

When I Stopped Writing on Their Papers: Accommodating the Needs of Student Writers with Audio Comments

A teacher finds using software to make audio comments on students' writing improves students' understanding of her responses and increases their willingness to take her suggestions for revision more seriously.

This is the story of how, one snowy Sunday afternoon, I curled up in the corner of my sofa, read one of my students' essays, and refused to pick up my pen. Instead, I thought about what I would say to this student if we had the luxury of conferencing about his writing. I considered his topic and why it excited me, how he got my attention as a reader, the questions that persisted after I read, and a few suggestions to help him improve the clarity of the writing. Then, I picked up my smartphone and recorded my thoughts. Talking into my phone made me feel like I was in conversation. "Hey, Kevin . . . Ms. Bauer here. So I just finished reading your essay and here's what I'm thinking . . ." Leaning back into the sofa cushions as I spoke, I felt relaxed, yet focused—professional, yet friendly—exactly the way I feel on a very good day in my classroom. Once I finished, I couldn't resist the temptation to play it back. What I heard convinced me that my pens should stay in my school bag until Monday morning.

In the process of recording audio comments, I came to a new understanding of my students' writing needs and my responsibilities as their writing instructor. I began to offer audio comments as a feedback option for early drafts on significant writing assignments. The other options were traditional handwritten comments and suggestions using the Track Changes feature in Microsoft Word. My objective was to provide substantial and useful suggestions for improving a draft that would be submitted for evaluation at a later time. Audio comments did not accompany a scored piece of writing because I

wanted my comments to be useful to students as they revised, not to serve as a defense of the score.

Before turning in drafts, students in my class reflected on their work and identified the particular kind of feedback they wanted on the assignment, which is one effective way of ensuring students' purposes for their writing guides the way I read their writing. Following Donald M. Murray's conference pattern, I focused on each student's request as I read, making little checks or stars on the page to indicate where I had a comment or suggestion. After reviewing the entire draft, I returned to the beginning and opened the voice memos application on my iPhone. The methods described here could also be undertaken with an inexpensive tape recorder or free recording software such as Audacity.

To keep my comments organized and to help students navigate my response, I wrote numbers in the margins of the paper and spoke those numbers into the audio recording just before I delivered my praise, questions, or suggestions. For this excellent improvement to my practice, I am grateful to Emily, one of the first students to select the audio comments option. When I finished my recording, I sent the writer an email with an MP3 attachment. The student's draft and a sticky note containing my prerecording notes were returned during the following class period.

As I experimented with providing student feedback via audio comments, I began to survey the students who selected this option. I explained that using audio comments was an instructional experiment, and that I was interested in their suggestions and feedback to make my practice as effective

as possible. After three years of experimentation with audio comments, I uncovered several themes among student responses. These themes confirm the research that has been conducted in the field and demonstrate how audio-recorded feedback accommodates student writers by addressing their individual needs.

Students' Responses to Audio Feedback: Personal Engagement and Confidence

My students expressed that they *felt personally engaged in the process of receiving feedback* with their frequent references to their feelings and level of confidence. In making audio comments, I was able to incorporate many elements of a successful writing conference such as making a personal connection and getting to know the writer, while avoiding the chaos of trying to conduct conferences during class time.

- “Keep making it personal because it really helps!”—Mike
- “I feel like they [audio comments] are more personal because I am able to hear your opinion through emotions and more detailed descriptions.”—Ashli
- “I liked knowing what aspects of my writing you enjoyed. This made me confident in those sections or ideas that I previously was not.”—Ali
- “I heard more about what you thought of my paper instead of just reading small comments on the side of the page.”—Amy
- “With audio comments, I like how the tone of the editor comes into effect. This makes the critique less harsh, and easier to understand.”—Prajoth

In her qualitative study of audio vs. handwritten instructor comments in three developmental college writing classes, Susan Sipple found that students perceived audio comments as more motivating than handwritten ones, which she attributed to “an increase in the amount of praise they received on papers where they were given audio comments” (24).

According to Andrew Cavanaugh, who advocates audio comments at the university level, “Text-based comments often ‘sound’ terse when read by

students; with audio comments, the instructor can qualify his/her language, adjust volume, use pregnant pauses, etc. in offering the student feedback on concerns in a paper. These dynamics help to communicate the problems in a student’s writing with care and empathy.”

As a teacher using audio comments to respond to students’ drafts, I learned that it is easy to make a critical remark in the space of a few words, but praise is not considered sincere unless it is elaborate. Students want to know *why* the instructor likes their writing or what makes a particular sentence powerful or effective. Not only is this kind of information a pleasure to receive, it provides the writer with a template for following one successful performance with another one in the future.

Tip: No matter how many errors I find in a paper, I make a point of opening audio comments with praise for some aspect of the writing and closing the recording with words of encouragement for the next draft. Even the level of difficulty the student has taken on with his or her selection of topic could be a source of praise. Beginning and ending with praise helps me maintain an empathetic stance toward the writer throughout the audio commentary. After all, it’s the writer’s purpose and effectiveness on which I’m commenting, not my own idea of what the writing should accomplish.

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Students' Responses to Audio Feedback: The Importance of Specificity

The students recognized and appreciated that my recorded comments referred specifically to their method of handling a topic or their strengths and challenges as writers, often remarking that the *degree of specificity* made the audio recording easy to use or easy to understand.

- “The comment that was most useful was the one that told me precisely where I could include research in my story.”—Dan

- “I liked how you marked my page and explained the mark in the audio comment. It was easier to follow, and it was very specific, describing which points needed more elaboration in order to be convincing.”—Arianna
- “The part where you specifically suggested a segue sentence that would work well.”—Sam

Haven’t we all been the recipients of generic comments running down the margins of a paper? “Develop. More details needed.” “Unclear.” These messages are frustrating because writers know they could apply to any paper. Without a specific context in which to apply the comment, students often misunderstand such comments or misinterpret them as criticism. This is no less true in audio commentary, but audio commentary makes it easier to be more

specific than traditional, written commentary does.

In his defense of audio comments as pedagogically sound and ergonomically necessary, Cavanaugh argues that the “thorough narrative that the instructor is allowed to provide affords the student a rich learning experience.” I wish I could report that recording audio comments significantly reduces the amount of time I spent on each student paper. It doesn’t. However, audio feedback enables my comments to become much more developed and targeted to the individual writer than they had been when I confined myself to cryptic and cramped notes written in the

margins. Generally, I remarked on 5 to 15 aspects of the writing in a recording of four to twelve minutes in length. In the same amount of time, I commented on far fewer items in greater depth.

Tip: When delivering suggestions for revision, attempt to indicate several ways the student might improve one weak aspect of the writing, rather than deliver a single, authoritative suggestion. In this way, the student learns by weighing the alternatives and selecting (or creating) one that is most appropriate for the writing situation.

Students’ Responses to Audio Feedback: Comprehension

The most gratifying responses I received from students were those in which students *confirmed their understanding* of a particular comment I had made on the recording or acknowledged that one of my suggestions did prove useful in revision.

- “The suggestion that I should have broken my story into different journal entries to improve my time usage. My story will flow better with multiple entries.”—Erin
- “After re-reading the ending, I agree that an email would have properly put a close to the story. It gave me insight on the fact that it is important to stick to a style when writing.”—Maria
- “Global revisions were the most useful, but the explanation of misplaced modifiers will keep me from doing it in the future.”—CJ

The practice of making audio comments goes beyond assisting students with revising a particular assignment. I was able to target my instruction so that students could learn about themselves as writers and develop strategies for avoiding common pitfalls on future assignments, thereby strengthening their writing performance over the year.

Since students reflected on their experience days after listening to audio comments, their recollection of specific suggestions indicates that they listened carefully and repeatedly, thus maximizing the benefit of the feedback and increasing the likelihood that they have internalized advice and will be able to access it in future writing situations.

Most students reported listening to my comments at least two times as they worked on the next draft of the assignment. Noah described his process as follows: “I listen, then review my writing. Then listen and review what I wrote again. Finally, I revise my writing and listen once more to see if I can catch anything else from the audio comments.”

Audio recordings are portable and easy to use, making them an ideal teaching tool. Former students have told me that they still have my MP3 recordings on their iPods, and that occasionally, when they have the device in shuffle mode, they are transported back to sophomore year when they hear my voice. Though many traditionalists might

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Jeff Sommers and Susan Sipple, who advocate digitized audio commentary, state that one important advantage of audio comments is that they “can be listened to (again and again) at the student’s convenience.” The title of their website, *A Heterotopic Space*, makes reference to the capacity of digital media to help instructors create a space outside the traditional classroom—a space in which students can consume and respond to comments at their own pace and in a comfortable environment.

Tip: Invite students to discuss how they use your audio comments and suggestions during the revision process, and devote some instructional time to providing strategies for deciding how to implement suggestions at the global (revision) and local (editing) levels. This instruction may include some discussion of the fact that it’s possible to consider a suggestion and ultimately reject it. After all, the objective is to help students become better writers, not just to improve the quality of a particular assignment or hold up the instructor’s suggestions as the only means of improvement. I have found that using audio comments helps students to see that my comments are meant more as *suggestions* than as *corrections* of their writing.

When I began my career as a teacher, I thought my job was to show students what was wrong with their writing and how to fix it. My focus was on the product. The skill I held most dear was editing. These days, my primary purpose is to convince the writer that his or her work is worthy of taking through another draft. My focus is on coaching

students through the process. I think a compelling topic, a convincing voice, and well-chosen details are more important than writing mechanics.

When I stopped writing on my students’ papers and made use of audio comments instead, I discovered that assessment, which I had always regarded as a chore, could be a powerful teaching tool and a means of helping my students communicate their thoughts and opinions in effective and engaging ways. Recording audio comments has helped me deliver feedback on student work that is compatible with my practice of student-centered, responsive writing instruction. And I think my students can hear the difference. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The author shares an innovative approach to responding to student writing. ReadWriteThink.org’s “How to Revise and Edit” describes strategies for students to begin revising and editing any piece of writing. While revising, the students are asked to “read as a reader,” “read as a writer,” and “read as an editor.” <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/revise-edit-30116.html>