

2023

Effective Writing Strategies and Feedback in Counselor Education

Lindsay Corinne Webster

University of Oklahoma, cwebster@ou.edu

Tessa M. Hastings

University of South Florida, tessahastings68@gmail.com

Kelseigh Garrett

Hamilton County Department of Education, kelseighgarrett@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/jcps>



Part of the [Counselor Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Webster, L. C., Hastings, T. M., & Garrett, K. (2023). Effective Writing Strategies and Feedback in Counselor Education. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision, 17*(2). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/jcps/vol17/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu.

Effective Writing Strategies and Feedback in Counselor Education

Abstract

Emerging counselors often are expected to demonstrate mastery of learning objectives through the written word. In this article, we address how counselor educators can implement simple and effective strategies for developing proficient, reflective, and self-regulated student writers. We propose three frameworks from academic literature to shape a pedagogical writing approach germane to the principles of counselor education: growth mindset, sociocultural theory of cognitive development, and constructive feedback typology. In addition to highlighting strategies to design developmental writing assignments with intentionality, we illustrate how to harness counseling skills to provide writing feedback that promotes insight and personal growth beneficial for counseling students' overall professional development.

Keywords

writing feedback, counselor education, growth mindset, zone of proximal development

Author's Notes

Lindsay Corinne Webster <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7341-1650> We have no known conflict of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to L. Corinne Webster, Dept. of Human Relations, 601 Elm Avenue, Norman, OK, 73019. Email: cwebster@ou.edu

Counselor educators regularly rely upon writing assignments to assess students' acquisition of course concepts, achievement of program standards and practices, and attainment of professional dispositions. Although written artifacts may be the most relevant and applicable methods for determining whether essential objectives related to abstract goals; such as the development of one's attitudes, behaviors, and identity; have been met, explicit training on how to best instruct and evaluate students' writing is missing from the doctoral-level training standards put forth by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) the profession's premier accreditation board. Inspired by writing pedagogy and highly regarded learning practices, we endeavor to present and describe writing strategies and feedback styles that will not only enhance your instruction but also promote student success through the development of reactive writers into proactive writers.

The content of our findings and recommendations is rooted in three overarching beliefs that are supported by academic literature. First, effective writing strategies and feedback can spur greater growth and development for counselors-in-training. Ortoleva et al. (2016) found that when structured and organized strategically with ample guidance and support, writing experiences can be used to amplify students' professional identity and expertise. Secondly, instructors who implement effective writing strategies and feedback encourage writing improvement rather than writing complacency. Most professional counselors will still be required to employ writing skills beyond graduation from a counselor education program (MacMillan & Clark, 1998/2006). Continued refinement of their writing while still in graduate school can support students' ongoing confidence in and attitude toward professional writing. After graduation, master's level counselors will be expected to apply their writing skills towards a wide range of professional communications, such as writing reports and evaluations, composing grant proposals for funding, developing

informed consent paperwork, corresponding with other agencies justifying the need for mental health services, and notating client progress. Lastly, the provision of sound writing practices and constructive feedback prepares counselors-in-training to contribute to the professional literature as scholars. Whether or not graduates opt to pursue a doctoral program, their mastery of job-specific skills and unique experiences are needed in written form for journals, magazines, books, and websites to continue the advancement of our profession (Bigelow et al., 2021).

Suggested Paradigms for Writing Feedback in Counselor Education

Despite the need for writing proficiency in counselor education programs, our search for literature regarding how to facilitate it has yielded minimal results. In this dearth of content-specific recommendations, we draw upon two learning theories and one writing pedagogy approach that align with core influences in counseling and counselor education, such as holism, positive psychology, human development, and wellness. The two learning theories described next are Dweck's (2006) growth mindset model and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory for cognitive development, and the writing pedagogy approach we share is Mahboob's (2015) feedback typology.

Dweck's Growth Mindset Model

Growth mindset is an individual's belief and assumptions about their intelligence, personality, and abilities. It promotes performance in academic and occupational settings. Those thoughts about oneself often produce impacts on patterns of behaviors often recognized as a mindset (Larberg & Sherlin, 2021). Dweck's model encourages persistence, perseverance, and requires grit when an individual is met with challenges. Individuals with a growth mindset recognize that intelligence and abilities must be developed.

A strengths-based paradigm that has been found to be a useful framework for offering effective writing feedback are the principles and concepts associated with the growth mindset model developed by psychologist Carol Dweck (2016). Dweck specified that a person's mindset as it relates to how they personally perceive their own qualities and abilities is along a continuum between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset. People who possess a growth mindset perceive opportunities for success. They grow from their own commitment to engaging in new risks and challenges, welcome the opportunity to learn from failure, and place a priority on their personal commitment to continued learning. Those with a fixed mindset regard personality traits as immutable, exhibit less interest in successes that require effort, seek opportunities that confirm their pre-existing views regarding their own natural ability or talent, and create a personal feedback loop that requires consistently proving their own worth to themselves. Ultimately, the mindset an individual internalizes profoundly influences how they lead their life (Dweck, 2016).

Studies have shown that students' implicit theories of ability affect their motivation, learning, and achievement outcomes. When students with a fixed mindset experience a setback, they are more likely to draw conclusions about their ability rather than effort and more likely to give up when faced with difficulties (Rattan et al., 2012). Students entering into undergraduate courses are often just out of high school and have varying degrees of background experience, writing skills, and study skills often needed for a college setting (Rattan et al., 2012). When entering into graduate school for counselor preparation, students are often required to contribute to formal written documents, including academic journals, clinical reports, and interagency communications. However, in some instances, counseling graduate programs do not provide sufficient preparation in the requirements for writing at a professional level. Counselor Educators

can teach and mentor new students so that they are better prepared for the demands of graduate writing expectations (Lambie et al., 2008). When students are met with challenging fields of study, educators have the opportunity to foster a growth mindset by encouraging students to persist and maintain long term engagement in studies. Educators have the opportunity to support student persistence and engagement when met with difficult challenges. However, if educators make sweeping statements about a student's intelligence or are quick to dismiss students who they perceive are lacking ability, educators may be inadvertently perpetuating a cycle of students with fixed mindsets (Rattan et al., 2012).

When examining growth mindset through the lens of Counselor Education, it is important to recognize the impact educators have when influencing a student's growth or fixed mindset. When educators themselves have a growth mindset, they are better able to influence students' beliefs about themselves and their ability and encourage students to tackle difficult challenges which are inherent to the counseling process (Larberg & Sherlin, 2021). On the other hand, students cannot effectively learn from educators with a fixed mindset. Oftentimes, those educators lack flexibility to work with a variety of students' learning styles and capabilities, frequently placing higher importance on test taking skills and higher achieving grades (Altaleb, 2021). As counselor educators often focus on teaching counseling concepts such as personal awareness, growth, and development, they have a unique advantage in contributing to student success and positive student outcomes (Larberg & Sherlin, 2021).

Educators can deploy a number of strategies in order to foster a student's growth mindset. Firstly, educators can create a climate of trust and safety for learning which, in turn, encourages student risk taking and promotes an environment focused more on learning and development of

skills rather than a performance based educational environment (Sherman, 2019). Wolcott et al. (2021) stated, “a growth mindset culture can support safe learning environments, normalize failure, foster feedback-seeking behaviors, and is more conducive to longitudinal relationships” (p. 437). Krupat et al. (2017) noted a student’s experience and the difference between a performance-oriented climate vs. learning-oriented climate. A performance-oriented climate of learning focuses more on the demonstration of skill and mastery rather than the development. In this particular climate, students are more focused on the appearance of competence rather than the growth of competence. When this climate is present, students are more likely to hide uncertainties and avoid feedback for fear of negative consequences. In contrast, a learning-oriented climate focuses on increasing knowledge and skill but also encourages critical thinking. In this type of environment, students' uncertainty is to be embraced rather than feared. Educators provide students with detailed feedback on how to improve and are encouraged to self-reflect (Krupat et al., 2017).

Dweck (2016) emphasized the difference between encouragement vs. praise when providing feedback for students. Dweck identified encouragement as helping students persevere and take risks when met with difficult challenges, whereas she defined praise as potentially eliciting pleasing and perfectionistic tendencies leading students to fear making mistakes. Dweck’s growth mindset model warns against praising students for their intelligence, this can lead to students trying to maintain that “smart” image as the praise focuses on their achievement. Conversely, students that are encouraged for task persistence and effort accept more challenges and see failure as an opportunity for growth (Williams, 2018). Counselor educators can provide constructive and supportive feedback to students when they struggle with assignments by writing “not yet” or “getting there” as opposed to writing “weak” or “lacking.”

Developmental and Pedagogical Theories of Influence

Counselor educators may benefit from various models from other pedagogies for providing scholarly writing feedback, such as rhetoric and composition. One such model is Mahboob's (2015) typology of feedback. Mahboob focused his model on crafting comprehensive feedback that is purposeful, organized, and matched to students' developmental writing levels and needs. Mahboob not only suggested using holistic feedback applicable to specific corrections, but also overarching skills generalizable to future writing. His method initially encourages student writers by focusing on their strengths and secondly by challenging their errors providing targeted, scaffolded, and criterion-based feedback. By using this twofold process of encouraging and challenging, instructors invite students to develop and refine scholarly writing skills. They accomplish this by understanding and balancing what students can do independently with what they may do with the addition of positive support. This balance is critical to meeting students in their zone of proximal development, a framework from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory for Cognitive Development

Vygotsky's (1978) developmental theory is based on several principles that are especially suited for providing feedback for students' writing. One of Vygotsky's guiding principles included development across the lifespan that is precipitated by the learning process. This principle fits well with scholarly writing feedback as this type of writing usually is developed in adulthood through practice. Vygotsky also believed that learning was a collaborative process that occurs in a reinforced and language-rich social context which is indicative of writing feedback. Furthermore, Vygotsky postulated that development happens when experts scaffold appropriate support to bridge the gap between individuals' current level of learning and desired level, which is highly

characteristic of writing feedback, especially when the process is outside of learners' comfort zones.

Vygotsky (1978) termed the gap between what learners can do independently, termed the *zone of actual development* (ZAD), and what they can only do with outside help as their *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). The key to understanding students' ZPD involves ascertaining their limits to learning even with help. Instructors need to assess their students' writing proficiency in order to scaffold feedback within their students' ZPD to spur learners toward advanced development. Thus, instructors endeavor to scaffold supportive feedback for current development (ZAD), and reserve advanced feedback for processes within students' ZPD.

Scaffolding techniques may include modeling, guided practice, and independent application (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Modeling provides the foundation for scaffolded learning. Instructors guide students through learning components by offering students insight into the procedural process with extensive rationale and explicit examples. After students experience the modeling process, they are invited to engage with the learning through guided practice. Guided practice is a repetitive process where scaffolds are successively removed as students gain proficiency. Instructors gradually reduce the incidence of examples and explanations until students have internalized the learning as evidenced by independent application. Once students have internalized the learning, instructors may need to provide brief hints to recall previously scaffolded learning as reinforcement rather than continue to offer in-depth corrections and rationales. Instructors may use these scaffolding techniques to help students internalize learning and engage in self-monitoring (Webb et al., 2019), strategies which Mahboob (2015) utilized in his feedback model. By understanding and meeting learners at their individual writing developmental level,

instructors may employ Mahboob's feedback model to inspire students to become more independent and self-regulated scholarly writers.

Mahboob's Cohesive and Coherent Feedback Typology

Mahboob (2015) reinforced that growth-minded feedback needs to be constructive and include both cohesive and coherent elements. The purpose of instructors providing both cohesive and coherent feedback is to offer students a way to understand, internalize, and transfer writing feedback. In turn, this provides students with feedback frameworks to apply to their future work, allowing for more autonomous writing (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Cohesive and coherent feedback provides effective, comprehensive, and supportive opportunities for students to develop and take ownership of their scholarly writing.

Cohesive Feedback. Cohesive feedback involves communicating purpose and providing organization to those receiving feedback. Providing students with the focus of the feedback (purpose) and how to construct feedback Mahboob (2015) advised establishing an understanding of students' independent writing abilities based on established rubrics. Rubrics aid in delineating criteria for varying writing levels and clarifying expectations in areas of language use, context structure, and grammar and format (Humphrey et al., 2010). Based on students' immediate writing needs, instructors select an overarching purpose for providing constructive feedback in selected rubric areas targeted for improvement, such as focusing on content or grammar and format rather than overwhelming student writers with all their mistakes at once. When instructors identify purposes for sets of feedback, where students are expected to apply feedback either to future work or resubmitted work, they benefit from establishing goals for each students' progress, thus organizing revisions into manageable segments tailored to each students' understanding of and ability to apply feedback.

To create cohesion in feedback, Mahboob (2015) outlined his feedback model in three stages: Feedback Preview, Feedback, and Feedback Review. The Feedback Preview (FP) allows instructors to establish the focus, or purpose, addressed in the feedback and typically is the first comment a student would read. Mahboob outlined the FP stage in two parts: *purring*, which we refer to as *encourage*, and *preview*. The encourage section includes greetings to build rapport and collaboration, as well as positive comments regarding students' demonstrated writing skills. A benefit of the encourage component is it necessitates instructors to assess students' writing development from a strengths-based framework rather than from a needs- or deficits-based framework. The encourage section of the FP mirrors growth mindsets and strengths-based strategies embraced by many counselor educators and provides a foundation for the preview section of the FP.

Preview. The second part of the FP, the preview, serves to support students' understanding of the intent, theme, and purpose of the feedback and outlines expectations (Mahboob, 2015). For example, an instructor providing feedback on a theory paper might state or write the following:

Hello, (Student's name). Based on the ideas you presented here, I can see you grasped the information and synthesized the concepts with your own beliefs. You make sound arguments for why your identified counseling theory is a good fit for you. Great use of theory-specific language! For the purpose of this set of feedback, I will focus on strategies for better organization of your ideas and indications where citations are needed to support your thesis. Please refer to the documents addressing these topics in the Scholarly Writing folder in our online learning classroom as you review my feedback.

Another example might include an instructor statement such as the following:

Hello (Student's name). Great job applying the previous feedback. I see you even applied some of my suggestions in other places in your paper to improve the clarity of your ideas. Now that your paper is organized and cited, in this draft I intend to focus on accuracy of APA format and grammar. Please refer to the documents addressing these topics in the Scholarly Writing folder in our online learning classroom.

Once the purpose and goals are established in the FP, all the feedback in the next stage should reflect the outline clarified in the preview section of the FP comment.

Feedback. The Feedback stage is the next step in Mahboob's (2015) model and includes all the feedback directly pertaining to students' writing, bearing in mind that the feedback is not intended to overwhelm students with all their mistakes, but to focus on pertinent goals to help students grow as writers. Feedback at this stage reinforces the purpose stated in the FP. If applying the first FP example, the emphasis of the Feedback stage should be on organization and citations rather than grammar or format. For instance, an instructor might comment to a student the following:

With a few tweaks, this paragraph would make a great introduction for the three ideas mentioned. I suggest developing each of the three ideas with more support in subsequent paragraphs. Please refer to the example on thesis development in the Scholarly Writing folder in our online learning classroom.

Instructors might include examples in the Feedback stage if they believe students need more assistance reaching this expectation.

In the second FP example from above, the feedback would focus on grammar and format. To illustrate, instructors might provide feedback such as, "This is a run-on sentence and needs a coordinating conjunction or semicolon between the two clauses." Instructors may need to add the

edited corrective conjunction or semicolon to students' work when more support is indicated. Feedback at this stage is personalized to students' specific developmental writing needs to help spur them toward more proficient scholarly writing.

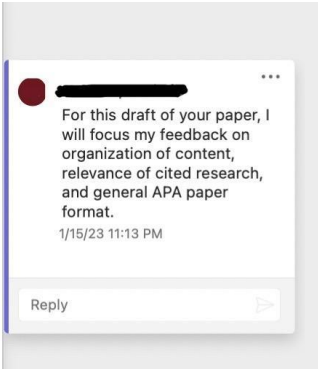
Feedback Review. Following the Feedback stage is the Feedback Review (FR) section of Mahboob's (2015) model. The FR serves as a summary to underpin the purpose, highlight the themes, and offer encouragement and reassurance that the feedback outlined in the body of students' text is within their ability. By providing a FR, instructors may help students respond to, follow through with, and apply feedback not only to issues in their initial writing but also to future writing (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2014). In utilizing Mahboob's (2015) three stages of feedback model, instructors focus learners' attention on the goals of a given round of feedback. By focusing feedback in terms of purpose and organizational stages, instructors may address the most salient areas of students' writing development as they also refrain from overwhelming and discouraging students (Moore, 2014). An example of an instructor providing a student with their intended focus for feedback can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Focusing Your Feedback on Feedback Goals

Implications and Considerations for Educational Settings

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact communities across the globe, counselors working in educational settings are facing unique challenges as they are called upon to not only meet the social, emotional, and psychological needs of the students on their caseloads but also uphold and carry out the health and safety policies and procedures put forth by the institutions they serve. MI is an evidence-based practice that could be utilized by counselors in educational settings (CES) to alleviate students' distress surrounding the current health crisis and stimulate them to make safe and healthy decisions as individuals and as responsive members of their school communities.



Coherence. Coherence is another important aspect of feedback that works together with cohesion and the three phases of feedback. The purpose of feedback is to create synergistic

feedback frameworks for students to develop and expand aspects of their scholarly writing (Mahboob, 2015). These structures act as bridges from one developmental writing level to the next, thus working together to promote growth in students' overall scholarly writing. A characteristic of coherent feedback is purposefully matching feedback types to students' current developmental writing needs. To accomplish this, instructors need to vary the amount of specific corrections offered for students' writings and the degree of explanation for why elements of students' text is problematic in their feedback based on students' level of writing abilities. For students needing more help developing their writing, we reduce the overall amount of correction in favor of providing more explanation for targeted skills. For a more independent writer, we provide less intervention. Mahboob (2015) designed his typology to aid instructors in determining the necessary level of explicitness in examples and depth of rationale in explanation when providing students feedback on their writing.

Mahboob's (2015) coherent feedback typology offers a guide to providing feedback about explicitness and/or rationale. By charting his four-part model on a Cartesian plane, Mahboob created a visual of the highest to lowest usage of each component in relation to the other. The quadrants are identified by terms Mahboob believed best described their function. These include *handholding*, which is the type of feedback with the highest levels of both explicit and rationale feedback; *carrying*, which is feedback that is high in explicitness but low in rationale; *bridging*, which refers to feedback that is high in rationale but low in explicitness; and *base jumping* feedback that is low in both rationale and explicitness.

Modeling (Handholding). As described above, Mahboob (2015) referred to the highest support level as *handholding*. Handholding is defined by Lexico (n.d.) as "the provision of careful support or guidance to someone during a learning process or a period of change." This definition

combined with Mahboob's description, "handholding" seems synonymous with nurturing and modeling. One of the roles of counselor educators involves offering thoughtful support to students who are in the process of learning and developing their counseling skills, identities, and scholarship, including academic writing (CACREP, 2016, 1.E-F). Although the ideals Mahboob conveyed in using the term "handholding" is compatible with counselor education goals, the term often has a negative connotation equated to coddling rather than nurturing (Hellerstein et al., 2004; Stoffel & Cain, 2018). Bearing this in mind, we suggest using the term *modeling* for this support level.

According to Mahboob (2015), modeling feedback works as a foundational base for scaffolding within students ZPD. This feedback is particularly beneficial to students challenged by assignments (Webb et al., 2019). Modeling provides detailed corrective examples along with comprehensive rationale to explain any disparity between the students' work and scholarly writing standards. Generally, this level of feedback is applicable to the first instances of problems encountered in students' writings, and its use decreases for similar subsequent errors, whether within one draft or across several. As students apply and integrate examples and explanations initially provided by modeling into their ensuing writings, other types of feedback become more developmentally appropriate. For example, counselor educators modeling feedback will tell students what to do and why to do it, such as moving a sentence to the beginning of a paragraph as a topic sentence for better clarity.

Alerting (Carrying). Mahboob (2015) termed the level of support with high explicitness and low rationale as *carrying*. He described this feedback as informing learners how to correct their errors, but not why they need to do so. Because "carrying" has strong connections with boundary problems in the counseling profession (Branco & Bayne, 2020; Sladky, 2019), we

suggest the term *alerting* instead. Alerting feedback is typically used frequently in writing feedback and requires strategic planning to be utilized within the guidelines of Mahboob's model. Alerting is typically used to correct errors made in typing or grammar and requires prudent use to remain focused on the intended purpose stated in the FP stage. In terms of guided practice, alerting acts as reminders of errors made earlier. Additionally, alerting feedback serves to step down scaffolding to reinforce previously modeled feedback and promotes handing over responsibility to learners as their ZPD expands and internalization occurs (Webb et al., 2019). An example of an instructor using alerting feedback would be marking an unnecessary word for deletion without providing an explanation.

Bridging. For feedback that is high in rationale but low in correction, Mahboob (2015) used the term *bridging*. He stated that the purpose of bridging is for “eliciting a change rather than correction” (p. 367). This feedback prompts students to independently correct previously explained problems within their writing. Therefore, to be within students' ZPD, instructors using bridging need to ensure their students have the capability to follow through with the feedback presented. Additionally, instructors may use bridging to extend and expand previous learning or modeling. Like alerting, bridging feedback reduces scaffolding and encourages learners to apply their previous learning to new situations. An example of bridging feedback is an instructor explaining why cited facts were preferred over personal opinion to expand a point, thus providing the student with the reason to edit their work, but not how to make the edit.

Hinting. The final type of feedback in Mahboob's typology is low both in explicitness and rationale and provides learners with only hints at problems in their texts. Mahboob (2015) called this feedback *base jumping* because, according to him, this feedback can be risky to execute well (p. 368). Although we understand Mahboob's reasoning for using “base jumping,” we propose

using the term *hinting* to refer to this type of feedback. Inherently indirect, beneficial hinting feedback is used to identify instances of problems outlined in the purpose of FP. Hinting works well with students who need little scaffolding when revising their writing and are capable of understanding what needs to be corrected, the reasons for the corrections, and how to make the necessary changes (Mahboob, 2015). Consequently, the opposite is also true, thus hinting feedback can miss students' ZPD and create confusion and frustration if not used appropriately. An example of hinting feedback is an instructor commenting "revise - unclear" without providing the reasons why or an explanation for how to correct the error. See Figure 2 for an example of a school counseling student's paper marked with each of the four types of feedback. Note that while all four types are demonstrated in Figure 2 for illustrative purposes, it would be best to select only one type based on the student's developmental level.

Figure 2

Four Types of Feedback in One Example

Understanding Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Shulman demonstrated a deep interest in how content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge are interrelated and make contact together (1986). Not merely in content knowledge about a given subject, but the content knowledge that directly pertains to teaching of the subject matter, Shulman termed this pedagogical content knowledge or PCK. It is an awareness of how best to teach a specific given subject matter; it is being cognizant of the examples, analogies, demonstrations, and explanations that are most useful to the audience you are addressing. Additionally, it is being prepared and open to face whatever and however the learning can best be address for that day with the learners that are

H **Awesome Counselor Educator**
Sentence fragment.

M **Awesome Counselor Educator** 2 hours ago
This sentence is incomplete because it is missing a subject and a verb. Here is an example of how you might rephrase your content to form a complete sentence:
He did not limit his discussion to content knowledge about a given subject, but rather expanded it to content knowledge that directly pertains to the teaching of the given subject matter.

B **Awesome Counselor Educator**
This sentence is incomplete because it is missing a subject and verb. Consider rephrasing your content so that it includes both components of a sentence.

A **Awesome Counselor Educator**
He did not limit his discussion to content knowledge about a given subject, but rather expanded it to content knowledge that directly pertains to the teaching of the given subject matter.

Note. *H* stands for “hinting;” *M* stands for “modeling;” *B* stands for “bridging;” and *A* stands for “alerting.”

Recommendations for Realistic Application and Attainable Results

As counselor educators with a variety of responsibilities beyond grading student assignments, we often do not have the luxury of extra time to incorporate every known best practice when it comes to providing detailed and developmental feedback for writing assignments. Therefore, we find it most beneficial to offer recommendations that both align with the realities of a counselor educator's energy and resources and also yield desired results. The following five tips are simple in application and rooted in growth mindset, ZPD, and writing feedback pedagogy.

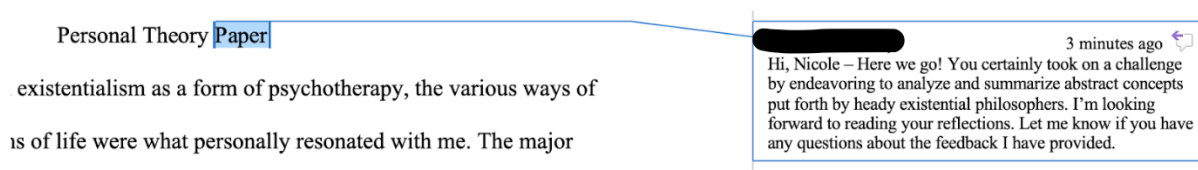
Recommendation #1: Draw Upon Counseling Skills

When it comes to structuring feedback for long written assignments, we recommend for counselor educators to draw upon counseling microskills to help facilitate the provision of constructive criticism within the context of an encouraging and collaborative instructor-student relationship. Notably, instructors of asynchronous online or hybrid courses are typically not afforded as many opportunities to establish rapport with students as instructors of face-to-face modalities; therefore, they might be limited to conveying support and motivation through the written word. Similar to Mahboob's (2015) FP stage, this can be accomplished on written assignments with one or two initial comments that aim to establish rapport, convey warmth and acceptance, and acknowledge the goals of your feedback. Establishing rapport and conveying warmth may look like addressing the student by name, recognizing the work they have done in class so far, and empathizing with any unique obstacles the student may have faced in completing the assignment (see Figure 3). Communicating acceptance humanizes you as an instructor and can be significant for students who have told you they struggle with writing in general or the identified topic in particular. Acknowledging the goals of your feedback will not only ground your students' expectations for the subsequent comments but also help *you* stay focused on the most important

points in your feedback. For example, an instructor of a theories of counseling course might state their feedback goal on a first draft of a personal theory paper accordingly: “The purpose of my feedback is twofold: (1) to help you clearly communicate how tenets of the theory align with your perspective of counseling, and (2) to facilitate the flow of your ideas using APA format.” Holding yourself accountable to your goals for feedback can help us to refrain from filling the students’ paper with too many comments, which we know typically leads to students recoiling from future writing and developing avoidant or self-critical behaviors.

Figure 3

Establishing Rapport in Asynchronous Feedback

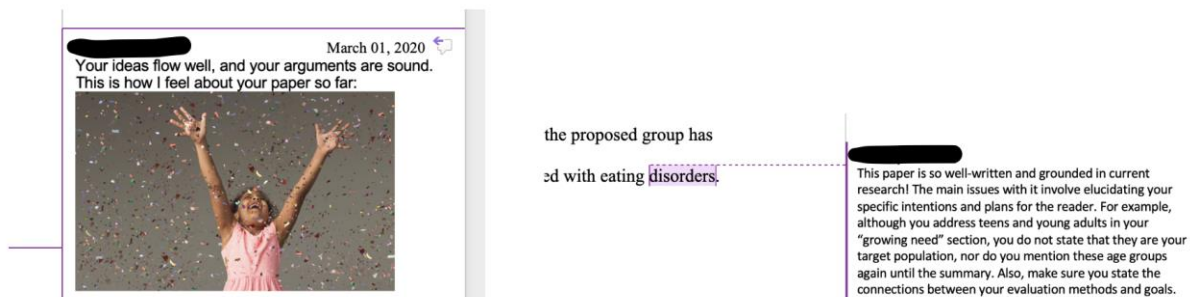


Additional counseling skills that promote adaptive feedback include facilitating awareness, clarifying content and meaning, and summarizing key takeaways at the end. When you begin to notice an unhelpful writing pattern, facilitate the student’s awareness of it in an observant and nonjudgmental manner and offer a possible solution: “I’m picking up on a pattern of loose connections between your ideas. Consider using transitional words and phrases at the beginning of each paragraph in this section.” Use open-ended questions and tentative sentence stems to clarify content and meaning that guides them without spoon feeding them a specific response: “I wonder if you have a community mental health agency in mind that could provide more insight about the clients themselves to better frame your proposed services.” Summarizing key takeaways at the end focuses the student’s attention toward the most important items for revision. In this

summary statement, also make sure to identify the strengths of the paper to keep the student encouraged and motivated (see Figure 4 for an example).

Figure 4

Identifying Strengths and Offering Encouragement



Recommendation #2: Limit Explicit and Rationale-Heavy Comments to Most Significant

From time to time, instructors encounter student writing that requires a great deal of editing and revision. Rather than overwhelming them and yourself with seemingly endless comments and tracked changes, we recommend focusing explicit and rationale-heavy comments to the two most significant per page of content. This strategy requires instructors to read the full page prior to writing out any comments. In our experience, students have either become resistant to writing or developed negative views of themselves as writers after having papers returned to them “bleeding” with instructors’ feedback — even if the feedback was left with positive, growth-based intentions. If you find yourself writing the same explicit comments about mechanics or writing style for many different students (e.g., APA format, parallel structure, sentence variety, etc.), consider storing these comments in one document that you can copy and paste from as needed (see an abbreviated example in Figure 5). Lastly, it is essential to focus on students’ strengths in addition to their deficits. A rule of thumb we follow is to leave one encouraging comment for every two wordy or explicit pieces of criticism.

Figure 5

Storing Frequently Used Comments in One Accessible Document

Quick Comments

Friendly Note

Hi there! I'll be making comments and tracking grammatical changes throughout your paper. Remember that I was a writing teacher before I became a counseling professor, and as such, I leave as many edits as necessary to help you have the best paper ever. My marks are NOT a reflection of your character, ability, intelligence, or worth.

Let me know if you have questions about the feedback I've left. I am human too and may have made a mistake! :)

Oxford Comma

APA favors the Oxford/serial comma. [Tutorial: The Oxford Comma](#)

Title

The title is not considered a "heading," so you format it without bold type.

Neighboring Headings/Back-to-Back Headings

It is inadvisable to put two headings next to each other with no text in between. I recommend either getting rid of the subheadings within each section or writing a brief paragraph introducing the section before inserting this as a level 2 heading.

Abbreviations

"When abbreviating a term, use the full term the first time you use it, followed immediately by the abbreviation in parentheses" (Purdue OWL, 2019, para. 2).

E.g., My teacher is a stickler for formatting our papers according to the American Psychological Association's (APA) style guide.

Anthropomorphism

This is anthropomorphism. Please revise. [Tutorial: Anthropomorphism](#)

Recommendation #3: Assign Low-Stakes Writing Assessment

Although most graduate schools require candidates to submit a written statement or essay for admission review, many master's and doctoral-level students are not adequately prepared for the amount and scholastic rigor of writing expected upon entrance into a counseling program. Therefore, we recommend assigning a low-stakes writing assessment early in the first semester of students' training. Akin to the developmental approach we take to counseling coursework, educators cannot facilitate writing advancement for their students without first knowing their current level of writing competency. A low-stakes writing assessment within the first few weeks of the term, such as a brief literature review or treatment proposal, will allow students to demonstrate their writing skills prior to commencing with a major assignment. Instructors can then

provide focused feedback for continued writing development and refer students to academic support resources (addressed in greater detail in Recommendation #5). However, it is impossible to know which students need the extra assistance without gauging their skill level first.

Recommendation #4: Implement Peer Reviews

At the graduate level, counseling students have likely had enough academic writing experience to fluidly integrate others' feedback for their own writing and offer words of wisdom for others in return. Implementing collaborative peer feedback opportunities can help students in giving and receiving critical writing support without the threat of judgment or grade reductions from instructors. Experts in collaborative writing recommended establishing groups of one to four students at the beginning of the term and providing brief time slots throughout the course for them to review each other's progress towards writing goals (Kalish et al., 2012; Wirtz, 2012). Set the tone for these discussions early on with a live or video tutorial that advises them how to have productive conversations. Supplement any tutorials with an evaluation rubric or a worksheet of structured feedback questions. Some general guidelines for productive in-class peer review groups include the following (Kalish, et al., 2012):

1. Read through the paper together.
2. Ask the author open-ended questions about their writing.
3. Focus the discussion on the author's process rather than on editing and correcting.
4. Never write on someone else's original paper. Either leave comments on a separate piece of paper or talk through feedback while the author takes notes.

For online courses, this strategy could be accomplished using peer review tools installed on most online learning management systems, such as Canvas and Blackboard (e.g., "Require Peer Review" function on Canvas or "Peer Assessment" tool on Blackboard).

Recommendation #5: Refer to Outside Resources

Similar to the need for counselors-in-training to learn how to make referrals and collaborate with community partners, counselor educators may find that in instances of limited writing competence or availability, it might make the most sense to refer students to outside resources. These resources may include physical or digital access points. Most in-person counseling programs are located within university campuses that offer a bevy of educational student services such as writing centers, tutoring, and academic coaching. Instructors might consider contacting representatives from one or more of these on-campus resources to visit their class and explain their services in greater detail, thereby establishing a direct connection between students and the referral source. Similarly, these student resources typically offer online services as well. For example, it is common for writing centers to provide an online writing lab (OWL) for asynchronous feedback on writing assignments. One such OWL is well-known for providing a comprehensive and easy-to-use online resource for scholarly manuscript style and formatting (i.e., APA style) that is universally accessible: the Purdue University OWL. Remember that you do not have to be the one providing the writing tutoring yourself! Working in conjunction with an institution's built-in support services can save instructors a lot of time and energy while helping students hone the skills they need. Another way to provide scholarly writing resources that could be formatted for in-person or online learning formats is to offer a writing bootcamp to new counseling students. Such a workshop, lasting 2-3 hours and offered outside of class time, could be aimed at preventing avoidable writing errors and confusion prior to students attempting their first major writing assignment.

Recommendation #6: Scaffold Assignments

As highlighted in the suggested paradigms section of this article, scaffolding is a supportive technique that provides students with modeling, guided practice, and/or stair-stepped processes before expecting them to independently apply their learning towards a major writing assignment. First, whenever appropriate, it is recommended that instructors provide past examples of well-written papers to model expected length, depth, organization, and rigor. An additional model that often results in papers with greater clarity and flow is the inclusion of an outline with suggested headings based on required topics and subtopics. Guided practice can be achieved through the instructor's communication of tips for writing success. Some advice the authors of this article have offered to students previously include how to organize one's workspace, minimize distractions, and manage one's time wisely. Walking or talking students through your own processes could help encourage efficiency and effective writing practices. Lastly, breaking down large assignments into smaller components allows students to better manage each part with more specified focus and less overwhelm. For example, when I (author's initials) assign my students the group counseling proposal, as is commonly assigned in many Group Counseling courses, I always break it down into two or three parts - the introduction and rationale, group procedures, and group session plans - and allow students who are dissatisfied with their grades in parts one and two to resubmit with revisions based on my feedback. Since I started scaffolding this major assignment, I have noticed a substantial increase in the quality of the students' initial and revised attempts.

Recommendation #7: Offer Choice in Assessment

Our final recommendation for realistic application of our review of the writing pedagogy literature is to present students with choice in terms of *how* they are assessed on course objectives. This recommendation features the growth mindset strategies of encouraging creativity and offering

choice in delivery. Students of all ages and backgrounds are more likely to take greater learning risks and persist further in challenging tasks when they are allowed to choose their own topic and/or method from a curated list of topics and activities that meet the course learning objectives (Kazakoff & Mitchell, 2017). This recommendation put to practice in a counselor education course could be as simple as generating a list of possible topics for a writing assignment, such as selecting one of the following for a paper focused on advocacy for underrepresented groups in school counseling settings: neurodiverse students, unaccompanied minors and refugees, LGBTQ+ youth, religious minorities, students involved in the juvenile justice system, or racial minorities. Other applications that involve even greater creativity include the provision of choice in terms of assignment delivery. For instance, the following options might be given as written deliverables in a wide range of counseling courses: literature review, portfolio, written speech, reflective journal, transcribed interview, or a webpage.

Conclusion

It is not uncommon for faculty and students to have fixed perceptions about graduate students' writing potential. Despite an emphasis on reflective and academic writing to assess learning in higher education courses, including counselor education, instructors are underprepared to craft developmental writing strategies and provide constructive feedback that reflect research on brain plasticity, learning development, and writing pedagogy (Paterson et al., 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this article was to present recommendations for advancing counselor education students' professional development through written assignments that emphasize continued growth and creativity. The strategies suggested represent core tenets of the counseling profession and are accessible to all counselor educators regardless of one's writing proficiency or familiarity with writing theories. When put in practice, intentional microtechniques such as structuring, modeling,

guiding, suggesting, and supporting are likely to improve students' competence in their training and development, leading to the production of more effective writing and service delivery from counseling graduates across the profession.

References

- Altaleb, A. (2021). Using Growth Mindset Strategies in the Classroom. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture & Education*, 20(2), 207–212.
- Bigelow, T. M., Das, B., Gilfillan, B. H., Forziat-Pytel, K., Galvan, A., & Kim, S. R. (2021). Wellness-based writing retreats: Promoting academic productivity across professional stages within counselor education. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2021.1924096>
- Branco, S. F. & Bayne, H. B. (2020), Carrying the burden: Counselors of color’s experiences of microaggressions in counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 98, 272-282. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12322>
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2016). *2016 CACREP standards*. CACREP. <https://www.cacrep.org/for-programs/2016-cacrep-standards/>
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Ballantine Books.
- Ferris, D., & Hedgcock, J. (2014). *Teaching L2 composition: Purpose, process, and practice*. Routledge.
- Hellerstein, D. J., Aviram, R., & Kotov, K. (2004). Beyond 'handholding': Supportive therapy for patients with BPD and self-injurious behavior. *Psychiatric Times*, 21, 58-61.
- Humphrey, S., Martin, J., Dreyfus, S., & Mahboob, A. (2010). The 3x3: Setting up a linguistic toolbox for teaching and assessing academic writing. In A. Mahboob & N. Knight (Eds.) *Applicable linguistics* (pp. 185-199). Continuum.
- Kalish, C. S., Heinert, J. L. J., & Pilmaier, V. M. (2012). Reinventing peer review using writing center techniques: Teaching students to use peer-tutorial methodology. In K. M. Hunzer (Ed.), *Collaborative learning and writing: Essays on using small groups in teaching English and composition* (pp. 30-42). McFarland & Company.
- Kazakoff, E., & Mitchell, A. (2017). *Cultivating a growth mindset with educational technology* [White paper]. Lexia Learning. <https://www.lexialearning.com/sites/default/files/resources/Cultivating-Growth-Mindset-with-Educational-Technology-White-Paper.pdf>
- Krupat, E., Borges, N., Brower, R., Haidet, P., Schroth, W., Fleenor, T., & Uijtdehaage, S. (2017). The educational climate inventory: Measuring students’ perceptions of the preclerkship and clerkship settings. *Academic Medicine*, 92(12), 1757-1764.
- Lambie, G. W., Sias, S. M., Davis, K. M., Lawson, G., & Akos, P. (2008). A scholarly writing resource for counselor educators and their students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 86, 18-25.
- Larberg, J. L., & Sherlin, L. H. (2021). Grit and growth mindset contribution to school counseling services. *SAGE Open*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211014512>
- Lexico. (n.d.). Handholding. In *Lexico dictionary*. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/handholding>
- MacMillan, M., & Clark, D. (2006). *Learning and writing in counselling*. SAGE. (Original work published 1998).
- Mahboob, A. (2015). Understanding and providing ‘cohesive’ and ‘coherent’ feedback on writing. *Writing & Pedagogy*, 7(2-3), 355-376. <https://doi.org/10.1558/wap.v7i2-3.26461>
- Moore, J. (2014). *Feedback on academic writing – Part one*. Oxford University Press English Language Teaching Global Blog.

- <http://oupeltglobalblog.com/2014/08/28/feedback-on-academic-writing-part-one/>
- Nicol, D. J., & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education, 31*, 199-218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600572090>
- Ortoleva, G., Bétrancourt, M., & Billett, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Writing for professional development* (vol. 32). Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004264830>
- Paterson, C., Paterson, N., Jackson, W., & Work, F. (2020). What are students' needs and preferences for academic feedback in higher education? A systematic review. *Nurse Education Today, 85*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2019.104236>
- Pearson, P. D., & Gallagher, M.C. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 8*, 317– 344. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476X\(83\)90019-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476X(83)90019-X)
- Rattan, A., Good, C., & Dweck, C. S. (2012). “It's ok — Not everyone can be good at math”: Instructors with an entity theory comfort (and demotivate) students.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*(3), 731–737.
- Sherman, R. (2019). The art of giving feedback. *The American Journal of Nursing, 119*(9), 64-68.
- Sladky, L., (July 8, 2019) Caring vs. carrying: A therapeutic review of empathy and boundaries. *Counseling Today*. <https://ct.counseling.org/2019/07/caring-vs-carrying-a-therapeutic-review-of-empathy-and-boundaries/#>
- Stoffel, J. M., & Cain, J. (2018). Review of grit and resilience literature within health professions education. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical education, 82*, 6150. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe6150>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Webb, S., Massey, D., Goggans, M., & Flajole, K. (2019). Thirty-five years of the gradual release of responsibility: Scaffolding toward complex and responsive reaching. *The Reading Teacher, 73*, 75– 83. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1799>
- Williams, C. (2018). Mindsets may matter in nursing education. *Nursing Education Perspectives, 39*(6), 373-374.
- Wirtz, J. (2012). Writing courses live and die by the quality of peer review. In K. M. Hunzer (Ed.), *Collaborative learning and writing: Essays on using small groups in teaching English and composition* (pp. 5-16). McFarland & Company.
- Wolcott, M., McLaughlin, J., Hann, A., Miklavec, A., Beck Dallaghan, G., Rhoney, D., & Zomorodi, M. (2021). A review to characterise and map the growth mindset theory in health professions education. *Medical Education, 55*(4), 430-440.