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The Genre of the End Comment: Conventions in Teacher Responses to Student Writing

A composition teacher finishes reading a student's paper and poises her pen over the blank space at the bottom of the final page.

This is a very good essay. You used quotes well to support your argument and the discussion of the Cousteau museum was interesting and effective in developing your point. Your paper is well-organized and your argument is well-accommodated to your audience. Your equation of the slaughter of whales to the capture of dolphins for massive parks seems a bit extreme, though. Try not to stretch too much for startling examples. There are a few awkward sentence structures and your conclusion is a bit forced, but otherwise, this is well-done.

The teacher could have written anything, but she chose to script a statement that closely resembles not only her previous end comments, but also the end comments of other composition teachers. Why?

Part of the answer, at least, lies in genre. But the similarities between end comments cannot be ascribed to active regulation of the genre by the teaching community. Teachers usually do not receive formal training in commenting and rarely share their written comments with each other. End comments are not preserved in one location for perusal by members of the community. Teachers rarely read their comments more than once or twice, since comments are widely dispersed shortly after they are written. In addition, many teachers have probably considered changing their com-

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menting strategies at least once during their teaching careers, and these changes would also seem to make a stable genre unlikely.

Yet faced with multiple student papers, the teacher nonetheless develops a pattern of response. And because other teachers face the same situation, they develop similar patterns. Over time, the teachers create a history of practice that, while always evolving, generates expectations for both readers and writers of end comments. In this way, a genre forms in response to "a recurrent rhetorical situation" (Miller 155), a situation which consists of the relationships between the teacher, students, their papers, and the educational institutions that sanction and encourage the interchange.

The teacher possesses the institutional power in the relationship and can use comments to motivate, educate, or chastise her students. But the student, the paper, and the institution can also exert power over the teacher. The teacher may fear authority challenges from aggressive students who receive poor grades or who oppose the teacher's views on writing. Even the student with the most fragile self-esteem can hold a kind of power over the teacher if the teacher feels obligated to communicate gently with that student. And the student's paper is not without power in this rhetorical situation, since it can frustrate or mesmerize, persuade or offend the teacher. The educational institution also exerts power over the teacher's commenting by determining the focus of the teacher's curriculum, by rewarding or not rewarding the teacher for pedagogical innovations, and, in many cases, by requiring that the teacher return papers with comments within a specified period of time.

Rather than examining this complicated situation anew each time they write an end comment, teachers follow patterns that meet the needs of the situation. In Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of genre, these patterns are called primary and secondary speech genres. Primary speech genres are simple units of written or spoken discourse, such as apologies or greetings, that display "relatively stable" content, style, and structure each time they appear (Bakhtin 60). Secondary speech genres, such as novels, grant proposals, and end comments, are more complex units of discourse formed by "absorb[ing] and digest[ing] various primary genres" (62). Like primary genres, secondary speech genres display relatively stable content, style, and structure. If an end comment can be seen as a secondary speech genre, what are the relatively stable features that distinguish it from other types of discourse? What are the primary genres in the teacher's repertoire and according to what patterns do they combine to form end comments? Do the current generic conventions help teachers create effective comments? Would alternative ways of constructing comments be more appropriate?

Past research on commenting has generally focused not on these questions but on the discrepancy between teachers' commenting goals and the actual results of comments. Some researchers have argued that comments

fail to achieve their pedagogical purposes because they are poorly written. Nancy Sommers, for example, argues that marginal and end comments often lack focus and specificity. Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch assert that comments reflect teachers' attempts to measure student writing against an ideal text, a practice which shifts authority over a text from the student writer to the teacher.¹ Others have researched the effect of comments on students' revisions. Melanie Sperling and Sarah Freedman, for example, found that one student consistently misinterpreted her teacher's marginal comments because the student did not share the teacher's knowledge and values regarding writing and revision. Larry Beason extended this research by identifying correlations between teachers' commenting aims and students' utilization of feedback. Still others have suggested that teachers should use alternative commenting methods, such as mentioning only the positive aspects of a piece of writing, in order to improve their responses (Zak).

But to address the problems with the average comment effectively, we first need to construct a better understanding of the nature of commenting as it is usually practiced. Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford began this work in a 1993 article in which they outline some commenting patterns and tropes and identify some of the rhetorical principles that serve as the basis of teachers' evaluations. In the conclusion of their article, Connors and Lunsford issue a call to action. "Future studies," they write, should describe "in detail the topography we have only sketched in here . . . determining those genres and tropes of response we tend to privilege" (219). Such an effort, they argue, will help us understand our commenting roles and help new teachers enter our community. This study answers Connors and Lunsford's call for a better understanding of the genre of the end comment. My study was designed to identify the primary genres included in the teacher's repertoire, to determine the features of these primary genres, and to discover patterns of use of the repertoire to compose end comments. That is, I wanted to determine the range of options available to commenters and find out if commenters make similar choices when selecting from that repertoire, as Bakhtin's theory would predict. I also wanted to begin to assess the adequacy of commenting patterns for the task at hand.

First, I analyzed 208 end comments collected from ten teaching assistants at Penn State. The comments had been written in 1993 on papers produced by students in the university's first-year composition and rhetoric courses. The 208 comments were randomly selected so that the sample includes approximately the same number of end comments from papers that received grades of A, A-, B+, and so forth through D. A small number of papers that received the grade of F were also included in the sample. Then, to ensure that the results of this study would describe end comments written by teachers in a range of post-secondary institutions, I analyzed a second sample containing end comments written between 1983 and 1985

by teachers at universities of various sizes located in every region of the United States. I collected these comments from student papers originally gathered by Connors and Lunsford as part of a large-scale study of student errors and later used by them in the study of commenting described above. Connors and Lunsford constructed this sample randomly, as they explain:

In response to a direct mail appeal to more than 1,500 teachers who had used or expressed interest in handbooks, we received . . . more than 21,500 papers from 300 teachers. . . . After stratifying our batches of papers by region, size of school, and type of school, we used the table of random numbers and the numbers that had been stamped on each paper as it came in to pull 3,000 papers. . . . Using the random number tables again, we pulled 300 papers. ("Frequency" 398-99)

From this representative sample of 300, I removed all papers which contained no end comment.² From the remaining 192, I randomly selected equal numbers of papers from each grade category as I had done with the Penn State sample. The national sample then included 105 end comments.

To begin my analysis, I read a set of comments and made a list of the types of remarks they included. I considered these topics, ranging from evaluations of the paper's organization to offers of assistance, the repertoire of primary genres from which teachers choose when composing end comments. To ensure that this repertoire included all primary genres used by teachers, I then read the entire set of comments, searching for additional primary genres. I found no additional genres, and therefore I am confident that I have identified the most commonly used primary genres. Then, I read all 313 comments again, recording the following for each: the primary genres it includes, the order in which those primary genres appear, and the grammatical subject and mood of each incarnation of a primary genre. Finally, I evaluated the comments and considered alternative patterns.

The Repertoire of Primary Genres

The study identified sixteen primary genres, falling into three groups: judging genres, reader response genres, and coaching genres.³ (See Table 1.) A primary genre may consist of several sentences, a single sentence, or simply a phrase or fragment.

Judging Genres

Not surprisingly, the majority of the primary genres in the teacher's commenting repertoire are tools for judging. Each of the eleven primary judg-

Table 1. Frequencies of Primary Genres in Sample.

<i>Primary Genre</i>	<i>Total Number in Sample</i>
<i>Judging Genres</i>	
Evaluation of development	199
Evaluation of style	118
Evaluation of the entire paper	106
Evaluation of focus	105
Evaluation of effort	96
Evaluation of organization	88
Evaluation of rhetorical effectiveness	82
Evaluation of topic	63
Evaluation of correctness	52
Evaluation of audience accommodation	51
Justification of the grade	48
<i>Reader Response Genres</i>	
Reading experience	67
Identification	43
<i>Coaching Genres</i>	
Suggestion for revision of current paper	155
Suggestion for future papers	88
Offer of assistance	37

ing genres can express a positive or a negative message. (See Table 2 for the positive and negative frequencies of each judging genre.)

In the sample end comments, evaluations of focus, organization, development, and style are relatively equally distributed between positive and negative messages. But some primary genres are much more likely to express praise than criticism, while others demonstrate the opposite tendency.

For example, more than four out of five teacher evaluations of the entire paper are positive, despite the even distribution of grades across the sample. Teachers may be reluctant to write negative evaluations of an entire paper because they feel such statements would simply indicate global failure rather than pinpointing failings which can be corrected, or because they realize sweeping negativity could destroy a student's relatively fragile self-confidence. They may justify writing almost exclusively positive evaluations as a way to demonstrate fairness or sensitivity. Unfortunately, the positive-only convention in the evaluation of the paper genre is so strong that some teachers may write positive evaluations of the paper without

Table 2. Positivity and Negativity of Judging Genres.

<i>Judging Genre</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Evaluation of development	55%	45%
Evaluation of style	55%	45%
Evaluation of the entire paper	83%	17%
Evaluation of focus	43%	57%
Evaluation of effort	82%	18%
Evaluation of organization	62%	38%
Evaluation of rhetorical effectiveness	65%	35%
Evaluation of topic	84%	16%
Evaluation of correctness	5%	95%
Evaluation of audience accommodation	59%	41%
Justification of the grade	27%	73%

actually believing them, simply to conform to the generic conventions. Of course, the positive evaluations range from high praise such as “This is an excellent paper!”⁴ to mild praise with negative overtones such as “This is a pretty good narrative,” and these variations allow the teacher to balance conformity with a measure of honesty. But when generic conventions become so strong that they lead teachers to make insincere statements, teachers’ credibility and the effectiveness of the end comment may suffer.

Several other evaluative genres are also generally positive, but since they appear less frequently in end comments and evaluate a specific aspect of the student’s paper, they often seem more sincere. One such primary genre is the evaluation of student effort. In this case, teachers usually make positive statements, perhaps to acknowledge the struggles of both strong and weak writers. For example, although one teacher found little else to praise in a particular paper, he or she commented “You worked hard on planning this paper—the outline was a good idea.” Negative evaluations of effort seem to be a genre violation of a sort. They appear very rarely—only, it seems, when the teacher is sufficiently frustrated with the level of work represented by the paper to abandon worries about harming the student’s self-esteem.⁵ For example, one teacher wrote, “The poor quality of the ideas, style, and proofreading tells me that you didn’t spend much time on this paper.”

Approximately two-thirds of evaluations of rhetorical effectiveness, evaluations that address the persuasiveness of the writer’s argument, are positive. The genre generally appears in end comments written on A and B level papers. Teachers presumably consider other matters more urgent

when commenting on average and below average papers. The audience accommodation primary genre, which explicitly discusses the extent to which the writer's strategies address the needs or attitudes of the writer's chosen audience, follows the same pattern in the Penn State sample as that of rhetorical effectiveness. No conclusions can be drawn about this primary genre from the national sample because only five of the 105 national comments include the genre. Perhaps the Penn State teachers use this primary genre more frequently than other teachers because the Penn State composition program emphasizes audience accommodation. The difference in frequency of the primary genre in the two samples may indicate the influence of the institutional setting and changing disciplinary emphases on commenting.

More than three-quarters of evaluations of topic are positive. In contrast to the rhetorical effectiveness and audience accommodation genres, evaluations of topic tend to appear only on papers graded C or below. Typically, these positive evaluations, such as "You've really got something interesting in this topic," highlight the interest or potential of the topic and seem designed to soften the negative evaluations that appear elsewhere in the comment. In fact, this primary genre may exist largely to help teachers fulfill the generic convention of including positive evaluations in end comments even when the student's paper is poor. These evaluations of topic could also provide encouragement for revision efforts.

Other judging genres, such as evaluation of correctness and justification of the grade, are selected from the repertoire primarily to convey negative messages. Naturally, teachers rarely mention correctness unless they perceive a problem. Justifications of the grade, which explicitly mention the reason for the letter grade assigned to the paper, are usually an attempt to forestall authority challenges, which occur most often when a student receives a low grade. For example, one teacher wrote "Though an interesting read, this paper does not fulfill the assignment and must receive a failing grade."

In summary, teachers select from eleven primary genres when evaluating a student's writing. Five have strong associations with praise and two with criticism, although teachers occasionally ignore the conventions. The remaining four genres are not tied to either positive or negative content.

Teachers also follow generic conventions for the phrasing of judging genres. For example, positive evaluations are frequently written as fragments, such as "nicely done" and "good paper." Eighty-six percent of all fragments in the sample express positive evaluations. Teachers are most likely to write fragments when evaluating the entire paper, organization, and style. Fragments provide no reasons for the praise and may give the impression of hastiness, thus weakening the praise.⁶

The primary judging genres also display patterns of grammatical subject. The teachers used "the paper" (or a variant such as "the organization" or "the style") as the grammatical subject of 46% of evaluative sentences. The use of "the paper" or a similar construction can lessen the impact of the evaluation by distancing it from the student. For example, a statement such as "You organized the second section well to bring out your main point" accords the student more credit than does a statement such as "The second section is well-organized to bring out the main point." Similarly, the use of "the paper" or a similar subject acts as a buffer between the student and criticism in negative statements. In other words, strict adherence to the generic convention of "the paper" or a variant as subject at times benefits the comment, but at other times harms it. The Penn State comments demonstrate three ways to alter the generic subject conventions to produce stronger and more personal comments in certain situations when "the paper" is less appropriate.

First, when expressing positive evaluations of focus, organization, development, the student's effort, audience accommodation, and topic, the Penn State teachers used "you" (meaning the student) as subject 58% of the time. This strategy heightens praise by acknowledging the student's active role in an achievement. When writing negative evaluations in these genres, the teachers conform to the "the paper" convention 63% of the time. Adherence to these local conventions is particularly obvious when a single sentence combines two primary genres, one of which carries a positive message and the other a negative message: "You make some good points, but this paper lacks a clear focus."

Second, when writing evaluations of correctness (100% negative in the Penn State sample), Penn State teachers used "there" as a pseudo-subject in 43% of the cases. For example, one teacher wrote "There are a lot of grammar errors in this paper." The use of "there" distances the criticism from the student writer even more than use of "the paper," and teachers may use it to protect the student from the stigma associated with correctness errors.

Third, 54% of the positive justifications of grades in the Penn State sample feature "I" (meaning the teacher) as subject. For example, "I gave your paper an A because you executed each aspect of the assignment well *and* wrote an especially strong conclusion." This technique heightens the praise by emphasizing that it comes from an expert, the instructor. It also allows the teacher to retain control over the discourse, even while acknowledging that the paper had an effect on him or her. (When negative, sentences justifying a grade in the Penn State sample conform to the "the paper" subject convention.)

Thus, rather than using “the paper” or a variant consistently in all situations, the Penn State commenters have developed other, no less consistent subject choice patterns for some situations when “the paper” is not the best subject. Such adaptations of the judging genres render them more flexible and responsive to actual contexts. Other features of the judging genres, most notably the strong tendency to write only positive versions of some genres and only negative versions of others, could benefit from similar adaptations. Evaluations of rhetorical effectiveness, audience accommodation, and topic seem particularly good examples of genres that could be effectively employed in their negative forms to point out common flaws in students’ papers. Yet commenters generally write only positive versions of those genres. As commenters, we should strive to select from all available options to create the most effective response, rather than using only a portion of the options again and again regardless of situation.

Reader Response Genres

Evaluative genres form the bulk of the commenter’s primary genre repertoire, but the repertoire also gives teachers other choices. The two reader response genres, for example, are tools for expressing the reactions of an active reader. Using these primary genres, a teacher can establish a more personal connection with the student and demonstrate the effects of words on readers.

The identification genre expresses the teacher’s response to the student’s personal experiences rather than to the student’s writing. For example, a response to a paper that included a mention of the student’s selection as a member of the baseball team included the following: “I have to congratulate you on your acceptance to the baseball team. I admire you because baseball will certainly require a large athletic commitment in addition to all the other academic pressures.” Such attempts to break through the impersonality of the end comment and establish a connection with a student are unfortunately rare in the sample. The commenting situation—including the time constraints, the focus on assigning a grade, and the frequent similarities between papers in a set—works against recognizing the individuality of the student writer. Only one out of eight end comments in the sample includes the identification genre.

Statements in the reading experience genre are intended as representations of the thoughts the teacher had about the paper while reading it. For example, in an end comment for a paper about a swim meet, the teacher wrote: “Your narrative seems to lead up to the climax of the meet, but when we get to that point it’s quite a let-down because you don’t discuss

the meet at all.” By revealing the thoughts of a reader, such statements may remind students that their words have effects. The effects discussed are usually negative, such as confusion and disbelief, although the sample includes the occasional positive reading experience statement, such as “I am certainly convinced.”

The reading experience genre often serves as evidence to support an evaluation. For example, one comment includes the following sequence of reading experience and evaluation of development: “I found myself wondering how somebody so unassuming and self-effacing can function as a role model. I don’t understand how kids can know about him. You should have explained this point.” The first two sentences in this example establish the teacher’s confusion while reading, serving as a justification for the third sentence, which negatively evaluates the paper.

Examples of the reading experience genre are relatively rare in end comments, perhaps because they are more commonly written in the margin at the moment when the thought occurs to the teacher. Teachers may also be wary of using the genre to criticize a paper because it highlights the subjectivity of readers’ responses. Statements of reading experience represent only the teacher’s experience, often featuring “I” (meaning the teacher) as subject. They seem vulnerable to counter-arguments representing the reading experiences of peer reviewers or other readers. Some teachers give their statements more strength by aligning themselves with the student’s audience, thus using an evaluation of audience accommodation to support the reading experience genre as in this comment: “I was confused by the sports terms you used, as non-sports-inclined members of your audience would also be.” Such techniques may strengthen the effect of the reading experience genre.

Both reader response genres can serve as tools to remind students that their words affect readers. They also give the teacher a presence in the comment other than evaluator or writing coach, a presence reflected by the use of “I” as subject in almost two-thirds of these genres. The reader response genres, if used more frequently, could serve as an antidote to the usual impersonality of end comments.

Coaching Genres

In addition to evaluating and responding as a reader to students’ papers, teachers also provide individualized instruction through end comments. For this purpose, the primary genre repertoire contains three coaching genres. The teacher can suggest ideas for revision of the current paper, suggest areas for improvement on future papers, or offer assistance to the student.

Suggestions (for current or future papers) can target either content or expression. Eighty-four percent of suggestions for revision of the current paper concern content issues, such as development, organization, and rhetorical effectiveness. Sixteen percent target expression, including correctness, clarity, and sentence structure. When suggesting areas to work on in future papers, teachers focused on content 35% of the time and expression 47% of the time. The other 18% request that the student put more effort into the next paper.⁷

Often, examples of the suggestion genres are merely veiled evaluations. For instance, one teacher wrote: "You could do some work on this essay to achieve smoother transitions and a tighter overall structure." According to my classification system, this statement is a suggestion for revision because it advises the student to "do some work on this essay." However, the main message of the statement is a negative evaluation of organization. Use of the suggestion genres to disguise evaluations may cause the student to view revision as punishment for mistakes, and may weaken the ethos of the teacher as coach. These evaluations-as-suggestions also provide few specifics to guide the student. In contrast, consider another suggestion for revision of organization from the sample: "Could you think of ways to continue the general text of the essay and integrate the examples in an overall reflexive or descriptive essay of Pittsburghese? In other words, could you group the specific examples to illustrate the more general points you made?" This suggestion follows a negative evaluation of the "list-like structure" of examples in the paper, and the suggestion naturally reinforces the negative evaluation. However, it also offers specific advice, and this advice is its main message.

The third coaching genre, the offer of assistance, gives students the opportunity to seek individualized instruction beyond that possible in an end comment. Most offers in the sample are related to suggestions and follow those suggestions in the comment. For example, the samples include the following offers: "Before you finalize your revision, show it to me" and "Stop by my office if you want to talk about these issues in your next paper." As these examples indicate, offers are highly standardized, usually including either "see me" or "stop by." They function in general as encouragement for the student to seek additional help, but can serve other, sometimes contradictory, purposes as well. For example, offers sometimes reveal the teacher's concern that the student will not understand the end comment, as in "I'd be happy to explain in more detail so see me if this hasn't made sense." Occasionally, on papers receiving grades below C, offers of assistance serve as warnings to the student, indicating the severity of the paper's faults and implying unpleasant consequences if the faults are not soon corrected with the teacher's help. For example a comment on a D

paper includes the following offer: "You really should see me so we can try to do something about your punctuation problems before the next paper."

As for the phrasing of the coaching genres, whereas teachers generally use declarative sentences to express judging and reader response genres, they tend to use commands and questions to express coaching genres. Thirty-nine percent of suggestions for revision of the current paper and 85% of suggestions for future papers are stated in the imperative, such as "Be more aggressive in persuading your reader to agree with you next time." Teachers are also likely to use commands, such as "see me," in the offer of assistance genre. Sixty-eight percent of all offers of assistance occur in the form of a command.

The use of the imperative to suggest or make an offer is unusual in everyday conversation and most written genres. The high incidence of the command in the coaching genres supports Bakhtin's assertion that primary genres change when they are absorbed by secondary genres (62). In the case of the end comment, the alteration probably stems from the power relationships in the situation. The genres of suggestion and offer usually indicate an approach by the speaker/writer, placing the listener/reader in the powerful position of accepting or rejecting the proposition. The imperative mood allows the teacher to maintain at least outward control of the power in these situations.

The interrogatory mood also appears in the coaching genres. Over half of all questions in the sample convey suggestions for revision of the current paper. Most often, these statements are questions for further thought, attempts to push the student to think more deeply about a subject. For example, one teacher asked "What do you think about the political implications of your proposal?" But other suggestions simply take the form of questions in order to disguise a negative evaluation: "Wouldn't your argument be strengthened by mentioning the specific musicians?" This question and others like it clearly imply "yes" answers, conveying a strong negative evaluation along with the suggestion for revision. However, the question structure may encourage students to consider the suggestion by engaging them in a dialogue, even if it is a limited and unbalanced dialogue.⁸

Thus the content and phrasing of the coaching genres suggests that teachers use them to push students to improve their writing. But all three genres place the burden of action on students, who must take the suggestion or accept the offer of assistance. Students may be unwilling to do so because they are intimidated by the negative evaluations that lie just beneath the surface of most suggestions and offers, and by the teacher's display of power through commands. To minimize the intimidation and thus make the suggestions and offers more inviting to students, teachers should consider two techniques. First, provide specific guidance in suggestions,

rather than simply restating an evaluation in question or command form. Second, rather than commanding students to accept offers of assistance, use a structure such as “If you stop by my office, we can practice with some examples to improve your sentence variety,” which emphasizes the benefits of choosing to visit the teacher.

Patterns in the Secondary Genre

When composing an end comment, the teacher typically selects four or five primary genres (each consisting of a group of sentences, a single sentence, a phrase, or a fragment) from the repertoire. The resulting secondary genre usually begins with positive evaluation, moves to negative evaluation and coaching, and ends either with coaching or positive evaluation. This pattern is elongated or shortened depending upon the length of the comment and the quality of the student’s paper.

Eighty-eight percent of end comments in the sample begin with a positive evaluation. Evaluations of the whole paper are especially common, appearing at the beginning of 23% of comments. In fact, if the teacher uses the genre at all, he or she is most likely to place it at the beginning of the end comment. Sixty-nine percent of evaluations of the entire paper appear in the opening position. On the other hand, judging genres that usually carry negative messages, such as evaluation of grammar and justification of the grade, almost never appear at the beginning of end comments. Coaching genres are also very rare in the opening position because they usually fail to convey the positive message required of an opening. Teachers may choose to begin comments positively for a variety of well-intentioned reasons. For example, teachers may imagine the student’s feelings when receiving a judgment of his or her writing and then deliver the praise the student hopes for—even if the teacher considers the paper worthy of only an average grade. However, the sample end comments offer little evidence that the teachers respond to individualized understandings of each student; rather, they seem to identify with a generic student apprehension.

In addition to a tendency to identify with a generic student, other factors may cause teachers to begin comments positively. For example, some teachers may wish to demonstrate their fairness, believing that a positive opener will convince students that the teachers were not simply searching for papers’ faults. Teachers who consider comments a tutoring or motivational opportunity might also hope to give the student a positive attitude towards the comment by beginning it positively.

These good intentions may motivate many teachers to write positive openers, but many others may write them simply to follow the generic rule, perhaps even expressing insincere or exaggerated praise in order to

fulfill expectations. Although the persistent adherence to a ritual opening may seem benign, it may actually diminish the effectiveness of even the sincerest praise. If students do not read comments carefully, or at all, it may be because the comments take highly standardized forms. Students who recognize that the positive opening is a generic rule may ignore the meaning of all positive beginnings simply because they appear at the beginning. Students who receive a low paper grade or who have low confidence in their writing ability would be most likely to have this reaction. These students may view the teachers' negative evaluations as the "real" message of the end comment, the reason for the grade, and conclude that the aspects of writing evaluated negatively are more important to the teacher than those evaluated positively in the comment opener. Students who receive a high paper grade or who are confident in their writing ability may be less likely to discount praise due to its conventional placement in the comment, but the fact remains that recognition of the positive-first convention could affect all students' perceptions of end comments that begin positively and thus diminish the effects of positive openers.

To guard against a weakening of their positive evaluations, teachers should consider resisting the generic conventions of the end comment on certain occasions. For example, teachers could give a positive opening more significance by following it with related reader response or coaching statements, rather than moving directly to negative evaluations. If positively evaluating development, the teacher might, for example, briefly explain the effect of one of the student's examples on the teacher as reader. Or the teacher might suggest ways to strengthen certain examples in the paper using techniques the student used successfully with other examples. The positive portion of the comment would then have the same structure usually found in the negative portion, with evaluation followed by a reader response or coaching genre. This strategy would be especially appropriate when the teacher wished to accord the positive and negative evaluations in a comment equal importance, or when the teacher wished to recognize exceptional student effort or give a student extra encouragement.

In addition, teachers could strive to insert positive evaluations throughout comments, organizing the comment not around a positive-negative-positive structure, but around some other principle such as a series of main points. For example, a teacher could include both positive and negative statements about the focus of a student's paper, highlighting places where the student maintained a clear focus and places where that focus lapsed, before moving on to positive and negative statements about another aspect of the paper.

After the positive opening, the second primary genre is as likely to be positive as negative, except in shorter comments and those written on

poor papers, in which the teacher usually begins to criticize the paper with the second primary genre. Teachers usually comment on the content of the paper in the second statement, perhaps in order to demonstrate that they have examined the student's ideas before (or at least concurrent with) passing a negative judgment on them. Twenty-three percent of second primary genres are evaluations of development, and 11% are evaluations of rhetorical effectiveness. By the third primary genre, 51% of teachers express negative evaluations, with evaluation of development still the most common primary genre (18%).⁹ Thus, the turning point between positive and negative is conventionally the second or third primary genre in an end comment. Teachers often mark the turning points in this progression with words such as "however," "but," "although," and "while." These and other similar words, which occur 335 times in the 313 comments (an average of 1.07 per comment), imply a dismissal of preceding statements of praise. By integrating positive and negative statements as I have already suggested, teachers could minimize the dismissal of praise that tends to occur in the traditional structure.

When writing the fourth primary genre, teachers select another negative evaluation 33% of the time. But as the comment draws to a close, teachers are less and less likely to write negative evaluations. Comments usually close with coaching or positive evaluation genres, and the turn to these genres usually occurs in the fourth or fifth primary genre slot. Forty-two percent of fourth primary genres are coaching genres. Thus the conventional pairing of negative evaluation and coaching constitutes the second major component of the secondary genre, following the positive component at the beginning. In fact, if a comment includes a coaching genre (most often a suggestion for revision or for future papers), that genre almost always appears after the negative evaluations, as the fourth or fifth primary genre. This convention holds true even if the suggestion being made is unrelated to the negative evaluation it follows.

This convention follows a logical movement from problem to solution and is probably intended by most teachers to help the student. Placement of coaching after negative evaluations can indicate confidence in students' ability to improve their writing and can motivate students to work towards that improvement. However, in the context of the end comment, the coaching genres are so consistently paired with negative evaluations that they take on a negative association. Framed between positive evaluations, the negative statements and the coaching genres appear to be a single block of text. As a result, coaching genres (usually suggestions for revision or for future papers) may seem like punishment for the "mistakes" mentioned in the previous negative evaluations. Students may learn to expect suggestions as part of the negative block in an end comment, and may

approach both negative evaluations and suggestions in the same frame of mind. Again, if students recognize the convention, it loses its effectiveness.

To reclaim the effectiveness of the coaching genres, teachers might consider resisting the generic conventions of the end comment by varying the placement of suggestions. For example, teachers could include suggestions for future papers that build on *positive* evaluations, reminding the student that improvement involves capitalizing on strengths as well as minimizing weaknesses. In addition, teachers could place coaching genres at the end of the comment, with a positive statement between the negative evaluations and the coaching genres. This genre resistance would help break the conventional association between suggestions and negative evaluations, allowing the coaching genres to receive status as separate genres, rather than appearing as adjuncts to negative evaluations.

Although some comments end with a coaching genre, most comments end with a positive evaluation. Fifty percent of fifth primary genres are positive evaluations, as are 51% of the rather rare sixth and seventh genres. This positive-last convention probably derives from the same impulses that cause the positive-first convention: empathy with the student, a desire to demonstrate fairness, an attempt to motivate, and, of course, an obligation to follow a generic rule. Because the positive-last convention is not as strong as the positive-first convention, a positive ending may seem more significant and credible to students who are aware of the conventions of end comments.

Putting It All Together

This study identified a complex set of commenting conventions, including a repertoire of primary genres and patterns of selecting from that repertoire to construct a product we recognize as an end comment. The following examples of end comments demonstrate how these choices work in practice. The first, taken from the national sample, was written on a "C" paper about child abuse.

Nicely done. The basic five-paragraph format works well for you and the paper is well-organized as a result. But the second paragraph needs some attention to transitional elements and certainly you need to catch the mechanical errors throughout. Focus attention on these two elements in your next paper in order to get over the hump of competent writing. As always, if you have any questions, don't hesitate to see me.

This comment begins, like most end comments, with a positive evaluation of the entire paper (expressed all too typically as a fragment) and contin-

ues with a positive evaluation of organization. The third primary genre, an evaluation of style, is negative, as are most third-position genres in the samples. The teacher makes a second negative evaluation, this time of correctness, before making a suggestion for the student's next paper and offering assistance.

This comment could be improved if the teacher resisted some of the generic conventions. The teacher could express the opening positive evaluation of the paper as a complete sentence to render its conventionality less obvious. The teacher could also attribute praise more directly to the student by using "you" (rather than "the format" and "the paper") as subject of the positive evaluations. The teacher could change the order of the genres so that they do not fall into a neat division of positive and negative. Perhaps most importantly, the teacher could personalize the comment by referring to specifics of the paper's content, and by including a reader response genre to emphasize the teacher's position as reader and the effect of the paper on readers. This comment contains very little to connect it to any particular paper, student, or teacher; in other words, the teacher did not adapt the generic conventions to the situation surrounding this particular comment.

The second example, taken from the Penn State sample, was written on an "A" paper evaluating the life of Booker T. Washington.

You've done an excellent job with this evaluation you found so difficult to write. You are especially strong at supporting your claims with examples and backing them up with appropriate outside sources.

Ideally, you would spend a little more time establishing why you chose particular criteria (and not others). Remember in future writing that this is important.

Also remember the importance of locating well-respected scholars in the field who support your position. Some claims in this evaluation might be seriously challenged because there is much controversy about Washington's "truthfulness" these days. Show knowledge of other supporters to help your defense.

Great attention to sentence structure, transitions, and paragraph coherence, as well.

This comment, although quite different in tone and content from the first, also follows the patterns identified in this study. It begins, typically, with a positive evaluation of the entire paper, and continues, also typically, with an evaluation of development. Notice that first one aspect of development (examples and evidence) is evaluated positively, and then another aspect

(explanation of criteria) is evaluated negatively. In accordance with the usual pattern, the teacher follows the negative evaluation with a coaching genre, making a two-sentence suggestion for future work. Instead of writing a positive ending at this point, as the pattern would predict, however, the teacher circles back to negativity with an evaluation of the rhetorical effectiveness of the student's argument. Then, the teacher again uses a suggestion, this time for revision of the current paper, to follow the negative evaluation. Finally, the comment closes with a positive evaluation of style conveyed, all too typically, with a sentence fragment.

While this comment conforms to the typical pattern, it also departs from the conventions in some beneficial ways. For example, the teacher begins with a positive evaluation of the whole paper, but personalizes it with a reference to the difficulty of writing the paper, information the teacher must have remembered from conversations with the student. This personalization helps render the positive opening less conventional and therefore makes it seem more sincere. The teacher also uses "you" as subject, especially when praising the student, further personalizing the comment and attributing the strengths of the paper directly to the student.

Of course, this comment could also be improved. The teacher could strengthen the positive evaluation of development (second sentence) and balance the positive and negative portions of the comment by adding a reader response genre at the end of the first paragraph to explain the reasons a particular example is persuasive. The teacher could also use a complete sentence to express the positive evaluation of style at the end of the comment, thus giving it more weight and reducing the impression of hastiness created by the fragment.

These two end comments demonstrate the generative range of the secondary genre patterns revealed by this study. The two comments vary in length and tone, and respond to papers with different grades. Yet both of them conform to the key patterns of the end comment genre. Nearly all patterns identified in both the primary genre repertoire and the secondary genre held true for both the national and the Penn State samples, indicating that most elements of the end comment genre are relatively stable across time and place.

The stability of the genre—the very feature that makes end comments recognizable and, perhaps, easier to write—may also reduce the educational effectiveness of the comment. The stronger a generic convention, the more it constrains teachers' choices, encouraging them to write statements that fulfill generic expectations and discouraging them from resisting the genre even when resistance would be rhetorically effective. Students who have noticed the similarities between end comments they have received may tend to dismiss the advice they are given as formulaic and conventional.

Teachers in the sample did sometimes resist generic conventions. And conventions were stronger in some cases, such as writing a positive evaluation of the entire paper, than in other cases. As teachers, we must heighten our awareness of the constraints of generic conventions and the danger they pose to end comments' effectiveness. I have suggested several ways to resist the conventions to combat the negative effects of stability, but teachers should experiment with other ways to resist as well, always being certain to match the resistance to the situation. The danger to the effectiveness of the end comment is its stability as a genre—we must be vigilant to ensure that our alterations do not become permanent, and therefore constraining, modifications.

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Notes

1. For further discussion of assessment based on ideals, see Huot.

2. One hundred and eight of the papers had no end comment. Twenty-one of these had a checklist indicating the student's performance on a variety of criteria, and the other 87 had only marginal comments. For this study, I analyzed only teacher responses written as sentences or phrases at the end of a student paper or in a "comments" space on a cover sheet.

3. The sixteen primary genres could have been classified in any number of ways. I choose these groups after completing my analysis because they seemed the most useful for highlighting the overall movement in the secondary genre from evaluation to suggestion.

4. All quotations of genres in this article were taken verbatim from the sample.

5. Note that negatively evaluating effort is different from suggesting that a student somehow alter his or her effort in the future. Although suggestions often imply a negative evaluation of effort, that implication is not their main purpose. And many suggestions concerning effort are simply offers of advice about the writing process.

6. In a survey of her students, Claudia Keh found that students consider one-word

comments least helpful because they provide no explanation of the praise or criticism.

7. In both suggestion genres, the Penn State teachers tended to target content, whereas the national teachers tended to target expression. Eighty-nine percent of Penn State teachers' revision suggestions concerned content. The commenters in the national sample also targeted content but showed a greater tendency than the Penn State teachers to make suggestions about expression. Twenty-nine percent of the national sample suggestions for revision address expression, compared to only 11% of those in the Penn State sample. When suggesting areas to work on in future papers, Penn State teachers again were more likely to target content (45%) than expression (36%). The national sample teachers targeted expression 75% of the time, mentioning content only 8% of the time. (The other 17% of the suggestions for future papers in the national sample, and 19% in the Penn State sample, focus on student effort.)

The tendency of the Penn State teachers to comment on content while the national sample teachers comment on expression may derive from changes in the composition community between the early 1980s (when the national sample teachers wrote their comments) and 1993 (when the Penn State

teachers wrote theirs). Although only nine to eleven years separate the comments, during that time the discipline's focus on rhetoric strengthened, and correctness and expression began to be deemphasized. The difference between the two samples may also derive from the Penn State composition program's emphasis on audience and rhetoric, which may lead Penn State teachers to comment more frequently on content issues than most teachers.

8. Keh found that her students consider questions the most helpful form of commenting because of their interactive nature. Her students said questions push them to think about a teacher's query.

9. If they do not choose development, the national and Penn State teachers diverge in their choices for the third statement, with the Penn State teachers preferring to comment on content and the national teachers preferring expression. The Penn State teachers' second choice for the third slot is evaluation of focus, at 13%. Suggestions for revision of the content of the current paper constitute 11% of all third statements in the Penn State sample. Evaluations of audience accommo-

modation and negative evaluations of topic are also frequent choices. The mixed selection for the third statement in the Penn State sample indicates that teachers select a genre to address the content-related faults of the paper at hand.

In contrast, if the national teachers did not choose evaluation of development for the third genre, they tended to choose genres that target expression. Fourteen percent of the end comments in the national sample use evaluation of correctness as their third statement, and 12% use evaluation of style. Another 14% of national third statements offer suggestions for improving expression. Thus, while the national sample matches the Penn State sample in negativity of the third genre and in the favorite choice for the spot, it displays a tendency to focus on expression, rather than content, that is consistent with patterns in the use of suggestion genres by teachers in the two samples. This distinction between the two samples may be due to changes in the composition community or to features of the Penn State program, as discussed in footnote seven.

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