Some Commenting Strategies

Comment with Questions
Try as often as possible to pose your comments in the form of questions (ie, “Many people would agree, but is it always true?” “How might you illustrate this idea?” “This seems too simple – what complexities might you be forgetting here?”). When you comment interrogatively, you heighten the student’s sense that s/he is engaging in a dialogue, which can draw the student into a more focused engagement with the rhetorical situation. Also, as the student increasingly internalizes this dialogue and comes to associate it with the composing process, it can form the basis for more and more ambitious critical and creative reflection – and better and better writing.

Comment for Revision
When you can frame your comments as suggestions-for-revision, you remind your students in a direct, material way that writing is a process, and that very good writing is a long, long process in which a text goes through layer upon layer of transformation. When you guide student revisions through specific suggestions on their manuscripts, you are likely teaching them more – and more effectively – than in any other interaction you have with them.

Comment with Reference to the Assignment
You can also sharpen a student’s sense of the specific rhetorical situation (and, in turn, improve the student’s writing) by alluding, in your comments, to key features of the assignment itself. These sorts of comments not only remind students of what they were supposed to be doing in the paper and justify the grade, they also underline for the student the particular abilities this assignment sought to cultivate. As such, these comments heighten students’ self-awareness as developing writers, which, one hopes, can speed that development.

Comment with Reference to the Overall Aims of Your Course
The more specific and precise you can be in linking particular moments in your students’ work to the overall trajectory of the semester, the more clearly your students will understand where you’re trying to take them and the more likely they’ll follow you there.

Comment with Reference to Your Grading Criteria
Think of those grading criteria as a repertoire of stock-phrases you can use in commenting, for this way you can justify a grade quite readily and, in the moment-to-moment stream of the student’s prose, with great specificity (ie, “See, right there, where I said ‘too simple’ -- that’s where the paper became a B-paper”)

Comment With Reference to the Comments of Others
When you have students comment on each others’ rough drafts (either in class or as a homework assignment), have them do so fairly elaborately – that is, have them discuss in detail and with reference to the assignment and grading criteria, what sort of grade a paper deserves, and then have the student staple this evaluation to the back of the draft so that you can dialogue with it as you comment on the draft, as in “Nancy was right when
she said the fourth paragraph is confusing, but I disagree with her point that it needs more detail – I think it needs only a more careful focus.” You can also have students write short self-assessments that they append to their work when they turn it in. This is especially valuable late in the semester, as they can use the concepts and vocabulary you’ve given them to reflect on what they’re trying to do as writers. Again, use these self-assessments to focus your response to the student text.

Comment, at Least a Few Times, Very Positively
By finding at least one or two places in the text to praise, you can convince the student that you are, as an audience, accessible, open to the pleasures of reading, willing to let student texts connect with you. This will give your negative feedback far more credibility.

Comment with Clear Sensitivity to the Student’s Aims
Try as best you can to honor what the student seems to want to say in a paper and make clear that you are trying to help them say what they want to say. Otherwise, if a student feels that the teacher is “taking over” the paper, they can lose interest in it and disengage. One way to do this is in the longer comment at the end of the paper, where you can quote the student directly (“When you say, ‘In today’s society, television is doing exactly what it has done for hundreds and hundreds of years’ might the argument be more convincing if it made a more specific claim and narrowed its historical scope…..”).

Comment in the Third Person and/or the First Person
Especially when your comments are necessarily rather negative, avoid saying “You have lots of grammatical problems; you have no clear thesis” and so on. Instead emphasize always that you are responding to a text, not a person. In short, avoid the second person, favor third and first. For example, consider framing your comments in terms of reader response, as in “When I read the third paragraph, I began to wonder if this paper might need more references to the reading the class discussed.”

Comment a Lot and a Little
Try to comment at least once on every page, and, ideally, every paragraph – even if your comment is simply “well, okay” or “hmmm” or “!”. Nothing erodes your credibility as a grader more than long stretches of commentlessness. By the same token, don’t try to do all of your grading and commenting in a single sitting – instead, do a little bit every day, never more than, say, two hours at a time. As long as you can return the papers to the students within a week of receiving them, or two weeks at the absolute most, you won’t make them impatient.

Comment with Comments - Not Copy-Editing Symbols
You don’t want your students to think of you as merely a copy-editor or error-hunter, for, obviously, audiences in the real world are much more complicated than that. When you need to mark grammatical problems, just do so with an “X” or a circle and tell the student that there lies an error s/he needs to fix and, if s/he doesn’t see what the error is or how to fix it, to visit either you in your office-hours or the tutors in the Writing Workshop.