

Suggestions to advisors regarding critical thinking.  
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## Giving Feedback to Students

### The Goal of Stimulating Critical Thinking

Students tend to look for commentary that addresses each small section of their work, or, indeed, each line. Their goal is to “fix” the specific errors in order to satisfy the teacher’s suggestions for editing. The result is that they have trouble developing the habits of critical thinking process required to develop a sound structure for their work.

One method that many advisors are now adopting, especially in the early stages of project development, is that of narrative commentary linked to helping the students correctly situate their thinking about their project before they write. We focus them first on understanding the larger issue in which their project derives its meaning, and systematically we encourage them to narrow the field to the specific focus of their work, which addresses some unanswered questions. We encourage them to understand that no problem is without its larger context, which they must explore before they can assign meaning to their own work.

It is unlikely that students will be able to articulate their own research area in its context without first studying what others have said about that broader topic. Often, students try to skip that step. Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of their research question and the work of others helps them to develop the “intellectual skepticism” which we advisors value.

The narrative provided by the advisors in the early work focuses on how well the students have completed the above steps in their early drafts. It generally takes more than one draft for novice students to write an adequate introduction to their project report that includes a proper articulation of their project focus. It will take place only after students have dipped sufficiently into the body of research that already exists.

The narrative response is also critical for commenting on the literature review that students do. Helping them to craft the arguments based upon the work of others helps them think critically about their own work. The mechanics of writing are less problematic when students think clearly about their work.

Those of us who have adopted the narrative style of commenting have found that our responses are more valuable to the students than our old style of commenting on mechanics, and it is certainly more pleasurable and efficient for us as advisors.

Advisors can learn how to use the narrative response effectively in workshops given periodically during the year by Lorraine Higgins or John Trimbur in the WPI Center for Communication Across the Curriculum. Look for announcements of the workshops.