Writing Teacher Comments: 10 Commandments

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS of Writing Student Progress Reports

THOU SHALL NOT . . .

I. Use loaded, pejorative words:

E.G., poor, lacks motivation, inadequate, lazy, bad attitude, lacks confidence.

II. Use weightless accolades or fatuous generalizations:

AVOID "Joy to have in class," "Enthusiastic student," "Making real progress."

III. Judge ("lest ye be judged"):

Describe and analyze, don't condemn. Try to describe what the child does not what the child is.

NOT, "Mary is a disruptive influence in class."

RATHER, "Mary disrupts occasionally with whispered conversations to her neighbors.

IV. Use Passive Voice:

NOT, "Mary would have been helped by more drill."

"Improvement has been made submitting work."

RATHER, "I will utilize more drill with Mary."

"Mary has improved the promptness with which she submits her work.

THOU SHALL . . .

V. Follow a 3-part format:

a. Overview of course work

b. Student's strengths and weaknesses

c. Specific recommendations for improvement.
VI. Edit Carefully:

Review a grammar text on mechanics, check spellings, and exchange reports with a colleague to proofread: a teacher's writing must be flawless (be prepared to rewrite comments if text is flawed or if tone is awry).

VII. Seek Second Opinions:

Share negative or controversial comments with a colleague to seek another opinion regarding appropriateness.

VIII. Support Generalizations with Specific Evidence:

Cite homework patterns, classwork, learning style, interactions with classmates, etc.

IX. Follow a Negative Comment with a Positive Recommendation (one that assumes some responsibility on the teacher's part to suggest that an unsatisfactory situation can be remedied).

X. Anticipate Negative Reports. Bad news should not be new news. Use red slips, notes and telephone calls to the dean and to parents so that a marking period report's bad news comes as no shock and so that the dean and the parents can become involved early in the problem-solving process.

Sample Comments:

The Pedestrian Comment:

I have enjoyed teaching English to Sally this semester. She is a conscientious student and a joy to have in class. Sally's grade would have been higher than a B if she had studied more carefully before the weekly quizzes, but I am certain this one problem will be remedied in the future. I expect progress next marking period.

The Destructive Comment:

Sally's difficulties are purely a matter of her attitude. She is distracting in class, ironically the one student least able to afford inattention but the one most likely to be talking to her classmates during a lesson. She always wants to do as little work as possible, frequently complains, and recently flirted with an honor violation in attempting to mislead me about "having to leave class early for a basketball game" when such was not the case. I assume that she is resigned to attending summer school; it is a shame that she is also jeopardizing her chances of learning anything that might be useful in passing either of the Mastery Tests that face her in history before she graduates (if she can) from this school.
The Superior Comment:

This first marking period in English class we have concentrated on three topics: grammar and mechanics, paragraph-writing organization, and mythology. Sally has a penchant for the study of language, and she invariably prepares well and scores well on our weekly grammar and vocabulary quizzes. Her writing is less accomplished, however, because she is hesitant to experiment with style and tone. The same mechanical perspicacity that is her strength in the study of grammar is her weakness in writing. Next marking period I recommend that Sally bring her writing drafts to me during consultation period so that we can play with tone and attempt to liberate a "voice" in her writing, one that is spontaneous and genuine.

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