand, the only content comment that was not effectively addressed was in the second rhetorical analysis assignment. Derrick effectively carried forward advice from one content comment on essay four, which suggested he furnish the audience and purpose descriptions needed. However, he did not follow through by referring to them specifically in his second rhetorical analysis essay, in spite of a clear directive in the end comment on the first analysis. The comment from essay four read:

In the next analysis, be sure to talk about how readers feel & think as a result of an author’s techniques and then directly relate that response to the impact it has on the author’s ability to achieve her purpose.
Instead of incorporating the advice in this comment, however, Derrick produced a first draft of essay six that closely resembled the first draft of essay four. Generally, he summarized the article and explained the flaws in the writer’s argument; he did not relate the author’s approach to the audience and purpose. One rater pointed out that it may have helped Derrick had I asked “for audience analysis more directly.”

Regarding comments targeting organizational problems

The research subjects seemed to carry forward organizational advice, even when they did not use it to revise the previous paper. Maddie, for example, seemed to carry forward organization advice, even when she did not use it to revise the previous argumentative paper. The comments suggesting reorganization appeared at the end of Maddie’s first and final submission of essay four, her first analysis. The first organization comment follows:

Once you’ve pared down the aspects you’re analyzing, go back through your paragraphs. Determine which information might fit under your new 2 or 3 topics.

Although the preceding comment is too specific to be directly applied to her subsequent analysis essay (essay six), on the second submission of essay four, Maddie was again advised to carefully consider organization when she drafted essay six:

Your goals are to choose the most important two or three areas for analysis, forecast those general areas, write strong topic sentences that announce those categories (one per paragraph), and build an entire paragraph on that one category or one narrowly focused aspect of that category.

The organizational problems disappeared in essay six.
When Andrea wrote the first analysis, she combined discussion of all sorts of elements within a single paragraph: credibility, illustrations, anecdotal evidence, and recognition of opposition in one; tone/language, emotional appeals, and support in another. My comments advised Andrea to tightly focus her discussion around one rhetorical element, and I gave her an example of all the rhetorical elements she had covered in one paragraph. While Andrea’s revision did not improve much, when Andrea wrote the second rhetorical analysis, essay six, her paragraphs were more cohesive.

Regarding comments targeting expression problems

Because this chapter explores only students’ uses of terminal comments on subsequent essays, I do not consider analysis essays (essay four and six)—on which I made no terminal comments pertaining to expression. Examining essays three and five, however, subjects appeared to carry forward advice related to expression two out of six occasions comments targeted those problems. The previous comments had addressed the following problems in essay three, the first argument paper:

Erroll, for example, did not use language concise or strong enough to let his opinion on the issue of prison overcrowding be recognized. Once he revised his first argument, essay three, he appeared to grasp what was needed, for in the subsequent argument, essay five, Erroll’s thesis contained a stronger opinion:

It [juvenile violence] is the fault of the parents giving access of the weapons to the juveniles.
When writing the first argument, Derrick leaped into quoted material without introducing the ideas with his own text. For example, on the first page, he wrote:

The overriding issue with mandatory minimum sentencing is prison overcrowding. "The Bureau of Prisons projections of future inmate population growth tell us that inmate population will continue to spiral, growing from 76,000 today to some 116,000 before the end of the decade" (Fed. Prison Pop.).

At this point, I gave Derrick the advice that was criticized by my raters as accurate but trivial in chapter four:

When you must quote, keep it brief and gradually lead in to the quotes, using phrases like: "According to Jim Smith, an expert in law enforcement," . . .

However, when Derrick wrote the subsequent argument, essay five, he used more graceful approaches to his quotes, as the following excerpt shows:

As stated in Mrs. McGough's article, "Our television shows rarely showed more than a fist fight . . ."  

Interpretation of results: Students' composing decisions

This portion of the study points out two salient issues—one related to general results and one related to individual differences within apparently homogeneous populations.

General results

The results of this study suggest that students might effectively apply terminal comments concerning content and organization when they compose subsequent essays.

On the other hand, terminal comments that suggest changes in expression did not appear to be consistently helpful to students when they wrote subsequent papers: Students effectively applied expression comments only when they
focused on obvious, stable problems. If comments highlighted conciseness or clarity issues (where students must be conscious of their word choices), the end comments were not carried forward from one essay to the next in a way that resolved targeted problems. Finally, while the focus of the comment influences students’ use of expression comments to a small degree, the quality of expression comments seemed to have no bearing on students’ subsequent effective use of those suggestions.

Before drawing any conclusions or making any recommendations, it is necessary to understand more clearly how and why students use the comments on their papers. In the next chapter, I will focus on two of the case study subjects, Maddie and Derrick, to closely study their writing and revision decisions.

Individual differences

It was at this point that I noticed Erroll’s grades and revision practices seemed different from the others in the group. On papers five and six, the second argumentative and analytical papers, three of the four subjects’ papers were in the “C” range; they chose not to revise either paper. On the other hand, Erroll received a “U” on both papers. The low grade that he received may have played an important role in his decision to revise. At the same time, the indicator of satisfactory grades that the others received may have played a role in their decisions not to revise.

Moreover, when Erroll revised, his work was less expert than that of the other subjects. He was the only one of the subjects who told me (twice) that he rushed through his revisions. On his third essay, an argument, Erroll revised his
thesis statement to take a stand, but he did nothing to the balance of his content. The result was his argument did not support his thesis, and the grade on his paper remained below satisfactory (it rose from a D to a D+). Often, Erroll sifted through his essays, revising word choices on some lines but not on others.

Researchers expect subjects in apparently homogeneous groups to demonstrate similar results. I can only speculate about what may have caused the difference between Erroll and the others. Perhaps he was experiencing personal problems, although none were apparent. He might have carried more than the average number of credit hours, or he might have worked to pay his tuition, room, and board when they did not. Or the indicators that I used to create a homogeneous group were inadequate. This is the difficulty of achieving homogeneous groups: The possible variables are seemingly endless, and researchers cannot test for them all.
CHAPTER SIX

DESCRIPTIONS: STUDENTS AT WORK

The thick description of qualitative research gives me a chance to tell the stories of my subjects and be more interpretive of their responses. Maddie and Derrick are two of the case study subjects whose work has been discussed in chapters four and five. In this chapter, however, I will provide thick description of Maddie and Derrick’s writing and revision decisions. Quantitative results show us what students are likely to do when they compose essays. Through the qualitative passages I furnish, however, we may come closer to understanding how and why students use our comments. My descriptions include their written and oral feedback to me, faculty members’ feedback to me, and excerpts from my comments and their essays. As I tell Maddie and Derrick’s stories in this chapter, I will be more speculative than in previous chapters.

At the beginning of this study, I selected the four subjects on the basis of several criteria: high school class rank, ACT-English scores, major course of study, successful completion of English 104 at Iowa State University, age, and native language (English). My objective was to find four students who were fairly similar and typical of ISU first-year writers. Maddie showed the problem that occurs when the student thinks she is doing one thing and the instructor thinks she is doing something else. I picked Derrick because his story pointed out the problem of the fallibility of the instructor.
At the onset of this chapter, I will describe Maddie and Derrick as the students I saw in my class. I will describe in detail Maddie's revision and writing decisions as I observed from the data, beginning with her approach to writing and revising the first argument (essay three), proceeding to analyze her approach to the composition of the subsequent argument, essay five. Next, I will describe her approach to writing and revising the first analysis, essay four, and her approach to writing the subsequent analysis, essay six. When I have fully described Maddie's composition decisions, I will turn my attention to Derrick and treat my investigation of his decisions in kind.

Maddie

Maddie was a dark-haired, blue-eyed first-year student, majoring in business. She was always neatly dressed in clean blue jeans and a crew-neck sweater or tee-top. Although she was reserved—almost shy—in class, the other students seemed to like her. In fact, she appeared quite comfortable with the two young women who sat on either side of her during English 105. Maddie rarely spoke during class unless I specifically asked her a question; when she answered, she was hesitant with her response.

Maddie's approach to her composition assignments was commendable. Feedback from students she collaborated with on a writing project stated that Maddie was reliable: She attended all meetings, contributed to the research, and provided meaningful peer review. She did not miss one day of class in sixteen weeks, and every paper she wrote was turned in on time.
Maddie's first submission of the four essays under analysis in this study were all average papers—if my practice were to put grades on the first submissions, I would have given her a "C-," "C," or "C+" on them. She had the option to revise them, but I did not require it. Maddie revised the first argument and analysis, essays three and four, but not essays five and six. In this chapter, I will analyze both drafts of her first argument and analysis and only the first draft of the subsequent essays in each genre.

Derrick

Derrick was a quiet young man with dark eyes. He joked with the other guys on occasion, and listened intently when they talked. For that matter, he listened intently when I talked. He usually showed up for class on time, dressed in sneakers, baggy cords, and a button-down shirt—loose at the collar, rumpled, and untucked, but clean.

Other than one day near the end of the term, Derrick, like Maddie, never missed class. Occasionally he turned an essay in a little late, but all his daily work was conscientiously completed on time. Derrick's spelling, punctuation, and grammar skills were greater than those of most of his classmates, so his papers were very readable. Had I graded Derrick's first submissions of each essay, I would have given him marks in the "C" range, with the first papers being lower. Derrick opted to revise essays three and four. I have elected to analyze Derrick's writing and revising decisions on essay three and his subsequent writing decisions on essay five.
Maddie’s approach to writing the first argument

The first submission of essay three

Maddie based her first argumentative essay on a news clipping from the *Des Moines Register*, which we had discussed in class. The subject of the article, a northern Iowa college student, had been sentenced to a long prison term for a relatively minor offense. Maddie wrote about the “get-tough-on-crime” campaign and its part in sending too many petty offenders to jail, and she offered alternatives, including ideas for building more efficient prison facilities. As I had encouraged her, she tried her hand at a creative introduction, as follows:

A mother sits in the court room anxiously waiting for the judge to come back and announce to the court his decision on whether or not Rob, her son, attempted murderer and also a two time drug offender, will get his parole or if he will have to stay in jail for the next 25 years. She has heard rumors about prisoners being released early because of the overcrowding, but she is confident that the judge will rule against Rob’s parole hearing. When the judge enters the room everyone stands. There is silence in the courtroom. After everyone is seated, the judge announces that he has granted Rob’s request for parole. The mother breaks down and cries in disbelief. She turns and hugs her son in fear of Rob returning to their neighborhood, where he is likely to commit another crime.

Maddie began a new paragraph that explained why Americans want criminals locked up for longer periods of time, and she touched on the overcrowding problem that resulted. At the end of the second paragraph came her thesis, obscured by faulty punctuation:

Due to the large amounts of overcrowded prisons, tougher parole and sentencing policies, and more prison space are needed.

I penned in the words “as well as” above the final “and.” In the margin I wrote:

So your thesis is ____? Break your thesis out so readers know precisely where you stand and what you’ll argue.
Maddie’s expression was frequently unclear, as this sentence from her second page also revealed:

The problem with prisons now is that prisoners are not serving their full time due to overcrowding and the introduction of mandatory minimum sentences, which demands that prisoners stay behind bars longer.

In the margin next to this sentence, I wrote, “There is contradiction here—can you detect the problem?” In my terminal response to Maddie’s first submission, I asked her to “clear up” some of her expression, but “more substantively, try to work the main concept of your argument into the tail end of your creative introduction.”

As I referred to in chapter four, Maddie’s written feedback to me indicated that she understood the part of my terminal comment that targeted the content of her essay, although she did not reference the expression problems:

I need to put my argument [sic] into the end of the first paragraph so that the anecdote and the argument tie together and the reader knows why I put in that anecdote and how it relates to my argument.

Maddie’s approach to revising essay three

When Maddie revised essay three, she took my advice pertaining to the content of the introduction. She added two sentences to the anecdotal beginning, so her new version read as follows:

... After everyone is seated, the judge announces that he has granted Rob’s request for parole. The mother breaks down and cries in disbelief. She turns and hugs her son in fear of Rob returning to their neighborhood, where he is likely to commit another crime. In this case, the judge probably made his decision based on the states over crowded prisons and their need to make room for the newer prisoners. Decisions like these have the politicians and citizens seeking for alternative solutions to the crowding.
Maddie's new introduction retained its attention-grabbing story, made reference to her thesis, and provided a smoother transition to the body of her essay. This revision was the only successful one of all subjects' revisions in the content category.

However, Maddie's treatment of expression problems was only intermittently effective. Remember, this was Maddie's original text:

Due to the large amounts of overcrowded prisons, tougher parole and sentencing policies, and more prison space are needed.

I penned in the words "as well as" above the final "and." Upon revision, Maddie effectively used my in-text comment, "as well as," (in a different position than I had imagined) to improve the level of conciseness in her thesis statement. Her use dramatically changed the focus and, therefore, the meaning of the sentence. Compare her original and revised versions:

Original

Due to the large amounts of over crowded prisons, tougher parole and sentencing policies, and more prison space are needed.

The original thesis seemed to indicate that because of overcrowding, tougher parole policies are needed, tougher sentencing policies are needed, and more prison space is needed.

Revision

Due to the large amounts of over crowded prisons, as well as tougher parole and sentencing policies, more prison space is needed.

"As well as," placed behind the introductory clause, changed or clarified the meaning of the original thesis. Only after revision did it become clear that
crowded prisons, parole policies, and sentencing policies are creating the need for more prison space. Maddie did not use the accompanying marginal comment that asked her to break out the thesis, so readers would “know what you’ll argue.” Instead, Maddie seemed to disregard it, perhaps because she did not think that change was still needed. In view of the changed emphasis derived from her placement of “as well as,” I somewhat agree.

Maddie also revised the contradictory sentence, but this time her revision did not resolve the problem. Again, her original and revised versions:

Original

The problem with prisons now is that prisoners are not serving their full time due to overcrowding and the introduction of mandatory minimum sentences, which demands that prisoners stay behind bars longer.

In response to her original effort, I wrote:

There is a contradiction here. Can you detect it?

Revision

The problem with prisons now is that they are so overcrowded that prisoners are not serving their full time and are being released early. Due to the introduction of mandatory minimum sentences, which demands that prisoners stay behind bars longer, prisoners are being kept for longer periods of time, and therefore, overcrowding the prisons.

In her revision, Maddie still contradiactorily explained that prisoners are being released early because mandatory sentencing keeps them imprisoned longer. The unpredictable or obtuse expression issues were not effectively attended to, even with the guidance of marginal cues. Only those problems that could be easily fixed by inserting proffered words or phrases (“as well as,” for example) were effectively applied to Maddie’s paper.
Final comments on essay three

While I emphasized expression and content problems in the comments on the first draft of essay three, my comments on Maddie's final draft of that paper emphasized expression and organization. Maddie sometimes presented material in an unpredictable order. For example, at the end of a paragraph about a Senate bill providing funds for regional prisons, she wrote:

Each year, the number of inmates continues to rise and prison space is getting limited, which forces states to seek alternative solutions.

The sentence would have more appropriately introduced the paragraph. In response I offered Maddie a marginal comment and an example, as well as a terminal comment, telling her that her organization was not always effective. Since students did not revise the final submissions, the only way Maddie could use these final comments on essay three was during the drafting of the second argumentative paper, essay five.

Maddie's approach to writing the second argument

The first submission of essay five: Subsequent argumentative essay

Maddie's subsequent argument was a response to the school yard killing of several elementary-aged children and a teacher in Arkansas. Maddie used a poignant description of the crime as her opening paragraph. In accordance with the previous comment targeting content in essay three, but with no additional prompting, Maddie connected the introductory anecdote to her argument:

In response to the Arkansas shooting, the world is wondering what is happening to our children that would make them want to kill others... The real reason our children are acting in this manner is because the media is portraying too much violence on television.
No problems in organization arose in her second argument either. However, expression problems did recur. Throughout the essay were words and phrases that were not concise and, therefore, detracted from the power of Maddie's argument. For example, Maddie wrote, "in these manners," "society has offered many solutions, yet there are none that can be proven," "the Eddie Eagle program addresses the young children to learn about safety," and "television is modeling and repeating the behavior."

Maddie's approach to writing the first analysis

The first submission of essay four

Of three short persuasive pieces I furnished the students for analysis purposes, Maddie chose to work with an article on prison reform. The article, which appeared in *Time*, was written by a lifer in Mississippi's penal system. The author, Wilbert Rideau, advocated release for elderly offenders serving life sentences because, past their prime and now strangers to the hormonal surges that propelled them into crime, they were no longer a threat to society.

When preparing her first rhetorical analysis, Maddie stated that she worked diligently:

When I first started writing this essay, I had no clue what to do. I actually ended up restating what the author had said. I found it really hard just to write about what kind of writing style he had or how he presented his essay... It took me several times to write this essay the right way. I looked at the sample essay the teacher gave us and kind of started with that... I made an outline of the topics I was going to cover in my essay and that really helped me organize my essay. I started at the computer and kept writing and deleting stuff. Once I got going, it was easy to go in order.
Maddie began her rhetorical analysis by citing the context of the article and the author’s main idea. She forecast the direction of her essay, stating that “Rideau uses personal anecdotes, comparisons, and contrasts to present his essay.” While Maddie’s analysis does cover those areas, they arise in no discernible order. Also, she gave short shrift to the credibility issue, which (due to the author’s situation and circumstances as an aging prisoner who stood to benefit from the success of his argument) should have formed the bulk of her discussion.

The terminal comments I gave Maddie are extensive and far outweigh the marginal cues I wrote. They focus on content and organization problems:

Maddie: You are on the right track here, even though you slip into summary on occasion—it’s hard to avoid at first.

As you revise, I’d like to see you do two things. First, reconsider your topics. Instead of naming 4 areas for analysis in your intro, why not just 2 or 3? It would be more concise (the essay, I mean). Rather than spreading your analysis so broadly, try focusing on two main areas for critical thinking. Most students have chosen to examine the author’s credibility and either his use of emotional appeals or evidence (support).

Once you’ve pared down the aspects you’re analyzing, go back through your paragraphs. Determine which information might fit under your new 2 or 3 topics. Then think about how the writer’s purpose and target audience have been attended to or ignored as he wrote.

Maddie’s written feedback to me, while brief, indicates she accurately read the end comment.

I must not summarize the article. I should only name 2 or 3 areas for discussion. I should try to focus on 2 main areas.

I designed the comment to be very specific, and I thought the “listing” effect (“do two things. First . . . Once you’ve pared down the aspects you’re
analyzing . . . then”) would guide Maddie as she revised. Also, the faculty raters deemed the comment valuable:

From Rater 1: Your end note (that tells her to reconsider her topics and name 2 or 3 areas for discussion instead of the 4 she has) is a good suggestion.

From Rater 3: Your opening statement is concise and effective—Maddie needs to know that she’s doing too much mere summary. I like the way you give her two additional things to work on (narrowing the focus and improving the coherence), explaining each clearly. I particularly liked the way you phrased your suggestion about examining ethos and mode of argumentation—it gives helpful hints without appropriating the student’s own approach to the assignment.

Maddie’s approach to revising essay four

Even though I specifically suggested she focus on the author’s credibility and emotional appeals or support, Maddie did not incorporate any of those rhetorical elements in her forecast statement. In fact, she made only one change to the forecast: In accordance with her apparent interpretation of my first directive (that she should name only two or three areas for analysis) she dropped one of the areas—now, instead of naming anecdotes, criticisms, comparisons, and contrasts, she names anecdotes, comparisons, and contrasts. Seemingly, Maddie took my comment literally: I told her to name areas for analysis, and she named them. I intended that she would not only name ethos, pathos, and/or logos (or credibility, audience appeals, or support) as the areas but discuss those in her analysis.

I suggested Maddie might discuss support as other writers had. Because Maddie dropped “criticism” from her list of areas for analysis, she apparently felt she was forced to change the first words of her third paragraph, “using criticism,” on her revision, so she gave me the word “support,” just as I’d asked. A
marginal comment also guided that revision decision. The paragraph now begins "Trying to support his logic."

Maddie made no revisions based on my second directive, and, in response to my third directive, she made only one incidental revision. I asked her to "think about how the writer’s purpose and target audience have been attended to." In a paragraph that discusses contrasts, Maddie added this clause to the last sentence: "but without proper references, the audience might doubt his evidence."

Although I thought she did not apply the terminal comments that targeted content and organization, she said in her interview that she did. Referring to my suggestion that she reconsider her topics and name two or three instead of four, I asked:

Now, did you make that change? Ummm. Looks to me like you’re down to three: anecdotes, comparisons, and contrast. Right?

Maddie: Right.

Okay. So it looks like you tried to narrow it down a little. [Referring again to the end comments on the first version] "Rather than spreading your analysis so broadly, try focusing on two main areas for critical thinking. Most students have chosen to examine the author’s credibility and either his use of emotional appeals or evidence.” And you really didn’t go that direction, I don’t think, did you?

Maddie: I don’t think so.

Maybe what happened is that you just took one of the words out of your intro and didn’t really change that sentence. [Referring to student’s essay] “Rideau uses personal anecdotes, comparisons…” Yeah, you took out the word “criticisms” and didn’t really talk about that. . . Let’s see what you’ve got here.

Okay. On your first version I say, “Once you’ve pared down the aspects you’re analyzing, go back through your paragraphs, determine which information might fit under the new two or three topics, then think about how the writer’s purpose and target audience have been attended to or ignored as he wrote.”
Can you remember, when you revised, did you try to apply these things, or did it seem like too big a job and so...

Maddie: No. I did try.

Obviously, Maddie and I had differing perspectives on the revisions she made. I detected no apparent effort to revise and initially believed she was approaching the task irresponsibly. However, her input caused me to reconsider. What I thought was her irresponsibility might have been miscommunication or different standards. Perhaps she attached different meaning into the comments than I intended. Perhaps she did not have the skills to make noticeable changes.

On the other hand, as Maddie revised she closely adhered to the few marginal comments I supplied. As I mentioned earlier, Maddie's dropping of the word "criticisms" from her topics for discussion was guided not just by the terminal comment, but a marginal comment cued that decision as well. Also, Maddie applied a marginal comment in the second paragraph on anecdotes. Her paragraph originally ended with these three sentences:

He hopes to influence the reader by letting them think he has inside information on the subject. This technique may give the audience the idea that he may not be a credible source. It makes them think that he is just writing the essay to benefit himself so that he can get out of prison.

In the margin, I penned:

Yes. Now, how does this impact his purpose?

Maddie attempted to answer my comment with the following revision:

It makes them think that he is just writing the essay to benefit himself so that he can get out of prison, *which destroys the purpose of his essay* and does not make him a credible source [emphasis mine].
On the second page, I noted that a paragraph was vague and contained mostly summary. I suggested in the marginal comment that the material may need incorporation into other paragraphs. While Maddie did not incorporate the material elsewhere, she did heed my warning: She dropped the entire paragraph, to the improvement of her analysis.

In Maddie's case, content and organization problems were not effectively attended to, although her revision decisions were more astute with the guidance of marginal cues. On the other hand, since Maddie made better revisions in response to the marginal comments, specific marginal prompts or cues on content and organization may be beneficial.

Final comments on essay four

On the final draft of essay four, I again wrote extensive end comments. For the most part, those comments emphasized the same problems as the first comments: content and organization. However, these terminal comments were even more detailed than the first. This time, I specifically mentioned that her forecast statement should have listed credibility as an area for analysis:

You have made some good points about Rideau's credibility—a necessary topic for analysis because of his situation (a prisoner writing about early parole). As such, your forecast should indicate that you'll analyze Rideau's credibility (ethos). In fact, nearly all your essay pertains to his credibility in one way or another, so why not announce the concept to your readers in your forecast?

In reference to the organizational problems, I again took a sequential approach. This time, I gave Maddie a list of her goals:

Your goals are to choose the most important two or three areas for analysis, forecast those general areas, write strong topic sentences that announce those categories (one per paragraph), and build an entire paragraph on that one category or one narrowly focused aspect of that category. Finally, as you write your concluding paragraph, the last
sentence (or 2) should leave an impression of your estimation of the argument's value or success. If your last sentence discusses good things, the impression you leave is that the argument was good.

As with the argumentative essays, the only way Maddie could use these final comments on essay four was during the drafting of the second analysis paper, essay six.

Maddie's approach to writing the second analysis

The first submission of essay six: Subsequent rhetorical analysis essay

Maddie's subsequent analysis addressed a persuasive letter to the class of 2001. I wrote the piece, intending to critique it as I guided the students through a practice analysis. However, the students asked to use my letter for their second rhetorical analysis assignment for three reasons. First, the letter addressed subject matter closely related to the topics they had been exploring all semester, so they felt comfortable that they had sufficient knowledge with which to interpret my letter. Second, the students were interested in the topic because the subject matter was timely: It addressed the recent rash of teenage violence. Third, I told them that there were weaknesses in the letter as a result of its hasty composition and that I would I appreciated their input for improving its persuasiveness. I decided to allow willing students to analyze it; others selected from two anthologized essays.

Maddie began the analysis by identifying the author, the target audience, the intended purpose, and the main idea of the letter. She forecast the body of
her analysis and followed through by devoting a paragraph to each area in the order in which they were listed:

McGough uses personal anecdotes and opinions to present her letter. Lacking the use of logos, she uses these techniques to try and influence the decisions of the ISU class of 2001...

Maddie devoted the first paragraph of the body of the analysis to describing how the author's anecdotes appealed to the readers. In her second paragraph, she described the letter as the author's opinion and argued that outside support was needed to enhance the credibility of the claims. In the third paragraph, she explained how the author used personal experiences and opinions to emotionally motivate the reader. Only in the fourth paragraph, where Maddie described the tone of the letter, did she stray from her forecast topics. All in all, this rhetorical analysis was focused and logically organized. Maddie consistently brought the discussion around to the rhetorical concerns of audience and purpose.

In view of Maddie's composition decisions, she seemed to effectively apply the terminal comments from essay four on this subsequent writing project.

Derrick's approach to writing the first argument

The first submission of essay three

Derrick based his first argument on the same news clipping as the one Maddie used. Derrick, however, focused his essay on mandatory minimum sentencing. The first sentence of Derrick's argument was his thesis:

In order to run an efficient, fair judicial system, mandatory minimum sentencing must be abolished.
Derrick’s forecast took up three sentences in his introduction, as follows:

Mandatory minimum sentencing seems to aid in prison overcrowding. Also, many nonwhites are being unfairly punished through mandatory minimum sentencing. They have not helped to incarcerate notable drug kingpins, and they also have[n’t] cut off the flow of drugs by any significant amount.

Derrick then wrote a paragraph devoted to each topic: prison overcrowding, discrimination against minorities, and ineffective curbing of drug crimes. Derrick slipped into one unannounced topic, that being the case of the Iowa college student cited in the Des Moines Register article; however, that subject fit under the umbrella of his phrase “unfairly punished.”

Throughout Derrick’s paper, I wrote brief marginal comments. For instance, when he wrote that several problems arose due to mandatory minimums, I asked if they were not ongoing and, therefore, if present tense were not more accurate. I asked him if he had tried to write an attention-grabbing introduction (he hadn’t accomplished it), and I gave him some feedback on his claims:

Derrick: When were the mandatory sentences enacted? Maybe the mand. minimums were intended to stop the discrimination?

When he wrote that minorities were more likely than whites to “receive a ‘substantial assistance’ reduction, I asked, “What does this mean?” Up to this point, I believe my comments were valuable.

I must have been tired the day I evaluated Derrick’s paper—the end comment I wrote was practically useless to him. In my defense, one of my objectives for this assignment was that students practice their citation and quotation skills. Still, the emphasis I placed on those elements was not
appropriate, considering the substantive matters I might have called to his attention. What makes these circumstances interesting, however, is Derrick's treatment of my mistake.

To trace Derrick's response to teacher error, I began by comparing my comment with Derrick's written feedback to me. My comment started with praise, and then I gave him the following advice:

In spite of all the little editorial remarks I make in margins, I suggest you give special attention to this remark as you revise: Try to use direct quotes only when you can think of no better or efficient way to incorporate the quoted material. Strive to summarize or paraphrase the borrowed material so your voice comes through, When you must quote, keep it brief and gradually lead in to the quotes, using phrases like: “According to Jim Smith, an expert in law enforcement.”

Derrick’s written feedback to me was the first indicator of a problem. In fact, initially I thought he was referring to my comments on essay two; now I believe he was summing up the essence of my marginal comments on his argument. Derrick translated my comments as follows:

Basically, you stated that I should go more in depth in my writing. Using more description would help the reader to get a better understanding for what I am trying to say.

Derrick’s approach to revising essay three

When I later interviewed Derrick, I knew something was wrong, but I wasn’t prepared at that time to analyze the situation. I asked Derrick if he tried to use the end comment. He stalled. The following is a partial transcript of our talk.
I = instructor
D = Derrick

D: Umm. Some of . . . What I tried to do was, like, I think in this one [indicating the revised essay] . . . I think that in this one, I did really well. I think I only used one or two quotes in this one.
I: Okay. So, when you went through and did your rewrite, you took out some of your quotes; is that what you’re saying?
D: Uhhh. I don’t remember. I think so. There’s’ like, two, three of them, four.
I: And I say, “Strive to paraphrase or summarize the borrowed material so your voice comes through.” So, is that what you did? Can you remember?
D: Yeah. With all the quotes I pulled out, I tried to say them a little differently.
I: Was that difficult?
D: Yeah. Sometimes it was. Because the information was sorta bland.
I: [Reading from the comments] “If you must quote, keep it brief and gradually lead into the quote, using phrases like, ‘According to Jim Smith, an expert in law enforcement,’ that sort of introduction.” Did you try to incorporate that into your paper?
D: I think so.
I: Let’s see if we can find anything like that.
D: I think the reason I wasn’t able to do that was because it was written by a group, FAMM, I think. I couldn’t say according to so-and-so because it’s kinda hard when it’s a group.
I: I see. Hmmm. Here’s one: “The federal judicial found that . . . .” I can see why you didn’t need to lead into these others.

Later, both faculty raters who surveyed my comments called my attention to my error. Their comments were:

Rater 2: Good attention to order of topics. Good supportive requests for clarification and reflection. End note focus on over-use of quotes surprised me.

You ask who cares about crowding on rev. but not on original? Rev. end note doesn’t follow up on use of quotes or order of topics. Positive note “some good revision” — I think the original may be better?

Rater 3: The focus of your terminal comment seemed to me trivial compared to other major changes you might have suggested—the incorporation of quoted material is not the major problem in the essay. Your marginal/textual comments, on the other hand, point to substantive issues, AND the student indeed seems to have paid attention to some of them.

Obviously, my terminal comment did not help Derrick make effective revisions to his essay. In the light of the fact that it failed to guide him appropriately, one may even assert that my comment caused harm to his work.

For, upon a third and fourth reading of Derrick’s essay three drafts, I agreed with
Rater 2; I think the original may have been better. This analysis, then, suggests several conclusions with pedagogical significance. One is that I, like all instructors, do make mistakes. Another is that Derrick recognized at least one and maybe other occasions when I made mistakes. Perhaps his past writing experience cued him into my error, or maybe something I said in class helped him out. He might have read something in our textbook that gave him the knowledge he needed to make his revision decisions. Whatever the case may be, Derrick recognized my mistake. And, most importantly, when Derrick recognized my mistake, he chose to circumvent my erroneous instructions, thus rightfully laying claim to his text. In essence, because they were faulty, Derrick appeared to ignore the terminal comments targeting expression; he concentrated on the marginal notes instead.

Most of the marginal comments I wrote on Derrick’s paper were in the form of questions. He answered nearly all of them: In response to my question about verb tense, he made grammatical changes. In response to my question on the creativity of his introduction, he created a new introduction. In response to my question about a word choice he had made, he changed a word (the wrong one). However, there appeared to be some lines he would not cross.

For example, when I tried, through marginal response, to engage him in developing his ideas further, Derrick apparently disregarded my question. To have entertained it seriously would have meant reconsidering one third of his argument—that the minimum sentencing laws were enacted to nab drug
kingpins. To incorporate the issue would have meant considerable textual revision and creation.

Neither did Derrick use my comment requesting he define a term he quoted—"substantial assistance." "What does this mean?" I wrote. When it occurred for the third time, I further prompted him: "I'd like to understand this better." When I asked Derrick about it during an interview, he said he did not change it because he did not understand what I was referring to—even though the question was written between the lines of his text, centered squarely above the term and its quotation marks. Perhaps Derrick himself did not know what the term meant; at any rate, he did not revise the content.

Final comments on essay three

My terminal comment on Derrick's first essay three draft targeted expression; my terminal comments on the final essay three draft targeted organization. Referring to a paragraph on drug kingpins, I had asked Derrick, "Why did you decide to hold this information back until now?" When he revised in response to that comment, his paragraph became a muddle of repetitious sentences that did not resolve his organizational problems. Therefore, in addition to praise, my final comments critiqued organization strategies.

In areas where my previous comments directed you to changes, I can detect some good revision. However, once you revised, your essay would have benefited from your independent critique. For instance, on the previous page where you revised but ended up with three nearly identical sentences within six lines—Next time you write and revise, be sure to carefully re-read your work (ALOUD?) to catch new problems that arise from your alterations.
These comments are fairly specific to essay three, so most of my advice could not be carried forward to the subsequent argumentative essay. However, we can examine the content of Derrick’s introduction, the expression surrounding quoted material, and the organization of sentences in essay five.

Derrick’s approach to writing the second argument

The first submission of essay five: Subsequent argumentative argument

Derrick’s subsequent argument, like Maddie’s, was written in response to the deaths of school children in Jonesboro, Arkansas. His opening few lines were most likely an attempt at a creative introduction, as it did not begin with his thesis statement (as the first draft of essay three did). Instead, Derrick’s new introduction began with a clichéd phrase:

In society today, there is little understanding as to why people do what they do. There are several instances each year that sound so atrocious; it makes you wonder how that could ever happen. Often times there is little explanation for the person’s actions. . .

It seems, then, that in accordance with the earlier marginal comment targeting content, Derrick attempted to furnish a hook in his introduction, even though his attempt was ineffective. While the terminal comment on the first argument was faulty, Derrick more skillfully executed the introduction of quoted material, paraphrasing, and citation of sources in this subsequent argument. Therefore, it appears that comments that target expression might be helpful if they target stable problems that can be anticipated across-the-board—from essay to essay. Of course, other factors may come into play, such as Derrick’s previous writing experience, classroom discussion, peer review, and textbook instruction.
Finally, no organization problems surfaced in this argument. Perhaps Derrick read his essay aloud to himself; perhaps he checked for repetitious sentences within his paragraphs: I can only speculate and hope that the end comments on organization may be partially responsible for his coherent presentation in essay five.

*Maddie and Derrick compared*

On the surface, Maddie and Derrick were much alike: reserved, responsible, conscientious—and they earned similar grades in the class.

On the surface, their composing and revision strengths and weaknesses were dissimilar: Maddie wrote creative introductions; Derrick struggled to find attention-grabbing hooks. Derrick's expression was concise; Maddie's wording was often obscure. However, closer analysis revealed some intriguing similarities.

Both Maddie and Derrick did not apply some of the comments I wrote on their essays, and when they gave me feedback, both recounted incomplete interpretations of my advice. Both Maddie and Derrick apparently seized authority over their own texts, deciding when, where, and how to make changes—neither of them gave full allegiance to my suggestions. Finally, while Maddie and Derrick did not seem to carry forward all the improvements they made when they revised their first argumentative paper, they did carry forward some of the improvements.

This in-depth look at two writers' composing and revision decisions cannot help us draw conclusions about all writers; we cannot assume that
misinterpretation of comments causes all writers to make poor revisions any more than we can assume that accurate interpretation of comments causes all writers to make good revisions. In the same vein, because Maddie and Derrick at times exercised authority over their texts, we cannot assert that faulty comments caused them to do such or that stellar comments caused them to relinquish authority. Still, there are some relationships that might be drawn from this study. Those relationships and their implications for pedagogy are discussed in the final chapter.
CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPLICATIONS: EFFECTIVELY COMPOSING TERMINAL COMMENTS

I have conducted this descriptive study of students’ uses of terminal and marginal comments to explore my research question: *What types of comments do students apply so as to resolve targeted composition problems?* My investigation is a specific response to the larger issue of how composition instructors can more effectively use their time to provide students with useful revision strategies. By examining the revisions and subsequent composition projects of four first-year writing students, I have attempted to explore (1) whether students seem to accurately read and interpret the end comments instructors write, (2) whether students seem to apply the end comments as they revise, and (3) whether students seem to resolve effectively targeted problems when they apply end comments.

Below I am going to speculate what these results might mean. Keep in mind, my findings are based on the work of only four students. Additional research is essential to confirm that the results may have significance for at least students who are typified by the subjects.

Findings concerning revisions of the same paper

An important finding of this study may seem obvious and overrated, but it is of vast significance to composition instructors: Students read written comments. Despite Hillocks findings that students do not use comments, and
despite our fears that our comments are falling into a vacuum, this study suggests that students read what we write. Furthermore, more often than not, they attempt to apply our advice and suggestions. In fact, my research suggests that if we don’t comment, students probably won’t revise.

Where the problem lies is in successful execution. Sometimes students create more problems when they revise. For example, when Derrick attempted to reorganize his argument about drug kingpins, he created content problems in the revision. Sometimes the revision addresses only half the issues at hand, as when Maddie, on her analysis revision, named three rhetorical elements as I suggested but did not reorganize the body of her paper.

This study suggests other reasons students sometimes do not make some revisions that we suggest. Instructors already suspect that their priorities are different from ours, but this research gives insight into some other things that are going on. For instance, students do not follow instructors’ advice because they can recognize bad advice when they see it. Derrick, for example, did not use the comment that asked him to change his expression leading into quotes. Even though Sommers worries that instructors unnecessarily appropriate students’ texts, Maddie was unwilling to be co-opted: She seemed to resist some of the advice I gave her in my comments.

Another reason for unsuccessful execution of advice is that students may have too little confidence in their writing skills to feel comfortable “messing” (Erroll’s word) with what they view as a finished product. They seem to fear that they will change elements that the instructor perceived as good and commit new
errors. Therefore, they might elect to leave portions of their essays unrevised when the task calls for reconstructing significant slices of their texts.

The results of this study showed that the subjects appeared more likely to revise expression problems than any other category. Expression problems were usually accompanied by marginal cues, so such revision was probably quick and easy. Also, expression revision often entailed replacing a word or phrase here and there, not an entire paragraph. It appears, then, that students might be more likely to use comments that entail only moderate or little work.

Findings concerning subsequent essays

Results here are most tenuous because students are not working from specific advice. Textbook advice, growth and maturity as a writer, different assignments that may capture their interest more than others, personal problems, and motivation are just a few of the things that may affect their responses. Nonetheless, some possible transfer of advice gleaned from previous comments seems to exist. While all the others need further exploration, certainly this portion of my study needs further research to determine what relationship may exist between comments and subsequent composition.

My study suggests that students appear not to carry expression comments over from one assignment to the next. Andrea, for example, wrote the same kinds of wordy phrases in the second argument (essay five) as she wrote in the first argument. On the other hand, students seem to improve content and organization on subsequent essays: Maddie was able to bring in material to
connect her introduction to her thesis on her second argument, and Derrick's organization problems disappeared. At the same time, content and organization revision requires a higher order of skill, so some students may have more trouble with these revisions than do others.

**Past and future research**

This study continues the work of Straub by taking exploration of students’ response to commentary into the classroom. Like Straub, I explored the types of comments students were likely to use. Unlike Straub, who presented students with a range of comments and asked their response to them, I investigated how students used the comments that actually appeared on their essays. If one were to look only at Straub and this study, one might conclude that expression should be handled only in marginal comments, while comments on organization and content should be terminal and forward-looking. However, as stated before, I studied only four students. Future research is needed to determine how teachers’ comments affect students’ writing and revision decisions. For example, while I investigated one group of average students, a researcher could look at three groups (at-risk, average, and high-achieving). Or while I looked at growth over only one semester, another researcher might conduct a longitudinal study to see how students fare over time. Eventually, a quantitative analysis with a large sample might also prove useful.

In the meantime, writing instructors might consider these findings as they write terminal comments on their students’ papers. For example, as instructors
assign students work, we might explain to them what true revision entails and explain our expectations for their revision. As we evaluate our students' work, we can be conscious of their situations as student writers: We should be careful to point out only as many problems as students can realistically be expected to address. Finally, as we teach, we should critique and encourage, articulating students' strengths so they have more confidence with which to tackle their weaknesses.
To: English 105 students in sections RN and RP
From: Sheryl D. McGough
Subject: Consent to participate in research

I would like you to participate in research towards my Master's thesis in English. I am investigating how theory that informs teacher evaluation of student compositions translates into practical application in freshman writing courses.

The case study in which I would like you to participate will involve analysis of your essays and my commentary. If you consent to participate in the study, your privacy will be strictly protected: your names will be removed from your essays before any assistants have access to your work, and if I refer to your work in my research report or thesis, I will protect your identity through pseudonyms and use no identifier codes.

Your participation will require no additional time commitment nor additional work; you will participate merely by attending class in Room 2223 of Roberts Hall and conferences in my office at 5 Landscape Architecture Building, as well as completing assignments that appear on the course syllabus, as required by the English department at Iowa State University.

My research will begin on January 27, 1998, and conclude on or about May 1, 1998. I do not anticipate any future contact beyond that date.

Be assured that participation in this study is voluntary; nonparticipation will not affect my evaluation of your performance in English 105.

Giving Consent: If you are willing to participate in this research, please read, sign, and return the following consent form. Thank you for your cooperation.

* * * * *

I agree to participate in the case study referred to above and conducted by Sheryl McGough. I understand that portions of my written assignments may be included in the academic or professional writing by Sheryl McGough. I
understand that all subjects will be referred to by pseudonyms and that the identities of all research subjects will be protected. I understand that there is no risk associated with this research, that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time, and that the researcher may use my data in research without prejudice at any time.

Signed

Date

Printed Name

Address

Home Phone
APPENDIX B

TERMINAL COMMENTS AND STUDENTS' WRITTEN FEEDBACK

Andrea's argument essay (no. 3)

End comment: original submission

Andrea: Your argument is timely, considering Veishea is fast approaching. This may be a good candidate for *ethos* or the *Daily*.

The argument could benefit from a strong statement of your thesis on p. 1. It's implied through a question you ask, but I wasn't *sure* that your point is that students should abstain during Veishea until I had read the entire piece. Also, remind your readers of your thesis throughout your essay—keep bringing the discussion back to your main point; show how your examples directly relate to your main point (thesis).

Feedback from Andrea

Have a better or stronger thesis statement. Keep reminding students of the thesis statement. Show how the examples directly relate to the thesis statement.

End comment: Andrea's revision

Your thesis is clear, but sometimes you wander from a tightly focused discussion, such as when you discuss smoking and some items on the list of problems related to drinking. In future essays, some extra attention needs to go to your word choice and phrasing. Try to be *precise*. Search your mind for just the perfect word or words to express your ideas. Sometimes it helps to put an essay aside for a day, then pick it up and comb it for any vague or misleading expressions.

Derrick's argument essay (no. 3)

End comment: original submission

Your paper has great ethos; it appears to have been written with care.

In spite of all the little editorial remarks I make in margins, I suggest you give special attention to this remark as you revise: try to use direct quotes only when you can think of no better or efficient way to incorporate the quoted material. Strive to summarize or paraphrase the borrowed material so your voice comes through. When you must quote, keep it brief and gradually lead in to the quotes, using phrases like: “According to Jim Smith, an expert in law enforcement,”...
End comment: Derrick's revision

You have a good argument as far as topic and support are concerned. Your thesis comes through loud and clear, and that’s very important to successful argument.

In areas where my previous comments directed you to changes, I can detect some good revision. However, once you revised, your essay would have benefited from your independent critique. For instance, on the previous page where you revised but ended up with three nearly identical sentences within six lines—Next time you write and revise, be sure to carefully re-read your work (ALOUD?) to catch new problems that arise from your alterations.

Erroll’s argument essay (no. 3)

End comment: original submission

Erroll: Your topic is a good one—You have tackled a timely topic and an important problem. Prison overcrowding has been much in the news.

As you revise, take a strong stand on an issue related to your topic. What specifically are you arguing in regard to prison overcrowding? In the first paragraph are some opinions, but you reverse yourself with the phrase “on the other hand.” You seem, therefore, to be arguing that we need to build more prison cells—as your phrase “it would be better to increase prison space” implies. If so, your essay needs to address ideas connected to building cells: the costs, the intended use, the objections, the benefits.

Feedback from Erroll

I need to narrow my topic down, and take a stand on the issue. I need to explain certain points in greater detail. I also need to inform my readers about what I am talking about. I confuse people with how I structure paragraphs, and I need to organize and clarify better.

End comment, Erroll’s revision

Erroll: You have successfully resolved some of the problems of the previous draft. One step you took was to add a thesis statement: the sentence wherein you take a stand on an issue. You say, “It would be better to increase prison space... Now, you have a new problem. Your paper must focus on your topic and issue as announced in your thesis. In other words, your paper should discuss why and how we should increase prison space. Instead, you discuss prison terms.

Maddie’s argument essay (no. 3)

End comment: original submission

This is a good effort. I am especially impressed by your organization—your work with the claims, reasons, and grounds might be the root of the logic you display.

As you revise, “clear” up some unclear sentences I’ve pointed out. More substantively, try to work the main concept of your argument into the tail end of your creative introduction—show how
the anecdote is related to overcrowding and the issue before you begin paragraph 2. Some changes needed on works cited page.

Feedback from Maddie

I need to put my argument [sic] into the end of the first paragraph so that the anecdote and the argument tie together and the reader knows why I put in that anecdote and how it relates to my argument.

End comment: Maddie's revision

Maddie—As I mentioned before, this is packed with good information. You did a lot of good research for this argument. Some of your revisions are quite effective, clearing up misunderstandings on the 1st version.

Although some revisions are good, there are other problem areas that arise in this essay, notably are expression/ease of comprehension problems and the organization isn’t always effective.

Andrea’s second argument essay (no. 5)

End comment: original submission

[No end comments; only marginal comments]

Feedback from Andrea (on marginal comments)

- look for verb tense change and sing. to plural change.
- works cited w/in paper should have author’s last name not title of source.
- spell out under 100 unless a percentage.
- watch out for 2 or more topics w/in one paragraph
- when doing a rebutal [sic], touch on subject, but don’t completely argue against the thesis.

End comment: Andrea’s revision

Andrea: While you solved many of the problems from the first submission, some that I didn’t point out remain. First, there are conciseness and correctness issues that pop up here and there.

More importantly, your organization still seems somewhat problematic in places, and you contradict yourself big time when you say on page 4 that we can’t blame TV for kids’ violence. If we cannot, why is so much of your argument devoted to TV violence?

Derrick’s second argument essay (no. 5)

End comment: original submission

Derrick: You’ve tackled a lot of information here that has potential for being very persuasive.
You have to revise this with two objectives in mind:

1. **Firmly** establish your thesis at the beginning (by the end of the intro) and keep repeating it—echoing it—reiterating it—throughout your argument. This will reduce confusion for your reader.

2. Concentrate on using explicit language. Phrases like "this is" "there are" usually get writers in trouble because readers don’t necessarily know who, what, or where is referred to by “this” and “there.” In the same vein, use synonyms, similar words and phrases, to keep reminding your reader of the subjects you’re discussing. Instead of “these children”—children who commit crimes, violent children, the Arkansas offenders, etc.

Final note—I didn’t mark punctuation, usage, etc. because your revisions will change much of your text.

*Feedback from Derrick*

You stated that I tackled a lot of information that could be very persuasive, but that I have to revise two objectives. I’ve got to establish my thesis at the beginning and end of the intro. I also have to concentrate on using explicit language because I’m getting myself in trouble with certain phrases.

*End comment, Derrick’s revision*

[No revision submitted]

**Erroll’s second argument essay (no. 5)**

*End comment: original submission*

Erroll: You have some interesting ideas at work here. I am also for gun control—and I’m not used to having people agree with me.

There are areas in your argument where your expression of ideas could be more concise, and I’ve pointed out several of these spots in marginal comments. More crucial to the success of your argument, however, is revision of your paragraph placement and structure. You need a plan for the way in which you will present information—you need to organize information so it makes sense to the reader. Your first objective, then, should be to clump related material together: introduction, explanation of the problem(s), solutions.

In addition, you are giving too much power to the argument that juvenile crime has decreased, given that your 1st page says it’s happening more and you say guns are a problem. Reduce declining rates of juvenile crime to a side comment with words like—although, even if, some believe.

*Feedback from Erroll*

I need to explain what I am talking about (ex. It, their etc!) I have a few little mistakes such as spelling or word choice. I need to start with a strong topic sentence for each paragraph to get off what I am going to talk about. I need to explain more on some issues. I also need to talk about one topic at a time. I need to organize my paragraphs better and get them in the right spot. I need more support for my conclusion.
End comment, Erroll's revision

Erroll: Your paper has nice ethos—quality stock paper, few errors in grammar or punctuation, lots of white space in margins/between lines. As you write future papers—in business and academic settings—remember to do these things, as they build your credibility.

"Organization" is a watch word for you. I suggest you outline before you write—plan your presentation of material before you write it. Think about: how will I first grab the reader's attention? What background information will the reader need before I begin my persuasion? What is the underlying assumption I need next to put forth? What evidence do I need to prove my assumption is correct? How many paragraphs will it take to then draw conclusions for my readers? Finally, how will I wrap up?

Maddie's second argument essay (no. 5)

End comment: original submission

Your sources have yielded some interesting facts and provoking opinions, Maddie. Your opening anecdote is concisely summarized too—creates emotional impact without overpowering your own thesis.

As you revise, try to create smoother transitions between paragraphs. As it is, it seems that your essay is comprised of building blocks of information just stacked one on top of the other. Your essay should more resemble a train, where one car of information pulls the next into focus, and the hitch that connects them is your voice—a voice that explains how one carload of facts is hooked to the next.

Feedback from Maddie

I need to create transitions between paragraphs that will help going from one topic to the next smoother. I should also make my opinion, or voice, heard more throughout my paper.

End comment: Maddie's revision

[No revision submitted]

Andrea's first rhetorical analysis essay (no. 4)

End comment: original submission

Andrea: This is a good first attempt—you have come up with some important insights into Awalt's argument.

As you revise, focus on expanding your discussion into Awalt's activities as a writer—when he wrote, he purposefully appealed to his readers—as you write, discuss how those readers were imagined by Awalt. Did he accurately predict how his argument or claims would be received? Did he meet the audience's needs or expectations?
Feedback from Andrea

Focus more on Awalt as a writer. How was the audience imagined by Awalt. Did his forecast accurately state what he was going to write about. Where [sic] the audience's expectations met?

End comment, Andrea's revision

Andrea: You do a nice job of pinpointing important elements for analysis—ethos, tone, support.

The goals you should set for the next essay on analysis should come out of these areas that need improvement:

1. Confine all the information in one paragraph to one tightly focused discussion on one aspect of argumentation. (For example, the main paragraph on p. 2 combines 4 discussions: of descriptive language, or tone, illustrations, and—to a limited degree—acknowledgment of opposition as well as a touch of organization analysis.)

2. Include a brief summary on the first page.

3. Work on being very concise in analysis—try not to discuss the claims the author makes and their value unless absolutely necessary. (This happens a bit on pg. 1 of this essay.)

Derrick's first rhetorical analysis essay (no. 4)

End comment: original submission

Derrick: Before you leave the introduction, I'd like a sentence that clearly illuminates your stand on the quality, value, success, or persuasiveness of this argument. Then, in paragraph 2, you have an excellent opportunity to discuss the target audience, purpose, and, perhaps, even the context of the article. Why not convert that paragraph to do so, since that is an important aspect of rhetorical analysis. Then, as you discuss the techniques Awalt used, relate them to the rhetorical elements—explain how his decisions affect readers, achieve purpose.

Feedback from Derrick

Basically, you stated that I need to make a couple big changes in my paper. One, change the introduction around by stating how I feel about the article. Also, combining a couple of the P's would help make the paper clearer. A number of minor errors must be corrected, plus, changing up my forecasting statement.

End comment, Derrick's revision

Derrick: you have good instincts about this article and its author. You certainly don't trust Awalt in spite of the credibility he should have had.

The problem is that you talk about Awalt's issues as much or more than you analyze his techniques and tools for writing an argument.

Good job with mechanics and visual ethos.
Erroll’s first rhetorical analysis essay (no. 4)

*End comment: original submission*

Erroll: We need to get more from you here. I’d like to visit with you about how we can get you set up to revise this. Thursday after class—Tuesday noonish or after class. E mail me with a couple times you have free. . . Your first step needs to focus on rereading the article and reconsidering what you understand to be the writer’s argument—what is he intent on arguing?

*Feedback from Erroll*

I need to write more in my paper. I need to visit with you and email. I need to reread the article.

*End comment, Erroll’s revision*

Erroll: I get a clearer sense in this revision that you understand Jacoby’s intent and how the excerpts from Vonnegut’s novel work to support Jacoby’s ideas—good.

Now, however, the matter of analysis v. summary rears its ugly head. You write mostly about what Jacoby wrote and very little about the rhetorical elements at play. Discussion of ethos, pathos, and logos should dominate your analysis, and the effects of credibility (or none) emotional appeals or audience reaction (supposing Jacoby intended certain ones), and evidence, support (or lack of it) on the audience and purpose must be prevalent. For instance—how did the tone of the article affect the readers’ emotions?

Maddie’s first rhetorical analysis essay (no. 4)

*End comment: original submission*

Maddie: You are on the right track here, even though you slip into summary on occasion—it’s hard to avoid at first.

As you revise, I’d like to see you do two things. First, reconsider your topics. Instead of naming 4 areas for analysis in your intro, why not just 2 or 3? It would be more concise (the essay, I mean). Rather than spreading your analysis so broadly, try focusing on two main areas for critical thinking. Most students have chosen to examine the author’s credibility and either his use of emotional appeals or evidence (support).

Once you’ve pared down the aspects you’re analyzing, go back through your paragraphs. Determine which information might fit under your new 2 or 3 topics. Then think about how the writer’s purpose and target audience have been attended to or ignored as he wrote.

*Feedback from Maddie*

I must not summarize the article. I should only name 2 or 3 areas for discussion. I should try to focus on 2 main areas.

*End comment, Maddie’s revision*
Maddie: You have made some good points about Rideau's credibility—a necessary topic for analysis because of his situation (a prisoner writing about early parole). As such, your forecast should indicate that you’ll analyze Rideau’s credibility (ethos). In fact, nearly all your essay pertains to his credibility in one way or another, so why not announce the concept to your readers in your forecast?

The essay’s inner-paragraph organization is still perplexing. Before you hand in essay 6 (the second analysis paper) either visit with me or make an appointment in the writing lab. Your goals are to choose the most important two or three areas for analysis, forecast those general areas, write strong topic sentences that announce those categories (one per paragraph), and build an entire paragraph on that one category or one narrowly focused aspect of that category. Finally, as you write your concluding paragraph, the last sentence (or 2) should leave an impression of your estimation of the argument’s value or success. If your last sentence discusses good things, the impression you leave is that the argument was good.

Derrick’s second rhetorical analysis essay (no. 6)

End comment: original submission

Derrick: You should revise this because you are very close to good analysis. Your command of the language used for analysis has clearly grown since essay 4. Focus on discussing the readers and how their unmet needs impact the author’s goal.

Feedback from Derrick

[None provided]

[No revision submitted]

Andrea’s second rhetorical analysis essay (no. 6)

End comment: original submission

Andrea: You helped me understand clearly how Rowley’s descriptive words worked to boost her argument. I’m not sure, however, whether you feel this is generally successful with some flaws or generally a failure. Also, not all arguments must contain the same persuasive elements—why no statistics here?

Feedback from Andrea

[None provided]

[No revision submitted]

Erroll’s second rhetorical analysis essay (no. 6)

End comment: original submission

[None provided. Marginal comments only.]
Feedback from Erroll

[None provided]

[Revision: only correctness issues resolved. No comments—student did not pick up]

Maddie's second rhetorical analysis essay (no. 6)

End comment: original submission

Very deeply critiqued. I can tell you have a solid understanding of how elements of argument work.

Your expression is sometimes inconcise—but that's mainly due to inexperience with the genre of analysis and the vocabulary/language it entails.

Feedback from Maddie

[None provided]

End comment, Maddie's revision

[No revision submitted]
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

In order of interviews' occurrence

April 7, 1998
I = instructor
E = Erroll

I: Hi, Erroll. It's good to see you again.
E: Yup.
I: Now, what I basically want to do is talk about what you did and didn't do to revise essay three.
E: See, this is one of the rush papers. I had four tests that week.
I: Okay. What I want to see is which of my comments you chose to use and which you didn't choose to use. [Reading from the first submission of essay three]. "You tackled a timely topic and an important problem. Prison overcrowding has been much in the news. As you revise, take a strong stand on an issue related to your topic." Did you feel initially that you had taken a strong stand on an issue? Or did you feel that you hadn't? [Pointing to the instructor's comments] Was this good advice? Was this useless advice?
E: I didn't really feel that I had that strong a stand on the issue.
I: Okay.
E: I just don't get involved in that kind of stuff.
I: Part of what I'm doing is trying to push you guys to do that. So, it was kinda hard to take a stand on it just for that reason.
I: Okay. When you rewrote, did you feel like you did a better job of that?
E: Well ... maybe a little bit?
I: A little bit? Okay. [Reading comment from first submission again.] What specifically are you arguing in regard to prison overcrowding? ... If so, your essay needs to address ideas connected to building cells: the cost, intended use, the objections, the benefits ... 
E: Yeah.
I: Ummm. So, when I gave this to you, did you make any decisions based on these comments? About what you were going to do with the revision?
E: No, not really. It's been a while ago ... 
I: So, you can't remember very clearly? It seems to me you came away from talking about building prison cells. That you backed off that and made it more about ... 
E: Just increasing space.
I: I was wondering if you did that purposely to try to meet this suggestion?
E: I can't remember for sure.
I: When I write comments, and I write a lot of comments, would it be better to have fewer words, fewer suggestions, or do you use these? Do they help you?
E: I think if you—the more suggestions you have, the better off you are, because it kinda gives you a broader area to select from, ya know, as for what you want to do to the paper. It kinda helps you out a lot more if you have more suggestions.

I: Okay. Okay. That’s good to know. Now, going back to this. [Looking at the revision of essay three.] Your material . . . you just never quite moved it. This organization is average. Your expression is pretty typical of freshman writers. You certainly are competent. As far as mechanicals: get an editor. Get someone to read these before they get to me. Okay. Here’s your thesis. You clear have a stand on the issue now. And that’s good . . .

E: Yeah. Yeah, that’s one thing I did, yeah.

I: That helps a lot. Okay. Ummm. This is a misleading topic sentence. [Reading] “Many minor offenders have been placed in prison for a ridiculous number of years.” The reason it’s misleading is that that prepares people to think that they’re going to read about people who have been sentenced, the number of years they’ve been sentenced, and why it’s ridiculous. And you don’t really go there.

E: Yeah. I just . . . I just start talkin’ about why it’s overcrowded and stuff like that.

I: Yeah. Can you envision a way that, just by changing the topic sentence, that paragraph would make more sense? You don’t have to rewrite the whole paragraph to match the topic sentence. I think you could just rewritten the topic sentence and come out with something that introduced this material.

E: Yeah.

I: Now, you didn’t do that. Is that because you don’t have a good sense of what topic sentences are supposed to do? Or was it that you envisioned having to write the whole paragraph over? Or . . .

E: Kinda. . . Kinda both.

I: Kinda both? It just seemed like a lot of work?

E: [Chuckling] Yeah.

I: That’s fair. Sometimes it’s just not worth your time?

E: Sometimes it seems it’s gonna be easier just to start from scratch than it is to . . . to tear the whole paper apart and put it back together.

I: Yeah. I understand that. Let’s see. [Looking at revision of essay three.] On your cites, just put the author and “1,” not the title.

E: Yeah.

I: This is good background information. Nice summary of that. Ummm. You resolved some of the problems from the previous draft: One step you took was to add a thesis statement (the sentence wherein you take a stand on the issue.) You say it would be better to increase prison space. Now, you have a new problem. Your paper must focus on your topic.

E: Yeah.

I: The issue is announced, and you don’t ever really bring it around to a full discussion about how you’re going to increase prison space. You give us background on why we should, but you don’t address issues on top of that. Are we going to build new prisons, are we going to increase space by releasing people?

E: Yeah.

I: And when you write arguments, keep bringing your thesis up, over and over and over.

E: Yeah.

I: Here, we’ve got all these prisoners in here for no reason. So, what’s that got to do with my thesis? Well, if we didn’t imprison all these people for no good reason, we’d have more prison space.

E: Yeah.

I: If we let ’em out, we’ll increase prison space. You have to keep reiterating to your reader all the way through, through all your major claims, how that relates to your thesis.

E: Yeah.
I: So, when you do number five [another argument essay], did I write a synopsis? I don’t think I did. Be sure that stand comes out: Here’s the issue; here’s what I think about it. Then be sure to remind people, this is what this paper’s about all the way through it.

E: Yeah.

I: Then if your paragraphs don’t lend to that, your paragraphs aren’t working for you. Okay? Any other questions about my comments?

E: I don’t think so. They’re pretty—most of em are pretty self-explanatory.

I: Would you prefer conferencing to written comments?

E: I don’t know. I kinda like written comments a little bit better, I think.

[Discussion digresses to exploration of essay five.]

April 9, 1998
I = instructor
A = Andria

I: I want to talk about your paper and the revisions you made. This is paper three. Looking at the comments I made on the first version, I say, “Andria, your argument is timely considering Veisha is fast approaching. The argument could benefit from a strong statement of your thesis on page one. It’s implied from a question you ask, but I wasn’t sure your point is that students should abstain during Veisha until I read the entire piece. When I read your revision, I could see where you went in and purposely changed that question into a statement.”

A: Right.

I: So, what that says to me is that you read these comments and that you were careful to try to go through and apply what I said . . .

A: Right.

I: . . . to change the way I perceived it.

A: Right.

I: [Referring to comments again] “Also, remind readers of your thesis throughout your essay. Keep bringing discussion back to your main point.” I noticed that a couple times. There were a couple times at least where I said, “Ahh. I think she’s doing this.” Did you make a concentrated effort . . .

A: Yeah. Right. Like at the end of each section, I tried to, like, bring it back. Like, this is what it has to do with my thesis.

I: Good. Good. That’s what I thought. So, when I write this kind of an end comment, you do use it and it does make sense most of the time.

A: Yeah.

I: Okay. Now, I ended up giving it a B-. I would like to see you say, “Here’s what the opposition thinks, and here’s why my position’s stronger.” So, when you do essay five, be sure to include that opposing viewpoint.

A: Okay.

I: Your organization is good. Your expression is usually pretty good, but every once in a while you use a word that isn’t quite right or gives the wrong impression. And you’re really good on editing: you proofread really well.

A: Okay.

I: That’s a pretty good paper. There was one place where . . . Oh, this. [Reading the marginal comment]. “How much, then, might a student spend on alcohol during Veisha?” [Now reading the student’s sentence] “The money they use to buy alcohol during Veisha could have been used to buy tickets to Veisha events or saved to be invested in a car or a home in the future.” This . . . I don’t know. [Again, reading marginal comments] “How much would a student spend on alcohol? $25?
$1500? Drinkers won't be very convinced that not drinking during Veisha could lead to the purchase of a car unless they're saving $1500.

A: I understand.

I: I'm just thinking that these drinkers are saying, "If you want to convince me not to drink because I should be saving for something better, it's gonna have to be pretty convincing."

A: Okay.

I: Do you have any questions about anything I said on that original as you went through?

A: No.

I: I take it the comments must be fairly helpful?

A: Yeah. They are. They help me figure out, "Oh. Maybe I do need to add that or forget that."

I: And they're not too much?

A: No. No.

I: Okay. We're done. Thank you.

April 16, 1998
I = instructor
D = Derrick

I: Okay, Derrick. These are your essays three and four in front of you. Now, I think you already gave me feedback on essay four. On essay three, are both copies there?

D: Yeah.

I: That's the rewrite. Here's the original. What I want to ask you is how these end comments I made helped you or didn't help you on the second version. [Referring to the end comments] So, I say, "I made lots of little editorial remarks. You know what I mean by that, don't you?"

D: Umm-hmm.

I: My marginal comments here and there.

D: Yeah.

I: [Reading from the end comments] "I suggest you give special attention to this remark. Try to use direct quotes only when you can think of no better or more efficient way to incorporate the quoted material." So, was that something you set out to address when you did the rewrite?

D: Umm. Some of ... What I tried to do was, like, I think in this one [indicating the revised essay] ... I think that in this one, I did really well. I think I only used one or two quotes in this one.

I: Okay. So, when you went through and did your rewrite, you took out some of your quotes; is that what you're saying?

D: Uhh. I don't remember. I think so. There's' like, two, three of them, four.

I: And I say, "Strive to paraphrase or summarize the borrowed material so your voice comes through." So, is that what you did? Can you remember?

D: Yeah. With all the quotes I pulled out, I tried to say them a little differently.

I: Was that difficult?

D: Yeah. Sometimes it was. Because the information was sorta bland.

I: [Reading from the comments] "If you must quote, keep it brief and gradually lead into the quote, using phrases like, 'According to Jim Smith, an expert in law enforcement,' that sort of introduction." Did you try to incorporate that into your paper?

D: I think so.

I: Let's see if we can find anything like that.

D: I think the reason I wasn't able to do that was because it was written by a group, FAMM, I think. I couldn't say according to so-and-so because it's kinda hard when it's a group.

I: I see. Hmmm. Here's one: "The federal judicial found that ...". I can see why you didn't need to lead into these others. I probably should look back at the first one and see what the differences
are. All right. Let’s look at this one. I say, “Which source and which page?” The second time through, you gave me a page number, but the source . . .

D: It was an internet source so . . .

I: Okay. But see, here, when I look at FAMM in the parentheses, when I turn to your works cited page, I think, “Gee, I want to know more about this.” So, when I turn to the works cited page, I look at the list alphabetically to find FAMM, and there’s nothing on your works cited list. See, here it’s buried in the works cited list. So, instead of FAMM in there . . .

D: Yeah. I didn’t know . . .

I: You need to use something that will get me to the first few words of the way it’s listed on the works cited. So, in here [indicating the parentheses following the quote], you don’t need the whole title, just enough to differentiate from everything else on your list.

D: All right.

I: Effect or effects would have done it. Same thing with Des Moines. See, here [referring to works cited list] the first word isn’t Des Moines; it’s the author’s name. So, in your parentheses you need the author’s name.

D: Right.

I: So, you didn’t change those from the first to the second. And the reason you didn’t change those was you didn’t realize what I was asking for; is that right?

D: Right.

I: So, when you read this, “On your works cited list, which entry is this?” what went through your mind?

D: I don’t think I made the connection what you were looking for there . . .

I: Okay.

D: I mean, for me, it just didn’t register in my mind what it was.


D: I just figured . . . That’s the same source.

I: Uh-huh.

D: I didn’t know what to change on that.

I: Okay. I was too vague on here, wasn’t I?

D: Yeah. If you would have put, uhhh . . . just something to the effect of “Use a few words of the works cited,” something like that.

I: What about my comment here, “I’d like to understand this better.”

D: Hmm.

I: Let’s see what we’ve done with that. And you didn’t do anything with that one.

D: I didn’t know what you were talking about there. I didn’t know if you were talking about this or this. I didn’t know what to change.

I: Okay. What about here. You wrote, “As you can see, mandatory minimum sentencing is useless in many cases.” And, I wrote, “I can see what’s useful in many cases. Is there a different word that might better say what you mean?”

D: I changed it to “most.”

I: Ohhh. I see. Rather than change “useless,” you changed “many” to “most.” I see.

D: Because most of the cases I read about and what not, mandatory minimums haven’t done anything good.

I: Okay. Okay. So, here, you had “most” and I asked “many?” and you picked up on that. [Looking at marginal comments again] “Okay. You made this point three lines above.” [Reading from the essay] “Mandatory minimums does not work. This is why a new system should be developed.” [Again reading from the comments] “Were you hoping the repetition would create impact? What risk do you run if you repeat it too much?” Did you change anything from that?

D: Ummmm. Yeah. Actually, I got rid of that. It sounded like I was just droning on.

I: Okay. So, you weren’t doing that for impact, and when I pointed out that was one reason to repeat and that was not your intent, you decided you were better off without it?

D: Yeah.
I: Okay. So this comment did communicate with you something that resulted in a change.
D: Yeah.
I: So, sometimes you made changes based on my comments and sometimes you didn’t. How could we sum up? You chose to make comments if you understood what my point was . . .
D: Right. And if they made sense. If it was logical to change that.
I: Logical. You mean from the point of view of what you thought your paper was communicating?
D: Right. What I was trying to say.
I: Good. That’s clear. Thank you.

April 23, 1998
I = instructor
E = Erroll

I: [Laughing] Are you looking forward to essay 6, Erroll?
E: [Laughing] Not really.
I: Okay. Let’s go back to the first version of essay four. I say, “We need to get more from you. I’d like to visit with you about how we can set up to revise this. Your first step needs to focus on rereading the article and reconsidering what you understand to be the writer’s argument. What is he intent upon arguing?” And you did that. And we discussed it, and you did come up with a clear sense of what he was arguing and what he was doing . . .
E: Yeah. I ripped out about half the paper.
I: So, you worked hard to try to get “more.”
E: Yeah.
I: [Looking at the revised version.] At the end, I tell you, “I get a clear sense in this revision that you understand Jacoby’s [the author’s] intent and how the excerpts from Vonnegut’s novel work to support Jacoby’s ideas. Good.” That’s what you took out: all of that that was alluding to it in a way that was probably wasn’t Jacoby’s intent.
“Now, however, the matter of analysis versus summary rears its ugly head. You write mostly about what Jacoby wrote and very little about rhetorical elements at play.” Specifically, what I’m saying to you is that I have a really detailed summary here with a little bit of evaluation, but I don’t have much analysis. Umm. “Discussion of ethos, pathos, and logos should dominate your analysis, and the effects of credibility (or none) emotional appeals or audience reaction (supposing Jacoby intended certain ones), and evidence, support (or lack of it), how does all that work on the audience and purpose must be prevalent. For example, how did the tone of the article affect the readers’ emotions?”
Now, when you write essay 6, you’re going to have to keep these same things in mind about essay 6.
E: Yeah.
I: Do you have a sense from . . . We’ve talked about it more, now, in class and the terminology. I keep saying, you know, “Tell me, what does the reader want? What does he expect? What do they need? Is the writer giving them what they need?”
E: Yeah.
I: Is that giving you some idea of how to add that to your written analysis?
E: Well, I’ve got a rough draft, and I’ve been talking about some credibility and stuff like that.
I: Ah-hah! Good.
E: It’s . . . I don’t know. I realize what I need to do on that paper [referring to essay four], and it’s kinda late to redo it . . .
I: Right.
E: So, I think I finally got it figured out on this paper, I hope.
I: Okay. Ummm. Let’s see how essay 6 goes, and . . .
E: I'm doin' this one, kinda like, totally different.
I: Do you have concerns about that one? Do you have a sense it's more analysis and less summary?
E: Yeah. I think it is more analysis.
I: Okay. Tell me what I can do to help? . . . Nothing right now?
E: Probably not. Until I get more into it.
I: Okay. So, you'll have a rough draft of 6 by Thursday?
E: Yeah. I got kinda a rough draft right now.
I: Okay. Which article are you doing? Oh . . . my letter.
E: Yeah.
I: I think that's the best one to do. I think that's the most obvious.
E: It's easy to tear apart.
I: I think so too. So, that's going to help you out, I think. I guess what I'm hoping is that when I give you back this one [indicating essay 6] with revision comments that you'll be able to hand it in . . . Let's see. How's your week next week? If you give me this on Thursday, and I give it back to you when you come to the final, you can take the final time to revise. Okay. Let's see how that goes. Don't be too disheartened.
E: Okay.
I: So, basically, when you revised essay four, you took my comment, you used it, you conferenced with me, but that's about all you could do with my end comment. And I was counting on you picking up other ideas from classroom discussion and things.
E: Yeah.
I: What do you think? Did you realize when you handed it in . . . you said you sorta realized when you handed it in that it was a lot of summary. You sorta knew there was not a lot of analysis going on in there.
E: Yeah. That was one of the ones that I was rushin' to do, so . . .
I: Well, I'm glad you revised it, and because you revised it, I think the next one will go much, much better.
E: I hope so.
I: The second one really gives you a chance to redeem yourself. Okay?
E: Good. Okay.
I: Thanks, Erroll. That's all.

April 23, 1998
I = instructor
M = Maddie

I: Let's see. Before you leave today, would you do feedback for me? Now, let's look at essay three. I want to take a look at the end comments and how they're reflected in your revision. So. Here's your introduction. It's kind of creative. In my comments, I'm asking you if you can tie into your introduction your thesis statement. Now, did you try to do that here [referring to the revision]. Let's see. You have added three lines of type—a couple of sentences. Is this your thesis?
M: Yeah.
I: So, would you say, then, that when you got essay three back and read my final comment, that you purposely tried to work that into this paper?
M: Uh-huh.
I: And there wasn't any confusion about what I meant when I said, "Try to work the main concept of your argument into the tail end of the creative introduction. Show how the anecdote is related." You understood everything I said? That was okay?
M: [Nods affirmatively.]
I: Okay. I’m asking you here about parallel structures. I said some of these are people, some are things, some are actions. And so you went back in, and it looks to me like you purposefully changed some of these. And now we’ve got...you went from drunken driving—and action—to drivers, which are persons. So, you did go in and try to change that and make it a more parallel structure. And now what we have still is an act—a murder. Make that a murderer and then all would be people.

I’m still asking, “What is your thesis?” See on the first version I say, “Okay. And so your thesis is...”

M: More prison space is needed is basically what I say.

I: Okay. And on this one [referring to the revision] I say, “Is this your thesis? More prison space is needed?” I need to verify that so that as I go through here I have in my mind the same thing that you do. That you’re looking to prove that we need more prison space. Ummm. The other thing I said in my end comments was about the works cited page needing revised. Let’s see what you did with that.

Okay. With the works cited page, you took the bolding off, like my comments said. The arrow—what I tried to say with the arrow, you need to put the whole entry on one line, from margin to margin. So everything you can fit on the first line should go on the first line until you run out of room. Then you drop to the next line and indent.

M: Oh. Okay.

I: I sort of got my point across by my arrows. But not quite. So, I was too vague on what I wanted from you there, wasn’t I?

M: Yeah, I guess.

I: Going back to the rewrite: “See marginal comment and last page of your essay. Maddie, this seems out of place here. It’s a point made earlier. Are you reminding us of your thesis? If so, can you think of a way to remind readers of the main point, but also have it fit the topic of the paragraph?” So, you need to remind us of your thesis as you go through. It will help us hear your voice. At the same time, it needs to fit the main topic of the paragraph where you’re sliding that in. On the last page [referring again to end comments], “If you’d like to remind readers of your thesis and still address the focus of the paragraph, you need to relate the need for more prison space to funding and truth-in-sentencing-laws. Maybe something like ‘This building of regional prisons would meet the judicial system’s need for more prison space without overburdening individual states.’ The words “prison” and “need” from your thesis are reiterated, reminding readers of your thesis while offering the reminder in a way that is cohesive with information in the paragraph.” Do you understand what I’m driving at there?

M: Uh-huh.

I: When you write future argumentative papers, is that something you think you’ll be able to incorporate into your paragraphs?

M: Yeah.

I: Okay. Do I need any different kind of comment or...

M: No. It’s fine.

I: Okay, that’s about all I wanted to ask you about this one. Then, do you have number four with you? The analysis?

M: All right.

I: That’s part of it. Oh, yes. Okay. Number 6 should go better than number four. It’s mostly a matter of working with the terminology and getting through it once. At the end of number four, I said, “I’d like to see you do two things. First, reconsider your topics. Instead of naming four, why not two or three?” Now, did you make that change? Ummm. Looks to me like you’re down to three: anecdotes, comparisons, and contrast. Right?

M: Right.

I: Okay. So it looks like you tried to narrow it down a little. [Referring again to the end comments on the first version] “Rather than spreading your analysis so broadly, try focusing on two main areas for critical thinking. Most students have chosen to examine the author’s credibility and
either his use of emotional appeals or evidence.” And you really didn’t go that direction, I don’t think, did you?
M: I don’t think so.
I: [Again, referring to the end comments.] “You have some good points about his credibility, a necessary topic for analysis. As such, your forecast should indicate that you’ll analyze credibility. In fact, nearly all of your essay pertains to his credibility in one way or another. So, why not announce the concept to your readers in the forecast?” So, you didn’t go that direction. Maybe what happened is that you just took one of the words out of your intro and didn’t really change that sentence. [Referring to student’s essay] “Rideau uses personal anecdotes, comparisons . . .” Yeah, you took out the word “criticisms” and didn’t really talk about that. However, can you see . . . When we say “credibility,” you know, you’re talking about . . . Let’s see what you’ve got here. Okay. On your first version I say, “Once you’ve pared down the aspects you’re analyzing, go back through your paragraphs, determine which information might fit under the new two or three topics, then think about how the writer’s purpose and target audience have been attended to or ignored as he wrote.” Can you remember, when you revised, did you try to apply these things, or did it seem like to big a job and so . . .
M: No. I did try.
I: Okay. And how about this: “think about how the writer’s purpose and audience have been attended to.” Is that something you understand how to go about, or do you need more specific direction on that?
M: I think I need more specific directions because I didn’t really understand what that meant.
I: Okay. Ummm. Is there anything about these comments that you did try to incorporate and I just didn’t perceive they were incorporated?
M: You did, but I just didn’t understand. You told me, like on this one too, you’re like, “Purpose to the audience?” and I just didn’t understand.
I: Okay. Okay. Basically, the comments weren’t enough to help you understand what analysis is supposed to address.

April 23, 1998
I = instructor
A = Andria

I: Okay. Now, here is the first analysis. I told you in the end comments on essay four, “Andria, this is a good first attempt. You’ve come up with some important insights into Awalt’s arguments. As you revise, focus on expanding your discussion into Awalt’s activities as a writer. When he wrote, he purposely appealed to his readers. As you write, discuss how those readers were imagined by Awalt. Did he accurately predict how his argument or claims would be received? Did he meet the audience’s needs or expectations?”
A: I don’t even know if I ever, like, answered that.
I: So, what do you think, when you rewrote this, why? Was it because you were looking at these marginal comments?
A: I think, yeah, I was usually looking at those.
I: Okay. Generally, marginal comments are more specific about these little points, while end comments are more general, about goals for the next paper.
A: Right.
I: If you had to analyze this end comment and my marginal comments, which ones would you say were more helpful?
A: Well, the marginal ones always are, because I always know exactly where it needs help, where I need help.
I: Okay. So, let's look at these. Do you feel like you got more into Awalt’s activities as a writer? Did you have any discussions about his doing something so readers would feel a certain way?

A: I don't know.

I: Let's see. The comments I’m making to you at the end of the second version are: “The goals for the next analysis essay—confine all the information in one paragraph to one tightly focused discussion on one aspect of argumentation.” That’s a real common problem.

A: Right.

I: “For example, the main paragraph on page two combines discussions of tone with illustrations and, to a limited degree, acknowledgment of the opposition as well as a touch of organizational analysis.” And, that’s probably because of what your topic sentence was. It probably touched on all those things. “Include a brief summary on the first page. Work on being very concise. Try not to discuss the claims the author makes and their value unless absolutely necessary. This happens a bit on page one.”

So, on the first version, I’m telling you to try to talk more about the author and I’m asking you specific questions about credibility and why does he do this, does it matter if he doesn’t have evidence, does he achieve his purpose? Now, this one, I’m telling you that some of your organization needs to be overhauled. You’re getting away from your topic here. The language . . . I’m trying to give you some vocabulary to help you. So, “It’s the language that created this sense of danger?” Here, you’re showing better thinking about the impact on audience and purpose. So, that tells me, from either the end comments or the marginal comments, somewhere you got the idea that you needed to do more exploration into that.

A: Right. I think I just had so many things that I wanted to talk about that I couldn’t cut it down much.

I: Yeah. Like on the first page [referring to first version] “This material could be omitted in favor of a brief summary. Also, your forecasting statement above would be a logical transitions sentence between your intro and the credibility discussion.” And so, when you revised, you got rid of what I said you might eliminate there.

A: Umm-hmm.

I: And now I’m suggesting you need a small summary. Remember the model I gave you?

A: Yeah.

I: Down here, I’m saying you’re simply retelling Awalt’s story. You need to replace it with analysis. Discuss how readers might react to his credibility, what they need in order to believe him.” Did you try to do that, do you think, on the second time through?

A: I tried to, like, cut that whole story down. Right there.

I: You kind of abbreviated the story. And here you add, “With these personal experiences, the audience was more likely to believe his opinion about homeless people. Because he worked with the homeless, his examples become more real to the audience. The credibility derived from his personal experience helps Awalt build a strong essay and made his argument believable.” You have done exactly what I asked you to do in this comment.

A: Um-hmm.

I: So, that must have been pretty clear . . .

A: Right.

I: . . . and maybe some things said in class helped to clarify it too. Looks like you went through and purposely tried to do that. Okay. I don’t think you answered all these marginal questions, but you did a pretty good job of covering most of it.

A: I can’t remember if I at least tried to put something in about all of it. I think I at least tried, but I don’t know if I always knew what the answer was.

I: Okay. In general then, when you get something like this, do you read through the marginal comments as you make your changes?

A: I sort of . . . Well, I like read through the marginal comments and try to figure out like where they sort of apply. And then when I try to do . . . And then, I think it was this one, I tried to go through the whole thing to make sure it still made sense.
I: Good.
A: Yeah. I don’t know if I actually did it though.
I: Okay. Do you ever come across comments that you just decide to ignore?
A: Sometimes. Not usually. I try to take most of the comments because they help. Or in some way they could be helping me.
I: Okay.
A: I think I... Because I didn’t answer all those questions we were talking about [referring to marginal comments on version one], I just didn’t really want to answer all of them. Because it just seemed to be more to write.
I: Is there a fear of rewriting? In other words, “I know what I’m saying here. I don’t want to mess this up. And if I try to answer all these questions, if I try to put all this in, I’m going to mess up all the rest of it.”
A: Well, that’s... I always think that if I try to answer all the questions, then I’ll have too much information there, and then it will become too long...
I: Too long for who? What?
A: Ummmm. Like for this one, I think I had too much information... I’m afraid I’ll put too much information in and I won’t have it all down to one specific thing or two specific things. Because I always have the problem of having too much stuff...
I: And not developing them enough? Because you’re supposed to have a few topics and develop them in depth.
A: Right. ‘Cause I think I’m going to have too many things that I’m just going to be talking a little bit about.
I: Okay. That’s all I need, except the feedback on essay five.
Rater One:

*Andrea’s essay 3*

In your terminal comment, you imply a thesis cannot be at the end of an argument.

*Revision*

She didn’t put the thesis where you wanted her to: up front. She did, however, related expenses of drinking directly to students and Veishea on page 2.

*Derrick’s essay 5 original*

Too many comments in the margins is overwhelming perhaps. No praise of Derrick except bibliography. When you tell him to establish his thesis in the end notes, should you tell him what you think his thesis is? I think problems with logic and content are more serious than style. I’d replace your advice #2 to concentrate on explicit language.

*Derrick’s essay 6 original*

You ask good marginal questions. In this essay, you do a good job of suggesting he’s expecting too much proof. Better than in Erroll’s. I like the “as your revise” prompt (though it doesn’t work!)

*Erroll’s essay 5 original and revision*

The sentence you questioned on page 1 is till a mess. Good end note on organization: “plan your presentation of material etc.”

*Erroll’s essay 6 original and revision*

No end comments. This student, as well as others, expects editorials to rely more on research than they do. After all, does the author need stats to argue that TV is more violent today? You never comment on this problem, though I understand why—it’s too hard to explain.) Jessica’s essay 3 original and revision

I don’t see much improvement, but you say the essay is “more coherent and convincing than the 1st version.”
Erroll’s essay 3 original and revision

Your note on the first page advising a paragraph break is accurate. It’s good that you compared the revision to the other version: “This conclusion is much more satisfying.” I like the numbering you did in the end note.

Maddie’s essay 3 original

On her original, you question what her thesis statement is in a marginal comment. I thought it was clear. It’s good that you compliment her later. Yes, her organization is good.

Revision

You didn’t comment on some things in the first essay that you pointed out on this one. But you do comment that a revised sentence is clearer now. Good.

Maddie’s essay 4 original

Your end note (that tells her to reconsider her topics and name 2 or 3 areas for discussion instead of the 4 she has) is a good suggestion.

Revision

She didn’t narrow down her thesis as you suggested.

Maddie’s essay 5 original

She makes abrupt shifts between topics on page 2. Also, her argument is simplistic—complex social issues can’t be attributed to 1 main reason as she suggests. She should acknowledge other reasons.

Rater Two:

Andrea’s essay 3 original

Good focus on thesis on p 1 & throughout and in end note. The positive reference to ethos or the Daily may discourage revision? We’ll see. Good running commentary re “I’m now assuming . . .” Reads like random facts generated by an “alcohol abuse” search & interviewing friends about drinking (not about Veishea drinking). “Veishea” is just tacked here & there.

Revision

P2 is interesting: she changes “why must the underaged” to “the underaged should not” & thinks it’s now a thesis
Also her response to relevance? mid p. 2 leads to “not directly impacted . . . rate of smoking” which makes the issue more clearly irrelevant. She leaves it in, but may be one draft from catching on.

Re: End note on revision

She has “heard” you on the relevance issue but the content’s largely the same (I’m not sure the thesis is clear.) Your advice to search for the right word by waiting a day is just what she says she now does (in her process note).

Andrea’s essay 4 original

Good marginal advice & guidance toward reader issues in strategies in end note. End note also positive & good goals—if # 3 has context from class discussion?

Revision

She does respond to your comments at end of P2 but mainly by circular assertion about credibility & experience (& a new angle).

Andrea’s essay 5 original

P 2 “thesis strong & clear”—I thought she was borrowing claims from your letter without acknowledging it? Good marginal comments on p. 4 re credibility of opposing views. P 2 & 3 her sources are so distant from discussion they all seem to be her ideas with no support. (P 4 & 5 are better).

Andrea’s essay 6 original

long note about “they” in P2 may confuse or overwhelm (I had no trouble reading “they” as “audience.” Good question at end of last discussion P. End note “helped me understand”—good tactic & good failure/success question.

She spends a long P saying “no statistics” in several ways. no support for claim that with “. . . statistics . . . the audience would’ve . . . how drugs effect . . . ”

Derrick’s essay 3 original

Good attention to order of topics. Good supportive requests for clarification and reflection. End note focus on over-use of quotes surprised me.

You ask who cares about crowding on rev. but not on original? Rev. end note doesn’t follow up on use of quotes or order of topics. Positive note “some good revision” — I think the original may be better?
Revision

[Student] added intro seems more tentative, less effective? (& in response to your request for an attention grabber)—& repetitive new P to set up drug offenders.

Derrick’s essay 4 original

Good end note focus—might ask for audience analysis more directly?

Revision

Good comments on revision re: issues vs. analysis. Not much change. Still focused on issues.

Erroll’s essay 3 original

End note suggest finding a focus—good response to the main problem—lots of assertions bundled together but aiming in different directions. His last sentence seems very odd.

Revision

Good end note to revision (although good positives may overstate: good Berryhill background—mostly the same). Rev. comment on thesis is interesting since it’s unchanged. He does remove “the other hand” from previous sentence, which helps. Ignores some editing advice re internal citations

Erroll’s essay 4 original

Praise for his last sentence is surprising—he’s confusing 2 senses of “normal” for one thing. Good idea to call for a conference & suggesting he re-read. The draft reads like hurried notes while reading. (Rather than trying to explain all the problems on the paper.)

Maddie’s essay 5 original

I like the building blocks/train analogy in the end note. (I think I’ll steal it.) Top p. 2 she mixes evidence from opinion & cause & effect studies. Some claims followed later by a reference seem like “facts” rather than one side or the other—I think this is why the “Gun sellers” P generates your response. (’d have her say “TV violence online claims that . . . .” or some such)

Maddie’s essay 6 original

Yes, it’s a good paper & shows understanding of persuasive tactics. I’d ask for specific support from your letter to support claims.
Rater Three:

*Andrea’s Essay 5 original*

I’m confused. There is a lengthy marginal comment on the last page of the essay, but nothing that looks like a true TERMINAL comment. As with other papers, the detail, thoughtfulness, and clarity of your marginalia are commendable.

*Andrea’s essay 6 original*

Your terminal comment is okay as far as it goes. The two sentences about Andrea’s coverage of description/argument provide a nice “stroke” but also raise an important question. The rest of the comment, though, seems cryptic, particularly if she’s going to revise. The question you ask about statistics, for instance, begs for further explanation.

*Derrick’s essay 3 original*

The focus of your terminal comment seemed to me trivial compared to other major changes you might have suggested—the incorporation of quoted material is not the major problem in the essay. Your marginal/textual comments, on the other hand, point to substantive issues, AND the student indeed seems to have paid attention to some of them.

*Revision*

The terminal comment on the revision, about the need for independent critique, is right on target, including the specific example you cited.

*Derrick’s essay 5 original*

I have some hesitation about your first point in the terminal comment. Did the student perhaps intend to write an inductive argument, rather than a deductive one? If so, he did a fair job. However, I suspect that your assignment (and most of your teaching) stresses putting the thesis up front. You are correct to tell Derrick that doing so will save confusion.

*Revision*

Your comment on explicit language is well done. After I read through the paper a second time I saw how much of Derrick’s argument is weakened by the kinds of unclear referents you mention. The comment about synonyms is a crackerjack because it provides good examples of exactly what you’re talking about.

*Derrick’s essay 6 original*

I am uncomfortable with the fact that you had or allowed students to analyze your own essay. I have no doubt that you can be impartial, but I wonder about them. At any rate, the advice
you give Derrick in the third sentence of the terminal comment is brief but clear. I noticed that here, as in some other graded essays I've looked at, your detailed marginal comments sometimes offer advice that's just as good or better than the terminal comment.

*Erroll's essay 3 original*

Your terminal comment on the original essay correctly points out that Erroll wasn't sure what his thesis is—he seems to argue for more realistic sentences AND for building more prison facilities. Your suggestions about proper development of the argument were right on target.

*Revision*

As I read Erroll's revision, it was clear to me that he paid very little attention to your comments on the original essay. One of the best examples of this is the first paragraph on page 2, the one with the faulty topic sentence. He did add a paragraph of detail about the Berryhill case, but that's the ONLY substantive change in the paper. Therefore I think the first sentence of your terminal comment, while "positive," is simply inaccurate—[he] didn't do ANYTHING to resolve the MAJOR problems of the previous draft. If this paper is to be revised again, your comment should make it crystal clear that revision means RE-VISION, not just dusting lint off the pages and adding a cursory sentence or two. If this is not to be revised, I would have given the revision the same grade as the original (D), because it's not significantly better. The student did NOT take advantage of the revision opportunity.

*Erroll's essay 4 original*

Your terminal comment is appropriate here, largely because Eric misses the whole point of the assignment by such a wide margin. There are times when a conference is much more effective than a long, detailed terminal comment that will not sink in.

*Revision*

Your opening remark on the revision is positive (and accurate). The segue into the "ugly head of summary" is also effective because it tells the student that while he improved he still has virtually no coverage of Jacoby's rhetorical strategies, which was the assignment's focus. I like the specificity you achieve in the subsequent sentences, although at some point you're probably overwhelming the kid. The final "For instance" provides an excellent focus for him to think about on other assignments.
Erroll's essay 5 original

Erroll's argument, as you understand, is diffuse. I think you do a nice job of making this point after you've finished the obligatory praise at the beginning of your terminal comment. Your explanation of what's wrong and the suggestion about "clumping" related material together are both very good. I also like the way you address Erroll's second major mistake, which is inadvertently giving too much credence to the opposing argument. Your suggestion that he reduce this to a minimum with qualifiers is an excellent point, tightly made. Overall, the quality of this terminal comment, given the paper's needs, is really superior.

Revision

You are very kind to praise Erroll for his ethos, and I say this because I don't agree with you—I think the paper still has enough sloppiness in grammar and usage to LOSE a lot of its credibility. The second paragraph of your terminal comment is largely hot air. By that, I mean you're basically telling him the same things you told him on the original, instead of leveling with him—he still hasn't clumped related material together effectively, and he still inadvertently weakens his own argument. The more I look at the "revision" the more I clearly see that he made damned few SUBSTANTIVE changes in the paper, despite your excellent commentary on the original. Perhaps your litany on organization will help Erroll on future writing assignments.

Erroll's essay 6 original

I didn't see a terminal comment per se here, but I saw a number of detailed—and sometimes defensive(?) marginal comments. For the most part the questions you raised are good ones, but I can't help thinking that they may be over this kid's head. A terminal comment with one or two focal points may have been a better evaluation method.

Maddie's essay 3 original

Your opening remark to Maddie is very nicely done. I like the positive tone you use in giving her some genuine praise. I also like the way you tell her to work her thesis clearly into her creative opening. What you DON'T do, however, is stress how she needs to keep that focus—whatever it is—before the reader. While she presents the material well, I found myself asking "So what?" after many of the paragraphs. You also don't address the many expression problems—see below.

Revision

She DOES make a substantive change in that first paragraph. But she still doesn't pay much attention to your comment to clarify her thesis. In your terminal comment here, I think you hit more correctly on the things you could have mentioned on the original. That is, the comments about expression and organization are true of the original paper, and the comments about clarity of focus also apply nicely. Had you put THIS comment at the end of the first version of the essay, the student might have made more of the kinds of revisions she needs to.
Maddie’s essay 4 original

Your opening statement is concise and effective—Maddie needs to know that she’s doing too much mere summary. I like the way you give her two additional things to work on (narrowing the focus and improving the coherence), explaining each clearly. I particularly liked the way you phrased your suggestion about examining ethos and mode of argumentation—it gives helpful hints without appropriating the student’s own approach to the assignment.

Revision

In the terminal comment on Michelle’s revision, your opening paragraph is excellent—her lack of a strong thesis statement DOES seriously undermine her argument. I like the way you explain your point fully, clearly, and in a tone that should engender the student’s cooperation rather than her hostility. The long second paragraph of your commentary is also very good for the same reason—it offers not only good advice but a suggestion for a conference about the issue. I also liked the way you touched on Maddie’s’ weak ending, where she totally confused her own stance. This terminal comment is a model combination of detail and focus. (It also helps illustrate why teaching writing well is so damned time-consuming.) It’s hard to write good terminal comments when the student isn’t going to revise the paper any more, but you do a good job of getting her to think about how she can improve the NEXT assignment.
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