

# Personalized Screencast Feedback on Student Writing

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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Providing substantive written feedback on student writing is time-intensive, and the written comments faculty give students are often ambiguous, vulnerable to misinterpretation, and impersonal. In an effort to better utilize the limited and valuable time of our teaching faculty, and to make the feedback they provide their students more approachable, constructive, and intimate—and, therefore, more likely to be implemented by students in their revisions—my project explores the feasibility of newer technologies for reviewing and commenting on student writing. Specifically, by utilizing Snagit screen-capture software and Adobe Pro software, as well as Microsoft Surface Pro and its ability to digitally annotate student writing with a stylus pen, I departed from traditional hand-written or typed comments on student papers and instead prepared screencasts for students (saved as mp4 files) that I hope better engage students by creating a more personal, conference-like experience. These screencasts provide encouragement to students by highlighting a few positive aspects their working drafts and then explore in greater detail a few problem-areas on which students can focus their revisions. Not only do these screencasts provide students personalized feedback on their papers, which should give them the impression that their work and ideas are taken seriously by the faculty member—which some rhetoric and composition scholars have argued better motivates students to invest in improving their writing (e.g., Sommers 1982 and Meyer and Smith 1987)—but offering verbal comments on student writing clarifies the faculty member’s tone and helps to dispel misinterpretations by students. (Utilizing the audio functions of Google Docs or Microsoft Word and inserting brief audio comments to supplement traditional written comments that students receive can also serve a similar purpose.)

The overall objective of this project is two-fold. The first is to enrich the revision process for our students by improving the quality of the feedback students receive on their draft papers, by rethinking the media and platforms through which our faculty provide these comments. The second is to reduce the significant time it takes to carefully review student papers and provide substantive and constructive feedback.

Over the course of the Spring 2019 semester, my pilot project involved reading a total of 126 rough drafts of three different formative writing assignments, writing short-hand comments with my Microsoft Surface Pro stylus pen on the pdf files my students submitted in order to give myself context for the subsequent screencasts, and then preparing a 4- to 7-minute screencast for each student, in which I talk through the positive and negative aspects of the draft—referencing specific ideas and passages in the paper. Some samples of the short-hand comments that I elaborated on in the screencasts follow here.

Figure 1. Short-hand marginal comments

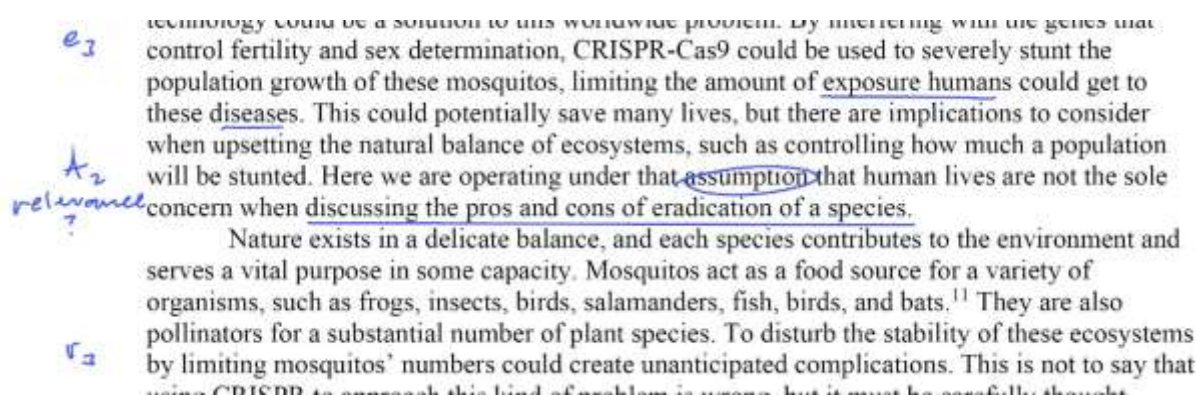
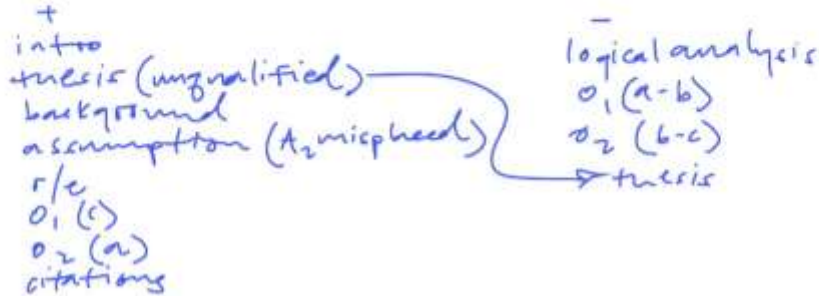


Figure 2. Short-hand comments at the end of a student's paper

CRISPR DISCUSSION. BECAUSE THIS IS SUCH A REVOLUTIONARY TECHNOLOGY, IT BROUGHT THE TOPIC OF GENE EDITING FURTHER INTO THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE. THIS IS A COMPLICATED TOPIC THAT WILL REQUIRE INPUT FROM NOT ONLY PROFESSIONAL SCIENTISTS, BUT ALSO ETHICISTS, REPORTERS, SCHOLARS, AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC. THIS TECHNOLOGY HAS THE POTENTIAL TO SAVE AND IMPROVE THE LIVES OF COUNTLESS PEOPLE, BUT IT ALSO RAISES CONCERNS ABOUT HOW FAR WE SHOULD ACTUALLY TAKE GENE EDITING. CONTINUED, TRANSPARENT RESEARCH AND OPEN DISCOURSE WILL ALLOW US TO RESPONSIBLY USE THIS TECHNOLOGY FOR THE BETTER.



Regrettably, these mp4 files proved to be too large to email to students (even with briefer 3-minute screencasts), so I opted to upload them to a shared Google Drive folder, to which I gave students access through Canvas. (Alternatively, I trust that Canvas could also accommodate these files.) Each file was titled as the last four digits of each student's respective CU student ID and, as an aside, while I was initially apprehensive to make my comments on student papers available to an entire class, I found that students appreciate the transparency and I believe that doing so allows students to engage in collective learning—improving their understanding of good academic writing by reviewing the works-in-progress of fellow classmates.

In any event, after reviewing a student paper, writing some short-hand comments at the end of the paper for my reference only, and recording a screencast of my feedback, before moving onto the next student paper, I would tentatively grade the paper in the detailed rubric I provide students in the directions to any given writing assignment. In other words, for each required component of the assignment, I would mark the quality of the current draft—omitted, poor, fair, good, excellent—so that once students submit their final drafts, all I have to look for are the revisions they made (using the compare function in Word). In the end, students receive no further substantive feedback on their work: rather, they receive the graded rubric with the specific percentage points they earned on each required component of the assignment. (I provide an example of such a rubric below.)

## LESSONS LEARNED

There were three key takeaways for me from this pilot project. First, this process of providing personalized screencast feedback is as time-consuming as giving students traditional hand-written or typed comments on their working drafts. While the process of grading final drafts becomes more efficient on the back-end, on the front-end—especially as one still works to develop a working understanding of how to use the necessary software and technologies—much time and patience is necessary to produce concise, organized, and constructive screencasts. Consequently, as a pilot project to make reviewing and commenting on student writing more efficient, this project has failed. However, this novel process was much less tedious than the alternative, conventional approach—and so I have now integrated this approach in all my classes. Moreover, I believe that the feedback students receive is much more meaningful, and so pedagogically I would now be conflicted to return to traditional hand-written or typed feedback.

Second, students seem to very much appreciate this novel, personalized approach to receiving feedback. These screencasts seemed to serve as substitutes (albeit imperfect ones) for in-person conferences, and so gave students the impression of sitting down with their faculty member in a less formal and more intimate context to constructively talk through ways in which the substance and form of their writing could be improved. I administered an informal survey at the end of the semester to gauge students' perspectives toward these screencasts, and more than 90% of surveyed students

“Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that the digital screencast feedback “was more helpful than traditional hand-written or typed comments” they have received in the past. Some of the specific comments from students follow below.

Third, compared to previous semesters, I observed a greater investment by students in making substantive revisions to their arguments and the form or presentation of their writing. This is true with both the problem-areas I explicitly noted in my screencasts, as well as problems that students identified themselves and proactively worked to correct. To explore the plausible causal factors for this improved understanding of the revision process, this pilot project has formed the basis of a new teaching and learning research project, whereby next semester I plan to compare the quality of both the revisions students make to their working drafts as well as the quality of their final drafts across two sections of my upper-division writing class. In one section, I will revert back to traditional typed comments on working drafts and in the other, I will continue utilizing the screencast approach.

### SELECT STUDENTS’ RESPONSES

The following are some student responses to the question “What specifically do you like or dislike about digital (mp4) screencast comments on draft papers?”

“Because you were talking I felt you were able to elaborate more than if you just gave back a draft with written comments. I liked the information you gave and it always helped during my revisions.”

“I really appreciate the time taken to create good quality comments on the papers. I think it’s better to do it verbally because a lot more can be said about the paper and can be much more clear than written comments.”

“Being able to rewind the video and hear the way you explain the comments multiple times makes it way easier to understand the critiques compared to written draft comments.”

“It is like going to office hours. Other forms of comments make me feel like I need to take them to office hours to get explained.”

“[I like] the fact that we get to see where on the paper specific mistakes happen. Talking is also better than written—it is easier to understand. You are also giving a lot more feedback compared to teachers in other classes that use written feedback.”

“I like that it was like going over the paper while sitting next to you. Getting a doc or pdf with you comments with the video was helpful the second time because it was hard to scroll through the video to find exactly what you talked about.”

### CONCLUSION

This pilot project has been very rewarding, both in helping to shape my pedagogy, as well as in observing a noticeable influence on my students’ commitment to consciously improving their critical-thinking and writing skills and the quality of their academic papers. This project has further impressed on me the need for us faculty to critically reflect on and substantively improve our approaches to teaching and learning. While the investment of time and energy in such initiatives can be daunting, our teaching and our students will be better for it. I am grateful to ASSETT for the opportunity to explore a tangible way in which I could enhance the learning experience of my students—an opportunity that, again, has motivated a new research project in teaching and learning.

For questions about this pilot project or for a sample of a screencast, or for suggestions about alternative methods for providing meaningful feedback on student writing, I would welcome interested faculty to contact me: [szentkiralyi@colorado.edu](mailto:szentkiralyi@colorado.edu).

Paper 3: Research Paper Grading Rubric  
 WRTG 1150: Critical-Thinking and Academic Writing

Student Name:

| <i>Specific Requirements</i>  | <i>Omitted</i> | <i>Poor</i> | <i>Fair</i> | <i>Good</i> | <i>Excellent</i> | <i>% Earned</i> |
|---|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Complete Rough Draft (5%)</b> Students must submit a <u>full</u> rough draft by the due date (thorough outlines, detailed partial drafts, drafts with no citations do <u>not</u> count as a complete rough draft).   | ✓              | ✓           | ✓           | ✓           | ✓                | %               |
| <b>Rough Draft Peer Review (10%)</b> Students must participate in <u>both</u> individual peer review workshops and complete the questionnaires. Grades on this section will be determined by the quality of the comments students give their classmates.  |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Introduction and Background (5%)</b> Find a creative way to pique your average reader’s interest in your paper, explain the issue you chose to write about, and clarify any important concepts or ideas that your audience needs to know to understand your argument.  |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Thesis (5%)</b> Clearly state a single, narrow, and properly-qualified (descriptive, empirical, or normative) claim you are defending.   |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Assumptions (5%)</b> Explain in detail 2-4 starting assumptions you make in your argument—considerations that must be true for your argument to be true—and briefly explain why it is reasonable to accept these assumptions as true.  |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Reasons and Evidence (20%)</b> Defend your claim by explaining in detail <u>3</u> conceptual reasons and <u>3</u> pieces of (descriptive or empirical) evidence that support your claim. You must show how your reasons and evidence come from your <u>12</u> required sources.  |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Logical Analysis (5%)</b> Make the logical connections for your readers between your thesis and each component of your argument—that is, explicitly explain <i>how</i> each reason or piece of evidence directly supports the truth of your claim.   |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Counterarguments (10%)</b> Thoroughly explore various weaknesses of your argument: (a) explain in detail <u>2</u> <i>realistic</i> objections to some aspect of your argument, (b) explain why they are persuasive, and (c) explain why the counterarguments are ultimately wrong.   |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Sources and Citations (15%)</b> Incorporate <u>12</u> reputable sources that were not assigned to read for class— <u>10</u> of which must be scholarly (or peer-reviewed) sources.<br><u>All</u> quotes, paraphrases, and summaries must be cited using in-text citations, footnotes, or endnotes. Specific page numbers must be provided with each citation. <u>All</u> peer-reviewed publications will include page numbers. If popular texts lack page numbers, include n.p. (no page) in the citation <u>and</u> include the paragraph number. |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Grammar (10%)</b> Students may not commit more than <u>7</u> errors with Rules of 1-16—including sentence fragments, run-on sentences, improper punctuation ( , ; :), as well as incorrect spelling.   |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Works Cited (5%)</b> At the end of your essay, you must also include the full citations of all your sources—using MLA, APA, or Chicago style—and the bibliography must be properly alphabetized. This does <u>not</u> count toward the minimum page requirement.   |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| <b>Revisions (5%)</b> Students must submit a substantively-revised final draft to illustrate they have taken the revision process seriously—revisions should work to improve one’s thesis, reasons or evidence, logical analysis, and objection and refutation. Corrections to spelling, grammar, punctuation, and word choice and order will earn no credit.   |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |
| Grade:  |                |             |             |             |                  |                 |