Five Time-Saving Approaches to Paper Comments
That stack of papers can feel pretty overwhelming. This handout offers time-saving strategies for
the busy professor who values providing written feedback on student writing.

1. Less is more. (You need not comment on everything.)

→**Strategy one: Comment on only a few (pre-selected) points.**
Key your comments to particular pre-selected criteria closely related to your course or
assignment goals. There are two potential benefits with this approach: 1) this approach may help
you cut down on the time it takes to comment on papers; 2) students are often overwhelmed by
all of the variables involved in effective writing and appreciate your instructional focus or
particular areas of concern.

*Focus on the most important lessons associated with an assignment/course:*
  - **design assignments** that reflect a few of your most pressing goals for student writers;
  - **clearly state** your expectations for your students' writing;
  - **be guided** by those expectations/values as you evaluate student work;
  - **offer and discuss models** of the sorts of responses you would like to see in student work.

→**Strategy Two: Avoid "Editing" Student Work.**
Some scholars of student writing development have suggested that an extensive focus on
sentence-level error may be counterproductive for the struggling student writer. (And, a focus on
error may misdirect your attention away from what a student has to say or the development of
relevant content/knowledge.)

Prepare your students for this approach:
  - Use a system like Haswell's "minimal marking" to send the message to students that
effective writing includes attention to surface-level presentation, and that they are
responsible for learning about the errors they make and how to polish their own drafts.
(For many students this attention to detail does take years of practice.) You can find
adaptations of Haswell's approach online.
  - Point out one or two sentence-level issues in an early paragraph of a draft, then ask the
student to find other examples of this issue in later paragraphs. Students might also create
an "error log" early in the semester, keeping a list of the most common sentence-level
struggles they encounter and preparing themselves to look for those issues before they
submit a draft.
  - Build in time for revisions, multiple drafts, peer review/response, or a trip to the writing
center for higher stakes assignments. Even strong writers benefit from slowing down,
talking with others, and workshopping their works-in-progress. Students will often catch
sentence-level issues themselves with enough time and the requirement to go over their
drafts once more before submission.

→**Strategy Three: Practice "feedforward" over "feedback."** That is, focus your comments on
what you would like students to do differently to make their drafts stronger instead of on what
they have not done well.
• Set out to respond to the student's ideas, grasp of content, or presentation of information—thinking of your comments as a form of "conversation" or "engagement" with that student. Even just one "global" comment (for instance, about how the student has or has not fulfilled the criteria of the assignment) can coach the student toward stronger work.
• Ask open ended questions that will ask the student to think more deeply or to include new information in a draft.
• Offer suggestions for how the student might solve a particular problem in a draft or draw stronger connections in their work. (e.g. "As a reader, I felt you need a little more explanation of X." Or, "I don't see you using the ideas we discussed in class here, how might you use the discussion we had on X to extend this paragraph.)

2. Rubrics focus your time and attention
A rubric is a basic scoring guide (usually in the form of a grid) that can help any writing instructor evaluate a student's performance based on a select set of criteria. (There are numerous examples of writing rubrics online.)
• A well-designed rubric reflects course goals and your values as an instructor and/or key terms related to the assignment.
• Using a rubric simplifies your responses as well—some of your responses can be in the form of a number, a checkmark, or a boiler plate.
• Discussing the rubric you will use in class can increase your students' understandings of your evaluation process and help them to understand what you're looking for in a writing assignment.

3. Explore alternatives to traditional teacher comments

→ Strategy One: Discussions about drafts-in-process may be more helpful than written feedback
• You might ask students to meet with you in one-on-one conferences or in small groups;
• These often take less time than sitting down with each paper individually;
• You need not only discuss one assignment, but read and give feedback on multiple assignments in one sitting;
• Class discussions of the goals for writers in your field can help students understand why and how their writing matters.

→ Strategy Two: Discuss "model" papers. What makes this paper "good?" How does the student compose ideas, work with the course content effectively, or integrate source materials in ways that reflect the writing of the discipline? Examples are often very helpful for students and can save you time by establishing what you value and comment upon. You can refer back to that paper in your comments, as well.

→ Strategy Three: Ask students to submit a "reflective" cover letter with the draft, telling you what they think the draft's strengths and weaknesses may be. Respond to only these reflections in your comments, rather than to the draft itself. This may help your students learn to read and think about what they write—a skill just as important as their actual writing. Some suggested prompts to offer students:
a. What part of the draft did they struggle with most?
b. What part was easiest (or required the least effort)?
c. If they had more time, what part of this draft would they change?
d. Ask students to imagine 3 things that they might do to change their essay: what would they change and why? Ask them to begin their response with "What if" -- for example, What if I used my current conclusion for my introduction? What else would have to change in this paper?

4. "Low stakes" and "writing to learn" exercises do not require extensive feedback
   • You can assign these a simple rating (such as a "check plus/check/check minus");
   • One brief comment at the end, often reiterates what you most value;
   • See the handout on "Low Stakes Writing" for more info.

5. Your Ethos Matters: Encouragement and Mindfulness
Students are often quickly overwhelmed by instructor comments on their papers—especially if those comments are overwhelmingly negative. Many students also do not actually read all of the comments instructors give.

Be sure to say "good job!" if you see that the student has been successful. (This, in fact, may be as important to improving student writing as pointing out where a student is having difficulty.)
   • Many students find our responses to their writing confusing, unclear, and ominous. (Is it any wonder they tune us out?) When we note where they have succeeded and offer specific comments (keyed to very explicit/accessible criteria) we can help them to build on their strengths as problem solvers.