Giving Formative Feedback

Roshunda Cade
Academic Resource Center Assistant Director, Writing Program

Introduction:
Formative feedback – to modify learners' thinking and learning to improve learning of the discipline to empower learners to become more aware of their own learning.

Timing of giving formative feedback is important. It must be given early in the writing process. Giving this type of feedback once a grade is on the line is too late. Students not only won't have time to consider the suggestions and revise, but they also won't have the will to do so, since a grade will already have been awarded.

Writing assignments are for more than just assessment. A paper is a communication tool that can help students gain knowledge of a discipline and display that knowledge.

Professors are disciplinary experts, and should focus on their fields of expertise while reading student papers. They shouldn’t get caught up in the minutiae of writing.

Instead, they can look to these five steps of giving formative feedback by asking the following questions of student papers and responding in appropriate ways.

Formative Assessment:
1. Requires students to take responsibility for their own learning.
2. Communicates clear, specific learning goals.
3. Focuses on goals that represent valuable educational outcomes with applicability beyond the learning context.
4. Identifies the student's current knowledge/skills and the necessary steps for reaching the desired goals.
5. Requires development of plans for attaining the desired goals.
6. Encourages students to self-monitor progress toward the learning goals.
7. Provides examples of learning goals including, when relevant, the specific grading criteria or rubrics that will be used to evaluate the student's work.
8. Provides frequent assessment, including peer and student self-assessment and assessment embedded within learning activities.
9. Includes feedback that is non-evaluative, specific, timely, and related to the learning goals, and that provides opportunities for the student to revise and improve work products and deepen understandings.
10. Promotes metacognition and reflection by students on their work.

1. Does the student construct the paper in the standard format of the field?
   a. If yes, tell the student in what ways so that he or she will know which strategies to repeat. Highlight specific good examples.
   b. If no, give specific feedback to help the student understand how arguments are constructed in the field.

2. Does the student include appropriate and sufficient evidence?
   a. If yes, tell the student in what ways so that he or she will know which strategies to repeat. Highlight specific good examples.
   b. If no, give specific feedback to help the student understand what good research in the field looks like. Suggest some search terms, for example, and why you believe those terms will yield significant results.

3. Does the student use appropriate terminology?
   a. If yes, tell the student in what ways so that he or she will know which strategies to repeat. Highlight specific good examples.
   b. If no, give specific feedback to help the student understand the vocabulary of the field.

4. Does the student use appropriate language for the rhetorical context?
   a. If yes, tell the student in what ways so that he or she will know which strategies to repeat. Highlight specific good examples.
   b. If no, pick 1-3 areas of concern and help the student find resources to learn how to improve. If, for example, you find that the student is using commas incorrectly throughout the paper, don't mark each missing (or excessive) comma. Write a note saying that the student needs help with understanding comma usage, and point the student toward appropriate resources.

5. What actions will best help the student progress in the writing of this paper?
   a. Set simple, achievable goals for the next draft of the paper. This will help the student do more than merely fix errors, but rather it will challenge the student to think through his or her rhetorical choices.
   b. Allow the student to make these revisions.

The RISE Model:
The RISE Model for Meaningful Feedback provides a framework for giving constructive feedback, following Bloom's taxonomy:

Reflect - Communicate your personal reflections with students e.g. I resonate with this because...
Inquire - Question ideas to gain information and clarify e.g. How are you using this phrase? Does it mean x?
Suggest - Offer ideas for improvement for the current draft e.g. You may consider including more information about x because of y.
Elevate - Offer ideas for improvement for future work e.g. When you next undertake this topic, you may consider researching more about x.