

Guidelines for Reading Early Drafts

Because we have read so many essays, we often convince ourselves that we immediately know what the student needs to do next. In truth, we owe it to the student and to ourselves to take a deep breath and absorb what we see on the page in front of us before jumping to conclusions.

When reviewing student work, particularly early content drafts, we recommend the following:

1. Step away from the computer and put down your pen. Read the draft once without comment or judgment.
2. Read it again; still without comments.
3. Reflect on previous drafts and writing exercises. What did you expect this draft to look like? What is missing? Were your previous instructions clear enough?
4. Make notes to yourself about what you see, what the student did well and what needs to happen next.
5. Write notes to share with the student. Be clear, specific and brief. Even if you plan to meet in person or by phone, don't assume that the student will remember what you say.
6. Add to your own notes: What do you expect from the next exercise or draft? How do you expect the student to use your feedback? This gives you something to reflect on when the next piece of work comes in.

Guidelines for Reading Later Drafts

It's easy to be critical when reading late drafts. We often want essays to be perfect, but perfection should not be the goal. Instead, strive for student growth and development. Does the voice shine through? Has the student made progress?

When reviewing student work during the polish phase, after they have revised, we recommend the following:

1. Step away from the computer and put down your pen. Read the draft once without comment or judgment.
2. Read it again; still without comments.
3. What do you like about this draft? Make some notes about what the student did well.
4. What do you remember after reading it? What do you think admissions officers will remember? Note that as well.
5. Think about how much better the essay could be in four years, when the student graduates from college. Think about how much better it could be if polished by a professional. Then think about your 17-year-old student. It should sound like it was written by a high school senior. Don't let the vision of perfection cloud your ability to live in the present.
6. Focus on the essay's growth; not its potential. How did the piece develop? What did the student learn to do while writing it? Write that down.
7. Make comments, not edits. Ask questions and focus on reflection. See yourself as a reviewer, not an editor.
8. Stay positive. At this point, the student is nearly done. Let go of the imperfect essay!