



Improve your Writing: Learning from Instructors' Comments

Many students express disappointment, confusion or frustration after the return of their first assignments. This is normal within new educational experiences; you need to adapt to new expectations that can vary by discipline or professor. You'll likely also find that you will need to improve your work as you progress through a program; the professor you had in first year will likely expect much more of you in your fourth year of studies.

Most instructors offer feedback to support your learning on assignment work, but many students ignore this essential information, unaware of its importance. Other students have difficulty understanding the comments, so they make little effort to improve. It is important that you read instructor comments carefully – even if you disagree with their message – because they offer you an opportunity to improve your argumentation, organization and writing skills.

Successful students all share one strategy; they make the changes that have been suggested when they work on other assignments. Rather than become discouraged by critical feedback, they seek out additional comments or explanations

to improve their work so it meets the expectations of their instructors.

We have decoded some of the most common instructional comments to help you to understand the feedback you receive and to help you to adapt your approaches to writing.

Feedback on Argument and Organization

Comment: “your paper lacks focus”

THE PROBLEM: The scope of your work is too broad, which can lead to a generalized and superficial discussion of many ideas rather than a deep and critical analysis of one main idea.

THE FIX: From the early stages of your work, it is important to interrogate your topic. Do not only discuss the what, who or when; to develop a strong argument, you must also consider how, why or so what. Asking “so what?” forces you to address the significance of the point you put forward in your paper.

EXAMPLE

1. Too broad: “world food sustainability”
 - a. Narrowed: “the effect of biofuels on world food sustainability”
2. Too broad: “climate change in the arctic”
 - a. Narrowed: “whale migratory patterns and climate change in the arctic.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES [Developing a Topic and Thesis Statement](#)

Comment: “your argument needs development”

THE PROBLEM: You have not sufficiently demonstrated a critical analysis of the evidence or explained how the evidence supports the argument you present.

THE FIX: Show your understanding and thinking by elaborating on the evidence you use. Rather than dropping in evidence without discussion, be sure to integrate it by explaining what it means and how it supports your point.

EXAMPLE

Too vague/undeveloped: “The imagery of the brick house tells the reader about the relationship between Vanessa and her grandfather.”

Specifics develop and strengthen the argument: “Laurence develops images of confinement and imprisonment in her description of Grandfather Connor’s dark and imposing brick house; these images symbolize the tensions between Vanessa and her grandfather.”

Comment: “repetitive”

THE PROBLEM: Repetition is often indicative of a general or weak argument or poor organization.

THE FIX: Providing specific and clear examples can help you to minimize repetition of general points. Rather than make multiple vague statements about poor performance of the current national government, you should identify specific examples of harmful policies and discuss how these examples support your argument.

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In addition, a reverse outline can help you to differentiate supporting points that may be repetitive. Once you have identified these separate points, they can be reorganized in effective paragraphs. See comments on being “disorganized” for more advice.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE: [Revising Argument and Organization: The Reverse Outline](#)

Comment: “disorganized”

THE PROBLEM: Your paragraphs may not be organized around one central idea. When you try to incorporate too many ideas in one paragraph, the ideas compete and weaken one another.

THE FIX: Be sure each paragraph presents one clear point; avoid clumping multiple ideas for one supporting point in a single paragraph. Breaking these ideas into separate paragraphs will allow you to better develop your supporting point. Remember that you don’t need to follow a five paragraph essay model; include as many paragraphs as you need.

Good paragraphs are the backbone to an organized paper; a good paragraph introduces its one idea, presents the evidence that supports the idea, explains how the evidence supports the point of the paragraph, and offers a conclusion to the point.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE: [Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay](#)

Comment: “lacks evidence”

THE PROBLEM: You may not be offering enough evidence or you may be misinterpreting evidence, detracting from the strength of your paper or leading you to incorrect interpretations.

THE FIX: Change your approach to research and notetaking. Preview the text before reading deeply; while you read, interrogate the text’s argument and its evidence. Do not just highlight a printed article or copy and paste text from an online source. Instead, take notes to summarize the key points and important evidence of the article, book or web site. Check for accuracy and think critically about the evidence before you present it in your paper.

EXAMPLE

Argument and Evidence: A decline in the violent crime rate indicates that society is becoming safer.

Problems with evidence:

1. extent of decline is unclear
2. crime rates include only reported crimes
3. assumption that safety is related only to violent crime

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE [Research and Notetaking](#)

Comment: “lacks cohesion”

THE PROBLEM: Your paper makes no connections between paragraphs or between supporting points and the thesis;

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these connections are necessary to develop one clear, cohesive and developed argument.

THE FIX: Use clear topic sentences to introduce the paragraph and to show the relationships between your supporting points and the thesis. Take time to explain points which may be obvious to you.

EXAMPLE:

1. Use a topic sentence to tie the paragraph to the thesis: “Despite the extent of public health research which demonstrates that early sex education can promote better sexual health for adolescents, few school boards offer programming that meets the recommendations of current literature.”
 2. Use a topic sentence to refer to a previous paragraph and tie it to the current paragraph: “In addition to parent reaction, school board decisions about sex education programming are often related to negative media coverage and community response.”
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Feedback on Writing

Comment: “awkward or unclear writing”

THE PROBLEM: You may rely on unnecessary jargon, broad generalizations, or long and complicated sentences, which can make your idea unclear and your argument ineffective.

THE FIX You should avoid jargon or other words that are not familiar to you, and be cautious with your use of the

thesaurus. Simplify your sentences to present a single idea and be specific in your points.

EXAMPLE

1. Unclear: “Stupefied by a venerable quandary, professional biological specialists are unable to precisely determine the hierarchical placement of the flightless, domesticated ornithological specimen or its reproductive ovum.”
 - a. Clear: “Scientists are unable to answer an age-old question. Which came first: the chicken or the egg?”
2. Unclear: “Elucidate and abridge your discourse at the sentential level to articulate a solitary conceptualization, and exact precision in the rendering of your hypotheses.”
 - a. Clear: “Simplify your sentences to present a single idea and be specific in your points.”

Comment “poor word choice”

THE PROBLEM: Inaccurate or inappropriate word choice can radically alter the meaning of your sentence and the clarity of your argument.

THE FIX: Look for opportunities to improve specificity and accuracy, and use a dictionary instead of a thesaurus.

EXAMPLE

1. When using pronouns like “it,” “this,” and “they,” be sure it is clear what noun they are referring to (“the legislation,” “the negative reaction,” or “language experts”).
2. Also watch for value-laden language; words like “primitive” or “barbaric” carry different connotations than “traditional” or “dangerous.”

Comment “poor grammar”

THE PROBLEM: Improper punctuation or incorrect sentence structure makes your message unclear or inaccurate. Further, poor grammar can make your entire paper seem unconvincing; your good ideas lose their strength when they are not communicated clearly.

THE FIX: Edit for grammar, punctuation, and word choice after editing for organization, clarity, and argument. Separating your revision process into stages will allow you to focus on sentence construction, verb use, and punctuation. Learn how to identify and fix common grammatical errors.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE: [Grammar and Clear Writing Modules 1-4](#)

Comment “problems with referencing”

THE PROBLEM It is essential to appropriately acknowledge your sources. Incorrect or inconsistent referencing reflects sloppy methods and poor research; if you do not correctly cite your sources, you are committing plagiarism, which is a very serious academic offence.

THE FIX Understand the rules of referencing and take the time to check your citations and reference list to ensure accuracy and consistency in format.

THE KEYS TO KNOW:

1. direct quotations must be enclosed by quotation marks, must be accurately copied, and must include a citation
2. summarized ideas from another source must be written in your own words and sentence structure and must include a citation
3. you must include citations (footnote or parenthetical in-text citations) and a list of references at the end of your paper (also called works cited or bibliography)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Avoiding Plagiarism by using Good Writing Techniques](#)

[ASC Online Documentation Guide](#)