# Composition Students' Opinions of and Attention to Instructor Feedback

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Reading and attending to feedback has long been established as an important part of the writing process and much pedagogical research discusses how to best provide feedback (Hillocks, 1982; Lipnevich & Smith, 2009; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Sommers, 1982). Little research exists, however, that investigates the frequency with which students actually read their instructors' feedback. Guided by three research questions, this study includes empirical survey data collected over two years on a regional campus of a large, Midwestern university with an eight-campus system. This study asks (a) if college composition students read their instructors' feedback, (b) what might encourage them to read their instructors' feedback, and (c) what do they find helpful or useful about their instructors' feedback? Students were invited to participate via email or by an internal online recruitment. Qualitative responses were coded topically, employing content analysis informed by grounded theory. Overall, this study finds that students who earn As and Bs in their college composition classes do read instructor feedback. Additionally, although mostly grade-driven, students are interested in feedback to help them improve their writing and feel encouraged to do so when allowed to revise and when feedback is clear, individualized, and positive. This research concludes that most instructors are providing feedback and, further, that students are reading it.

Keywords: instructor feedback, comments, survey, qualitative analysis

Within writing studies, providing feedback on students' essays is an accepted and expected pedagogical practice among composition instructors (Hillocks, 1982; Sommers, 1982). While research discussing instructor feedback tends to focus on types of useful feedback (Rae & Cochrane, 2008), grade justification (Connors & Lunsford, 1993), student improvement (Ruegg, 2015), and ESL or L2 students' perceptions of comments (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinti, 1997; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), little attention tends to be given to whether and why students read and attend to their instructors' feedback. And, while studies related to college students' in specific majors and upper-division classes exist (Whitington, Glover, & Harley, 2004), there remains a lack of research about first- and second-year college students and their perceptions regarding the feedback they receive from their instructors. Little research exists in the field of writing studies, in particular, regarding the frequency with which students actually read their instructors' feedback and why they might or might not choose to do so. This research is particularly salient, given that one learning outcome in many first-year composition (FYC) programs is to teach students about the writing process, of which reading and attending to feedback is significant in relation to revising. In that way, this research includes empirical survey data collected among composition students, investigating whether and why these students read marginal or formative essay feedback provided by their instructors.

## Previous Research on Instructor Feedback

FYC instructors devote much of their time outside of class to writing comments on students' essays with the hope that students will read and attend to their feedback in order to improve their writing. While a brief search of literature will reveal that much of the current research about instructor feedback focuses on online classes (Cole et al., 2017; Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Laflen & Smith, 2017), the importance of instructor feedback in face-to-face classes has long been established (Paulus, 1999), and scholars such as Poulos and Mahony (2008) have argued that the effectiveness of feedback extends beyond the mode of delivery. Whether online or face-to-face, FYC instructors continue to attempt to provide helpful feedback in the form of formative and summative comments,

encouraging students to rethink and revise essay drafts during the writing process as well as later/final essays for portfolio assessment. With so much time devoted to feedback, scholarship has focused on investigating whether instructor feedback is important and effective (Getzlaf, Perry, Toffner, Lamarche, & Edwards, 2009; Lipnevich & Smith, 2009), and composition instructors continue to implement and provide feedback because research has shown that it helps improve student writing.

In an effort to mitigate the time-consuming nature of providing feedback, some instructors have tried alternative methods such as automated feedback, which has proven to be less than ideal when compared to personalized instructor comments. For example, Dikli and Bleyle (2014) investigated automated essay feedback among 14 student participants, comparing instructor feedback on essay drafts with automated feedback on those same drafts. After analyzing both types of feedback in terms of quality and quantity, they determined that instructors provided more and better feedback than the computer.

Another method for providing feedback with the hope of efficiency is recording audio feedback rather than writing or typing feedback directly on an essay. Ice, Curtis, Phillips, and Wells (2007) conducted a document analysis, finding that students were three times more likely to apply content provided by audio feedback than text-based feedback. Though Cann (2014) argued that audio feedback is an effective but underused method for providing feedback, Cavanaugh and Song (2014) have taken a more nuanced and indefinite stance. After conducting surveys and interviews with seven students and four instructors, they found that instructors provided more macro-level comments with audio feedback and micro-level comments with written feedback, with students preferring either audio or written feedback based on their own revising methods. While the effectiveness of audio feedback might require additional research, students' perceptions of the effectiveness of instructor feedback has been established.

Boyd (2008) surveyed 19 sections of FYC students in online and hybrid classes, pointing out that online students continue to rate their instructors' feedback as most important to their learning—though, perhaps because of the students' assumption that classes ought to be teacher-directed and unidirectional. Previous research about students' perceptions of feedback has

shown again and again that students prefer feedback that is timely as well as specific (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). Lipnevich and Smith (2009) conducted six focus groups and found that students preferred detailed comments, concluding that specific, descriptive feedback (rather than letter grades) resulted in the highest student improvements and that specific, detailed comments were the most effective form of feedback, whereas praise was the least effective.

Also in an investigation of specific, detailed feedback, Gallien and Oomen-Early (2008) studied four online health courses, two which received individualized feedback from the instructor and two which received collective feedback. They found that students who received individualized feedback were more satisfied with the course and performed better overall, reinforcing the importance of personalized instructor feedback. Further speaking to both individualized and timely feedback, Getzlaf et al. (2009) surveyed graduate students in online courses about their perceptions of effective instructor feedback, concluding that individualized, timely, and positively constructive feedback is beneficial. In a study of online FYC students, Cunningham (2015) also found that timely instructor responses (e.g., emails) and individualized feedback (e.g., comments on essays) most notably created a high sense of instructor presence, resulting in student satisfaction. Likewise, Litterio (2018) surveyed 20 FYC students about their perceptions related to learning outcomes and their own learning in fully online composition classes, finding a correlation between instructor feedback and positive perceptions of student learning.

While previous research has determined that students prefer timely, individualized instructor feedback, little scholarship exists investigating whether most students actually read the feedback that their instructors provide. The study that comes closest to answering this question is Laflen and Smith (2017), who used a learning management system to track 334 undergraduates in 16 fully online and web-facilitated courses in order to determine whether students opened an attachment if their grade was included in the attachment with feedback and separately in the grade box or if the grade and feedback were only included within the attachment. They found that "not making the grade visible made students 35 percent more likely to open the feedback attachment" (p. 46). Although they posited

an unintended finding that "the majority (52.5%) of students continued to open the feedback attachment to view instructor feedback for the first paper" (p. 48), it is unclear whether students were interested in looking at their grade only. Although Laflen and Smith (2017) could determine that students opened the attachment, they could not determine whether students actually read the instructor feedback included.

As previous research has shown, detailed, descriptive feedback can be effective in online and face-to-face classes, which is why composition instructors continue to provide comments on students' essays—with the intent that students will read and attend to those comments. The question remains, however, whether students actually read the feedback that instructors provide and what they perceive to be most helpful or useful. In that way, this research surveys students enrolled in face-to-face and online composition classes in order to discover whether and why they read their instructors' feedback. Specifically, this study is guided by the following research question: Do college composition students read their instructors' feedback? If so, why?

## Methodology

Data collection took place over the course of six semesters or two academic years at a regional campus of a large, Midwestern university with an eight-campus system. At the time of this study, this specific regional campus enrolled about 7,000 students with the average student age being 23. Fourteen percent of the student body identified as minority or international and 22% identified as an adult learner. Socioeconomically, the average student would be considered lower-middle class, with 82% of students receiving financial aid.

First-year composition (FYC) on this campus (and university-wide) comprised two composition courses. To qualify for this survey, students participating in the study must have either currently been enrolled in or completed one of the two composition courses, both of which include the following learning outcomes salient to the topic of instructor feedback:

- Knowledge of Composing Processes
  - Understand writing as a series of recursive and interrelated steps that includes generating ideas and text, drafting, revising, and editing
  - Recognize that writing is a flexible, recursive process
  - Apply this understanding and recognition to produce successive drafts of increasing quality
- Collaboration
  - Work with others to improve their own and others' texts
  - Balance the advantages of relying on others with taking responsibility for their own work
- Composing in Digital Environments
  - Understand the possibilities of digital media/technologies for composing and publishing texts
  - Use digital environments to support writing tasks such as drafting, reviewing, revising, editing, and sharing texts

The first course was an introduction to academic writing and the writing process, requiring students to complete three to five academic essays of increasing difficulty. The second course built upon the first, requiring students to write three to five essays, one of which was a longer research essay. Instructors at this university were afforded the agency to choose and develop their own assignments and design their courses as they prefer, as long as they meet the learning outcomes.

With regard to the learning outcomes listed above, FYC students were required to produce essay drafts and revisions, and instructors were expected to provide feedback on student essays. This feedback could appear in several forms. Some instructors chose to provide their own feedback on essay drafts that students also submitted to peer workshops. Instructors may also have provided formative feedback on drafts produced before or after peer workshops. Other instructors also provided formative feedback on "final" essay drafts submitted for a grade, with the expectation that students would revise again for a final portfolio due at the end of the semester. Still other instructors provided an opportunity for students to revise "final" essays during the semester in lieu of a portfolio due at the end of the semester. Each instructor determined how many drafts students submitted and how much feedback they would provide on each essay.

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Given the mode in which their class was delivered (i.e., online or face-to-face), instructors also had the freedom to choose whether their feedback was handwritten or digital, provided in the margins or as a longer comment at the end of an essay. Given this instructor agency and noticeable in the results of this study, students would comment on different types of feedback (e.g., on drafts and final submissions) provided in different ways (i.e., digitally and handwritten).

**Survey.** In order to answer the research question "Do college composition students read their instructors' feedback? If so, why?" participants were asked one close-ended question, "When thinking about your College Writing class, did you read the feedback (e.g., marginal comments or ending paragraphs) that your instructor provided on your essays?" with the following answer options: *Yes*, *No*, *Sometimes*. Based on their responses, participants were asked one of three open-ended, follow-up questions to explain why they did, did not, or sometimes read their instructors' feedback: Why do you read your instructor's feedback? Why don't you read your instructor's feedback? Why do you sometimes read your instructor's feedback?

To better understand student perceptions of instructor feedback and better inform the research question, participants also were asked three optional, open-ended questions:

- What, if anything, could your instructor do to encourage you to read their feedback?
- What, if anything, do you find helpful or useful about the feedback that your instructor provides?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add about your thoughts regarding instructor feedback?

Given that the main purpose of this survey was to determine whether and why students read their instructors' feedback, choosing to include the three additional questions as optional rather than mandatory for survey completion was purposeful. The intent was to encourage students to complete the survey rather than risk participant attrition due to survey fatigue if students chose not to answer the three open-ended questions after completing the first part of the survey.

**Analysis and reliability.** In order to code the qualitative responses, content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002) informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was applied. Open coding was employed by reading through all participants' responses, looking for patterns and common words among them. Individual responses were coded according to the overall theme or topic. For example, when asked, "What, if anything, could your instructor do to encourage you to read his or her feedback?" if a participant responded, "A chance for extra points if we read the feedback and edit," that response was initially coded as "extra points." Topics mentioned in each response were then coded as categories with the current example coded as *Allow Revision/Higher Grade/Extra Credit*. Each question (one follow-up and three open-ended) produced its own coding and categorization and was tested for reliability. Ten percent of responses from each of the four questions was randomly selected and two raters coded and categorized according to each respective coding scheme. Cohen's Kappa was calculated in Dedoose, which interprets .65–.80 as "good agreement" and > .80 as "excellent agreement."

The follow-up question for participants who indicated that they did read their instructors' feedback yielded two core categories and six subcategories. The first core category was *Grade-Driven*, which included four subcategories: *Better Writer for Future Assignments*, *Earn Higher Grades*, *Revision*, and *Understand Grade*. The second core category was *Writing-Driven*, which included two subcategories: *Improve Writing Overall* and *Value Instructor's Comments*. Inter-rater reliability simple agreement and Cohen's Kappa when coding responses were .90 and .68, respectively.

The follow-up question for participants who indicated that they sometimes read their instructors' feedback yielded five categories: *Grade Dependent*; *Skim*; *Unimportant/Did Not Care*; *Illegible*; *Lose Interest*. Inter-rater reliability simple agreement and Cohen's Kappa when coding responses were .89 and .90, respectively.

Question 1 yielded eight categories: *Allow Revision/Higher Grade/Extra Credit*; *Explain Importance*; *Nothing/Self-Motivation*; *Make Feedback Visual*; *Provide Better or More Feedback*; *Include Encouraging Feedback*; *Make Responses Mandatory*; *Provide Less Feedback*. Inter-rater reliability

simple agreement and pooled Cohen's Kappa when coding responses for Question 1 were .97 and .92, respectively.

Question 2 yielded two core categories, *Instructor Feedback* and *Student Improvement*, with 13 subcategories. The core category *Instructor Feedback* included *Clear, Detailed Feedback or Examples*; *Positive Comments*; and *Thoughtful, Honest, or Individualized Feedback*. The core category *Student Improvement* included *Improved Writing Skills for Future*; *Content-Based Improvement*; *Grammar and Punctuation*; *Revising*; *Understand Strengths and Weaknesses*; *Editing/Errors/Diction*; *Structure-Based Improvement*; *Understand Instructor Expectations*; and *Nothing*. Inter-rater reliability simple agreement and Cohen's Kappa when coding responses for Question 2 were .87 and .65, respectively.

Question 3 yielded two core categories: *Commendation* and *Criticism*, with six subcategories. The core category *Commendation* included *Feedback is Helpful* and *Praise for Instructor*. The core category *Criticism* included *Provide Less Overwhelming or Negative Feedback*; *Provide More Detailed, Honest, or Clear Feedback*; *Wish for Legible Feedback*; and *Other Negative Comment*. Inter-rater reliability simple agreement and Cohen's Kappa when coding responses for Question 3 were 1.0 and 1.0.

## Participants

Fifteen sections of college composition students who were currently enrolled in one of the two composition courses (i.e., College Writing I and College Writing II) were invited directly to participate via an email sent by their instructors after final grades were posted and their semester had concluded. Of those fifteen sections, thirteen were fully online and two were face-to-face. The face-to-face sections included students from the same regional campus, and the fully online sections included a majority of students enrolled at that same regional campus but also could have included students from any of the other seven campuses. Other students self-selected to participate by choosing to take the survey as part of a Regional Campus Subject Pool. The Regional Campus Subject Pool (RCSP) is an internal recruitment system where faculty members who are principal investigators on the regional campuses of this Midwestern university can upload open surveys that students can access via a database.

Students were able to choose from a list of the open surveys according to topic, length, or credits awarded to earn points for a class in which they were enrolled that was including the RCSP as one of its course assignments (e.g., a research methods class in Psychology). In order to qualify to complete this particular survey, students had to have taken at least one of the two tiers of college composition either fully online or face-to-face and with an instructor who provided feedback. (Although required and implicitly asked of all instructors in the learning outcomes, there was no policy or oversight to ensure that every composition instructor provided feedback to students.) Students who qualified for and successfully completed the survey via the RCSP earned 1 point of credit in whichever class was associated with the system.

In total, 272 students began the survey. After accounting for the exclusionary criteria (13 students had not taken college composition, five said that their instructors did not provide feedback, and 32 said that their instructors provided some editing marks but no comments) and six participants who did not complete the survey, 216 participants remained (79% completion). Participant demographics included 162 females (75%), 53 males (24.5%), and one participant self-identifying as intersex (.5%). Given the number of students who had taken college composition while still in high school (e.g., College Credit Plus or Post-Secondary Education), 50 (23%) participants were under the age of 18 at the time they completed the survey. The majority of participants (132 participants, or 61%) were between the ages of 18 and 24, followed by ages 25–34 (23 participants, or 11%) and 35 or older (11 participants, or 5%). Participants were also asked about the grade they earned in their composition course. Of those completing the survey 116 (54%) indicated A-range, 82 (38%) selected B-range, 16 (7%) chose C-range, one participant (0.5%) indicated D-range, and one participant (0.5%) selected F.

For ease of reference, the following table includes the aforementioned participant demographics:

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Table 1
*Participant Demographics* (n = 216)

| Category | Number/percentage |
|---|---|
| Sex | |
|     Female | 162 (75%) |
|     Male | 53 (24.5%) |
|     Intersex | 1 (0.5%) |
| Age | |
|     <18 | 50 (23%) |
|     18–24 | 132 (61%) |
|     25–34 | 23 (11%) |
|     35–44 | 5 (2%) |
|     45–54 | 3 (1%) |
|     55–64 | 2 (1%) |
|     65–74 | 0 |
|     >75 | 1 (0.5%) |
| Grade in class | |
|     A-range | 116 (54%) |
|     B-range | 82 (38%) |
|     C-range | 16 (7%) |
|     D-range | 1 (0.5%) |
|     F-range | 1 (0.5%) |

## Results

Of the 216 participants who successfully completed the survey, 197 (94%) indicated "Yes" (they did read their instructors' feedback). Those participants were asked a follow-up question to explain why. The following table includes participants' responses, coded and categorized according to two core categories—grade-driven and writing-driven—and six subcategories. Table 2 also provides a definition and example for each subcategory as well as the frequency with which each subcategory was given as a response.

Table 2

*Yes, I Read Feedback* (n = 197 [94%])

| Core category | Response subcategory | Definition and example | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grade-driven *n* = 107 (54%) | Better writer for future assignments | Student commented that they[1] would like to improve their writing to do well in their current class. This might also imply that the student reads feedback to earn a higher grade. | *n* = 53 (27%) |
| | | E.g., "To see how I can better my writing for the next essay." | |
| | Earn higher grades | Student commented that they read feedback to earn higher grade on future essays in their current class. | *n* = 22 (11%) |
| | | E.g., "To help increase my grade." | |
| | Revision | Student commented that they read feedback in order to fix mistakes. Although not explicitly stated, this might also suggest that the student reads feedback to earn a higher grade. | *n* = 16 (8%) |
| | | E.g., "helps me learn what to fix" | |
| | Understand grade | Student commented that they read feedback to understand the grade that they earned. | *n* = 16 (8%) |
| | | E.g., "It's nice to know why I got the grade I did." | |
| Writing-driven *n* = 90 (46%) | Improve writing overall | Student commented that they would like to become a better writer in general or beyond their current writing class. | *n* = 76 (39%) |
| | | E.g., "I am always looking to improve my writing skills. Writing well is valuable to me." | |
| | Value instructor's comments | Student indicated that their instructor provided feedback that they value. | *n* = 14 (7%) |
| | | E.g., "I respect my instructor and am looking to improve my writing skills." | |

As evident in Table 2, students read feedback in order to either earn a higher grade or to become better writers. Of the respondents, 107 (54%)

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indicated that students read their instructors' feedback in order to earn a higher grade in the class. Fifty-three (27%) responses were categorized as *Better Writing for Future Assignments*, which specified that the student wanted to improve their writing in order to do well in their current class. The implication here, as with all subcategories in the *Grade-Driven* core category, is that the student read the feedback in order to earn a higher grade. In fact, 22 (11%) participants clearly indicated that they read feedback in order to *Earn Higher Grades*. The subcategories *Revision* and *Understand Grade* both were composed of 16 (8%) responses and implied a desire to earn a higher grade by revising or understanding, respectively.

The second core category, *Writing-Driven*, included 90 (46%) responses and specified a desire to improve writing abilities overall (e.g., "I am always looking to improve my writing skills. Writing well is valuable to me") or were too vague to imply a desire to earn a higher grade (e.g., feedback is important). Seventy-six (39%) responses were coded as *Improve Writing Overall*, indicating that participants read feedback to improve their writing, further suggesting that they would do so even if it were not tied to a grade. Fourteen (7%) responses were coded as *Value Instructor's Comments*, suggesting that participants read feedback because of appreciation and find feedback to be valuable or beneficial.

Participants who commented that they "Sometimes" read their instructor's feedback provided six reasons explaining why. Although only 11 (5%) participants responded "Sometimes," and some of the categories are an *n* of 1, the following table has been included so that future researchers might be able to add to this data, perhaps finding more students who are indicating that they occasionally or "Sometimes" read feedback.

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Table 3

*I Sometimes Read Feedback* (n = 11 [5%])

| Response category | Definition and example | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Grade dependent | Student commented that reading feedback was unnecessary, given that they received an acceptable grade. | *n* = 4 (36%) |
| | E.g., "It depended on the grade of my paper" | |
| Skim | Student explained that they read some comments (e.g., ending comments but not marginal) or skimmed to find their grade. | *n* = 3 (27%) |
| | E.g., "I usually look at the grade and the ending comments and disregard the marginal comments throughout the paper." | |
| Unimportant/did not care | Student indicated that they did not believe the feedback was important or they did not care to read it. | *n* = 2 (18%) |
| | E.g., "Some of the feedback may or may not be important." | |
| Illegible | Student commented that instructor feedback was too difficult to read. | *n* = 1 (9%) |
| | E.g., "Many of the comments were very hard to read." | |
| Lose interest | Student commented that, although they might read feedback at the beginning of a semester, they lose interest by the end of the semester and do not read anymore. | *n* = 1 (9%) |
| | E.g., "in the beginning of the semester I want to learn how to write better for the end. At the end I get lazy and do not really care." | |

As Table 3 suggests, students seem most influenced by grades, with 4 (36%) participants explaining that they read feedback depending upon the grade that they earn, coded as *Grade Dependent*. Three (27%) responses were coded as *Skim*, with participants explaining that they quickly read

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through comments or read through some but not all of the comments, focusing, instead, on their grade. In that way, 7 (63%) of the comments could be interpreted as *Grade-Driven*. Two (18%) of the responses were coded as *Unimportant/Did Not Care*, with participants indicating that feedback is not always important or that they do not always care to read it. One (9%) participant commented that they did not always read feedback because the handwriting was difficult to read and one (9%) other participant commented that, although they read feedback at the beginning of the semester, they lose interest by the end of the semester. Again, regarding illegible handwriting, it is worth noting that participants were not asked whether their classes were online or face-to-face, so responses are conflated when being able to parse could provide additional context.

One student responded "No" they do not read the feedback provided by their instructor, explaining, "I don't really read the feedback I get if I feel the professor is rude or I feel they don't actually know what they are talking about." The remaining 7 responses of the 216 included participants who responded "Yes" (they did read their instructors' feedback) but included "N/A" in the textbox in order to be able to complete the survey, which required entering text into the textbox to submit.

**Question 1: What could encourage feedback reading?** After explaining why they did, did not, or sometimes read their instructors' feedback, students were given the opportunity to answer three additional questions related to instructor feedback. The first optional, open-ended question asked participants "What, if anything, could your instructor do to encourage you to read their feedback?" Out of the 216 participants, 152 (70%) chose to answer the first question. Table 4 includes 8 response categories to which responses were coded and categorized, along with definitions, examples, and frequencies for each. The following table includes 154 responses total because two participants provided two answers, which were coded individually.

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Table 4

*What Could Encourage Reading Feedback?* (n = 152 [70%])

| Response category | Definition and example | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Allow revision/higher grade/extra credit | Student responded that if they were given a reward, allowed to revise, or given extra credit or a higher grade they would be more likely to read feedback. | *n* = 40 (26%) |
| | E.g., "A chance for extra points if we read the feedback and edit." | |
| Nothing/self-motivation | Student responded that they already read their instructor's feedback and, therefore, did not need encouragement to do so or that reading feedback is a choice and/or that students ought to be self-motivated, so that there is nothing that an instructor can do to encourage students to read feedback. | *n* = 36 (24%) |
| | E.g., "I tend to read the feedback regardless." | |
| | E.g., "Nothing. I believe it's common sense to read the feedback. If not, that is their own fault." | |
| Explain importance | Student responded that if the instructor explained the purpose or importance of feedback, individually conferenced with the student to explain feedback, or asked them explicitly to read it, the student would read it. | *n* = 24 (16%) |
| | E.g., "Speak up about how important reading feedback is or discuss feedback individually with each student." | |

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| Response category | Definition and example | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Make feedback visual | Student responded that if their instructor used all capital letters, bold letters, a different color typeface/pen, or made their writing more legible, they would feel more encouraged to read the feedback.<br><br>E.g., "Write in red, it pops out more and I feel obligated to read it, because then it seems important." | $n = 19$ (13%) |
| Provide better or more feedback | Student responded that if the instructor provided better or more feedback, the student would feel encouraged to read it. This also includes responses in which students indicated that their instructors already provided good feedback and would just need to continue.<br><br>E.g., "Add examples of what else to do and give information to be able to build off of." | $n = 15$ (10%) |
| Include encouraging feedback | Student responded that if their instructor provided more positive comments, the student would feel more encouraged to read the feedback.<br><br>E.g., "Use encouraging words to motivate myself to improve my grades." | $n = 14$ (9%) |
| Make responses mandatory | Student responded that if reading feedback required a mandatory response or were tied to a grade/points they would feel more encouraged to read it.<br><br>E.g., "Make it mandatory and a response be required" | $n = 4$ (3%) |
| Provide less feedback | Student responded that if the instructor gave less feedback, the student would feel more encouraged to read it.<br><br>E.g., "Write smaller amounts." | $n = 2$ (1%) |

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As Table 4 shows, participants, again, suggested that they were mostly encouraged by grades. Forty (26%) responses were coded as Allow Revision/ Higher Grade/Extra Credit, indicating that students would be more encouraged to read feedback if they were offered extra credit or allowed to revise and resubmit for a higher grade.

Given that the majority of these participants already read feedback, 36 (24%) participants responded that they did not need encouragement because they already read their instructors' feedback or that students ought to be self-motivated to read feedback, thus there is nothing that an instructor can do to encourage students.

Twenty-four (16%) participants also indicated that, if their instructor would explain the importance of feedback or ask them to read it during an individual conference, they would be more likely to read the feedback. Those responses were categorized as Explain Importance because, whether individually or as a class, students suggested that additional information about feedback would be helpful in encouraging them to read it.

Other responses indicated a desire for feedback that is legible, helpful, and encouraging. Nineteen (13%) participants responded that they would read their instructors' feedback if it were more visual in some way. These responses, coded as Make Feedback Visual, suggested that if feedback were more visually distinct in some way (e.g., using a bold typeface or colorful pen) or if it were more legible, the students would be more inclined to read it. Fifteen (10%) participants responded that if their instructor provided more detailed or specific feedback, they would be inclined to read it. Those responses were categorized as Provide Better/More Feedback. The category Include Encouraging Feedback was composed of

14 (9%) responses, which suggested that if instructors also pointed out what students did well, the students would feel more encouraged to read the feedback.

Four (3%) participants suggested that if reading feedback were somehow required, students might be more inclined to read it. Although this category, Make Responses Mandatory, could have been collapsed within Allow Revision/Higher Grade/Extra Credit, the fact that this response seemed to be more directive and to omit student agency seemed important to parse out. The final category, Provide Less Feedback, was composed of 2 (1%) responses, indicating that, if their instructors provided less feedback, they would feel less overwhelmed and be more inclined to read it.

**Question 2: What is useful about feedback?** The second optional, open-ended question asked participants, "What, if anything, do you find helpful or useful about the feedback that your instructor provided?" Of the 216 students who completed the survey, 170 (79%) participants chose to answer this question. Table 5 (see the Appendix) includes two core categories (i.e., Student Improvement and Instructor Feedback), and eight and three subcategories, respectively, as well as definitions, examples, and frequencies of each subcategory.

Table 5

*What Is Useful about Feedback?* ($n = 170$ [79%])

| Core category | Response category | Definition and example | Frequency |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Studen improvement $n =$ 135 (79%) | Improved writing skills for future | Student responded that reading feedback has improved their writing skills in gneral or helped them apply skills to their next essay or class. | $n = 46$ (27%) |
| | | E.g., "They have good ways to improve my writing for other classes." | |
| | Content-based improvement | Student responded that their instructor provided information on a macro- or content-level (e.g., ideas, topics, details, etc.), which was useful. | $n = 18$ (11%) |
| | | E.g., "Getting feedback helps to provoke creative and critical thinking." | |
| | Grammar and punctuation | Student reponded that reading feedback helped them improve and correct their grammar and/or punctuation errors. E.g., "I found the grammar points to be helpful." | $n = 15$ (9%) |

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| Core category | Response category | Definition and example | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Revising | Student responded about the importance of feedback when trying to revise or fix mistakes. | $n = 14$ (8%) |
| | | E.g., "The comments help when doing revisions to papers." | |
| | Understand strengths and weaknesses | Student responded that reading feedback helped them understand their own strengths and weaknesses as a writer. | $n = 12$ (7%) |
| | | E.g., "I found the feedback positive because helps see my weakness that i [*sic*] need to work on." | |
| | Editing errors and diction | Student responded that feedback helped with editing (e.g., word choice or fixing errors.) | $n = 11$ (6%) |
| | | E.g., "It points out mistakes that I may not have realized myself and provides suggestions about how to fix said mistakes." | |
| | | E.g., "She points out the unnecessary words and sentences i dont [*sic*] need." | |

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| Core category | Response category | Definition and example | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Structure based improvement | Student responded that feedback helped them better understand and/or improve the structure of their essays (e.g., transitions, organization, etc.). | $n = 11$ (6%) |
| | | E.g., "Helps me understand how to better form/transition essay." | |
| | | E.g., "I find suggestions on how to transition paragraphs the most helpful." | |
| | Understand instructor expectations | Student responded that they read feedback to better understand their instructor's expectations. | $n = 8$ (5%) |
| | | E.g., "It helps me understand what they are looking for." | |
| Instructor Feedback $n = 35$ (21%) | Clear detailed feedback or examples | Student responded that their instructor provided specific feedback or information that was clear or easy to understand. | $n = 14$ (8%) |
| | | E.g., "The feedback was always straight to the point, it was easy to see what needed fixing." | |

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| Core category | Response category | Definition and example | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Positive comments | Student responded that feedback is helpful, positive, or encouraging. | $n = 12$ (7%) |
| | | E.g., "I found it helpful that the feed back [*sic*] was not only the negative but positive things as well." | |
| | Thoughtful, honest, or individualized feedback | Student believed instructor truly read an essay, focusing on their content and providing feedback that was personalized. | $n = 9$ (5%) |
| | | E.g., "My instructor gave very insightful feedback and you could tell she actually read the papers for the content and not just looking for errors." | |

As Table 5 shows, 135 (79%) responses to Question 2 were categorized under the core category Student Improvement, suggesting that these participants found their instructors' feedback to be useful in helping them become better writers in some way. Forty-six (27%) responses were further subcategorized as Improved Writing Skills for Future, indicating that these students believed that reading their instructors' feedback helped improve their writing ability overall, either for future essays or classes. The subcategory Content-Based Improvement was composed of 18 (11%) responses in which participants indicated that their instructor provided information on a macro- or content-level (e.g., ideas, topics, details), which these students found helpful.

Fifteen (9%) responses indicated that students found feedback about Grammar and Punctuation to be helpful, while 14 (8%) responses suggested that feedback is useful in helping students revise, which was subcategorized as Revising. What is not clear, however, is whether the participants who suggested that feedback is helpful for revising were referring to content-level issues or errors related to grammar and punctuation.

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Twelve (7%) responses were subcategorized as Understand Strengths and Weaknesses, with participants indicating that reading feedback helped them become more aware of their own writing abilities and shortcomings. Eleven (6%) responses were subcategorized as Editing/Errors/Diction, which might be similar to Grammar and Punctuation, but because these participants did not mention grammar or punctuation specifically and, instead, made mention of specific word choice issues, "editing," or "mistakes" more generally, these responses were coded separately.

Structure-Based Improvement, comprising 11 (6%) responses, suggested that feedback was helpful in understanding how to transition or organize an essay. The last subcategory within Student Improvement was Understand Instructor Expectations, comprising 8 (5%) responses directly indicating that these students read feedback in order to understand an instructor's expectations.

Whereas the first core category included more applied responses (i.e., students answering the question in terms of how feedback is useful to them), 35 (21%) responses to Question 2 were categorized under a second, objective core category Instructor Feedback. These responses provided more specific information about instructor feedback and what kinds of feedback students found most useful

The remaining responses indicated that feedback is useful when it is clear, positive, and thoughtful. Fourteen (8%) responses were subcategorized as Clear, Detailed Feedback or Examples, indicating that students found feedback that is easy to understand to be useful. Twelve (7%) responses were subcategorized as Positive Comments, with participants indicating that feedback is helpful when it is also encouraging and identifies not only points of critique but what a student has done well. The last subcategory, Thoughtful, Honest, or Individualized Feedback, comprised 9 (5%) responses, indicating that feedback is helpful when students believe that their instructors closely read their essays and provide personalized suggestions or comments.

**Question 3: Other comments about feedback.** The last optional, open-ended question asked participants, "Is there anything else that you would like to add about your thoughts regarding instructor feedback?" Of the 216 students who completed the survey, 61 (28%) participants chose to

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write a response to this question. Table 6 includes two core categories (i.e., Commendation and Criticism), with two and four subcategories, respectively, as well as definitions, examples, and frequencies of each subcategory.

Table 6

*Other Comments about Feedback* (n = 61 [28%])

| Core category | Response subcategory | **Definition and example** | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Commendation $n = 43$ (70%) | Feedback is helpful | Student indicated that feedback is helpful.<br><br>E.g., "Instructor feedback can be very uplifting and insightful. All teachers should put the same effort into each students [*sic*] feedback and use feedback to critique."<br><br>E.g., "It is very helpful. I hope that all instructors take the time to provide feedback on students work!" | $n = 32$<br>(52%) |
| | Praise for instructor | Student provided positive comments regarding their instructor and/or the feedback provided by their instructor.<br><br>E.g., "I want to thank the instructors that do take time to read our essays and make notes about how we can make them better." | $n = 11$<br>(18%) |

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| Core category | Response subcategory | Definition and example | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Criticism<br><br>*n* = 18 (30%) | Provide more detailed, honest, or clear feedback | Student indicated that they would like to have better feedback, meaning that it is either more detailed, honest, or clear.<br><br>E.g., "I want instructors to be honest, don't hold back. Even if it's a little mean. I want the constructive criticism to help me in the long run." | *n* = 6<br><br>(10%) |
| | Provide less overwhelming or negative feedback | Student indicated that they would prefer less feedback or less negative feedback.<br><br>E.g., "It is most helpful when the feedback isn't overwhelming." | *n* = 4<br><br>(7%) |
| | Wish for legible feedback | Student indicated that they would like to be able to read their instructor's feedback.<br><br>E.g., "I wish my instructor feedback was more easily able to be read." | *n* = 4<br><br>(7%) |
| | Other negative comment | Student provided negative comment related to their instructor or commented that feedback was not helpful.<br><br>E.g., "His feedback did not help at all, took paper to writing center and made no differnce [*sic*] what I did." | *n* = 4<br><br>(7%) |

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As shown in Table 6, 43 (70%) responses were categorized as Commendation, providing praise for either feedback or an instructor. Of the 43 affirmative responses, 32 (52%) suggested that feedback is helpful and/or more instructors ought to provide feedback. The remaining 11 (18%) responses provided praise for instructors who provide feedback.

Criticism, the second core category, was composed of 18 (30%) comments and 4 subcategories, all offering a critique related to feedback. Six (10%) responses indicated that students would prefer feedback that is more detailed or candid, coded as Provide More Detailed, Honest, or Clear Feedback.

The remaining three subcategories were all composed of four (7%) responses. The subcategory Provide Less Overwhelming or Negative Feedback seemed to indicate that students would prefer either fewer comments or less negative (perhaps more positive) feedback. The subcategory Wish for Legible Feedback reiterated students' desire to be able to read handwritten comments. Four comments (7%) were also subcategorized as Other Negative Comments, including general criticisms related to students' observations about unhelpful feedback.

## Discussion

One key finding of this research is that most students who participated in this survey indicated that they were reading their instructors' feedback. With 94% of participants responding "Yes," this survey suggests that, while mostly grade-driven, students are reading instructor feedback. In that way, the answer to the overarching research question—Do college composition students read their instructors' feedback? If so, why?—is overwhelmingly affirmative and mostly so that they can earn a higher grade. Of course, further research is necessary regarding whether students earning lower grades read feedback.

Also noteworthy is that most instructors seem to be providing feedback. Out of 253 participants (272 who began survey, excluding six who did not complete the survey and 13 who had not taken college composition), only five students responded that their instructors provided no feedback (about 2%) and 32 (about 12%) said that their instructors only provided editing marks. This finding speaks to the fact that most

composition instructors seem to recognize the importance of providing feedback and are attending to this time-consuming but pedagogically effective practice. Additionally, although this might speak more to social desirability, the fact that 61 participants chose to answer the final, open-ended question and that 70% of those participants included a positive comment related to instructor feedback, is encouraging and indicates that these students believe that feedback is not only helpful but appreciated.

An additional question remains, however, considering that students who do not read instructor feedback might also not participate in surveys: What can instructors do to encourage the students who do not read their feedback? Based on information presented in this research, to encourage these students to read and attend to instructor feedback, the following two questions are posed: (1) Should instructors accommodate the idea that students tend to be grade-driven by allowing revisions for a higher grade? (2) Should instructors emphasize and explain the importance of instructor feedback with the intent to encourage student reading of and attention to their feedback?

Whether students believe that reading feedback will help them revise a specific essay, compose their next essay, or apply concepts to a future class, each of these reasons is tied to earning higher grades. Even the core category "Writing-Driven" might also relate to grades, if comments are interpreted as implying that students want to "improve my writing skills" in order to earn a higher grade or that they "respect my instructor and am looking to improve" to earn a higher grade. More research, such as student interviews, are necessary to understand possible implicatures, yet it is clear that the majority of participants who responded to this survey directly indicated or suggested that they feel encouraged to read feedback when doing so can directly affect their grade, either by revising for a higher grade or understanding how to earn a higher grade on a future assignment.

If instructors were to afford students the opportunity to revise to earn higher grades, conceivably that could also mitigate the tendency for instructor feedback to be primarily a grade justification (Connors & Lunsford, 1993). In that way, offering students the opportunity to revise might provide instructors with a sense of freedom to focus more on

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questions for revision rather than defending (or even inflating) the grade a student earned. Even if the content of the feedback remained the same or similar, instructors might feel more at ease while reading and commenting, knowing that after indicating the grade that a student earned, agency resides with the student, and the student must choose whether their grade is final.

Participants who responded to Question 1 of this survey also indicated that if instructors explained why feedback is important, they might feel more encouraged to read it, suggesting a disconnect between instructor pedagogy and student understanding. In keeping with what scholars like Sommers (1982), Hyland and Hyland (2001), and Lizzio, Wilson, Gilchrist, and Gallois (2003) have found, these participants also indicated that providing more positive comments would encourage them to read the feedback. Like Lipnevich and Smith (2009), who concluded that students prefer detailed, descriptive feedback, participants described what made feedback itself useful to them, asking that it be clear, positive, and thoughtful. This study suggests that these students preferred feedback that included personal, individualized feedback and suggested that they would feel more encouraged to read comments that also mentioned their strengths. With that in mind, perhaps one takeaway from this survey is that instructors could make a concerted effort to explain the purpose and importance of feedback and to include positive feedback along with points of critique.

When responding to Question 2, most participants (27%) believed that improving skills for the future was what made feedback useful. What is unclear, however, is whether participants meant for future assignments (i.e., grade-driven) or for their jobs/careers/selves (i.e., writing-driven). The question of transfer is an important and complex one, as Fraizer (2010) found that, overall, FYC students believed that their course helped them to develop as writers but were unable to articulate exactly how or in what ways. In the end Fraizer suggested that expanded conceptual thinking related to writing might happen in "third spaces" (Mauk, 2003) such as writing centers or small groups of students who meet outside of class, which reiterates what Wardle (2007) argued in that the burden for encouraging generalization seems to reside in classes and experiences

beyond FYC, thus calling for continuing to expand Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines programs. In that way, the issue of transfer, although a topic found within the qualitative data, is beyond the scope of this particular study.

## Limitations

As with any empirical research, this study is not without limitations. First, this sample is small, gathered from one university with eight campuses. At least one of the campuses is represented in this sample, but given the use of the Regional Campus Subject Pool (RCSP), as few as one or as many as all eight of the campuses could be included. Not asking for participants' home campuses was an oversight and a possible limitation, given that student demographics (e.g., age and socioeconomic status) vary by campus.

Another possible limitation is that students were not asked about course modality and whether their composition class was online, face-to-face, or hybrid. Understanding whether students perceive a difference in instructor feedback given the course modality could have provided additional insight and discussion. This survey also failed to ask whether feedback was provided on drafts, revisions, and/or final essays in order to more fully understand instructors' methods for providing feedback and students' perceptions thereof.

Selection bias and social desirability are, perhaps, the larger limitations of this study. Given that 92% of the participants responded that they received an A or B in their class, we can determine that students who did well in their composition classes also read feedback (and also take surveys). These same students also know that the "right" or socially desirable answer to these survey questions is that, "Yes," they read feedback and that "feedback is helpful." The fact that this survey was either administered after a class had ended or through the RCSP, which maintained anonymity, might have mitigated some of the limitations related to social desirability. Overall, if replicating this study, I would ask (a) participants'

home campus, (b) if their class was online or face-to-face, and (c) if their instructor provided feedback on drafts, final essays, or both.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study suggests that students—at least students who earn As and Bs in FYC—do read instructor feedback. Although mostly grade-driven, these students are interested in feedback to help them improve their writing. Further, the students who read the feedback seem to be appreciative of their instructors' time and attention. Again worth noting is that instructors are providing feedback, but further research is necessary regarding what kinds of comments and at what stage of the writing process feedback is provided. Given student comments, feedback could help with transfer, serving as a catalyst for student improvement. Again, more research is necessary to determine if any lasting effects or learned writing concepts are applied beyond FYC.

Although the majority of instructors do seem to be providing feedback, this research suggests a possible opportunity for more programmatic support regarding whether instructors provide feedback, whether instructors ought to explain more overtly the purpose of reading and attending to feedback, and whether doing so ought to be tied to an opportunity to earn higher grades. Writing programs have a responsibility to their composition instructors and could offer opportunities to ensure instructor feedback is provided and helpful by holding workshops about formative and summative comments as they relate to specific learning outcomes and discussing the option of allowing students to revise to earn higher grades. If we are going to continue to spend the time necessary to provide feedback to student writing, we ought to continue discussing ways to ensure that our feedback is both useful and being read.

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