Why grading takes so long

Why does grading take so long? A teacher asks it with the stack still open. The stack takes the night because each paper is being asked to prove you taught it. The student needed a note. The pen is writing a defense.

On the next paper, write one true line where you would normally write five, and stop.

Already behind by fifty papers? Do the four-word line on the ten that need it least. That buys back the hour for the ten that need a real note.

You pick up an essay that is decent. There is a real idea in the second paragraph, buried under a quotation the length of a grocery receipt. You write a kind line next to the idea. Then you teach the comma splice in the margin: the name, the definition, two ways to fix it, an example. You bracket the quotation and write four lines about how much of someone else's sentence a paper needs. The page has more of your handwriting than the student's typing. You have not finished the class set. You have finished one.

You count, because counting feels like control. Page one carried eleven comments. Your usual is about 30. You came to that number after one sentence, and the number has been loyal ever since. The student will read the grade, say the paper was fine, and miss every note except the one that confirmed what they already thought.

You tell yourself this one needs it, and the next one needs it, and the one after that is "quick." The quick one is not quick. It has a semicolon the student tried, and you want to honor the attempt, so you write a small essay about semicolons. Honoring the attempt takes 20 minutes. The attempt was one mark.

You are angry at how long it takes, and you are also proud, and the pride and the anger are the same pen. If you stopped, you would feel like the teacher the sentence described. So you do not stop. You get slower, and you call the slowness standards.

A former student writes you, years later, about a paper where you did almost nothing. You remember the paper as a failure of effort. They remember the one line.

If you have marked a page until the page was mostly yours, and called it feedback, you are in the right place. The student did not need that margin. The student needed to know someone was still in the room with the idea. The rest was the alarm, building a case that the lesson had been taught.

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What did one word on an observation do to her pen?

Shannon's number has a source: nine years ago, one sentence near the bottom of an observation called her feedback adequate. The pen has been in correspondence with that sentence for years. 88 essays belted in beside her, 14 done, 74 to go, 37 more hours at the usual rate. She is the English teacher, and she still does the arithmetic, because the arithmetic is the only thing that tells the truth about the pen.

In the first Wednesday of the book she reads her own comments aloud. Good, say more about this. Then the comma splice, with the definition, the three fixes, the example. By the eighth comment she can hear the rhythm. It is the rhythm of someone following a child around a room, picking things up.

The facilitator holds the marker and separates two things that have gotten stuck together. The comma is the student's. The comment is Shannon's to make shorter. The student's phone can define a comma splice in a few seconds. What the phone cannot do is care that the idea in the second paragraph was real. That care is the comment. The definition, the three fixes, and the example are Shannon making sure nobody can say she did not teach it.

She tries to stop. Essay 15 gets three comments. On essay 16 she writes *comma splice* and the definition comes out of the pen behind it, whole, with its example, before she can ask the question. Essay 16 gets thirty-one. Going on is easier than stopping. The pen is not confused. The pen is scared.

The card the table gives her, when it settles, is short enough to tape inside the grade book. The comma is the student's. The comment is yours. Name it. Don't fix it.

What did four words do that thirty comments did not?

The chapter called I Want to Hear More is a letter, not a system. A former student, now a public defender, writes Shannon. The only thing she had put on his paper was *I want to hear more.* Four words. They did what 30 comments never did. He is not flattering her. He is reporting a mechanism. The four words left the paper his. The 30 comments would have made the paper a conversation with her standards, which he was never going to win, so he would not have entered it.

The facilitator mirrors and does not reassure. The mechanism is rude and useful. The student who needed to know you were listening needed a short proof of listening. The seminar in the margin was for the form, and for the administrator in the back row, and for the night you could not stand to be *adequate*.

Later the table catches the overcorrection. Shannon gives a quiet student three words when he needed a real comment. The comment that matters is the floor. Name the error, or name the idea, in a sentence the student can use. Do not vanish into a code the student cannot use, and do not write the lecture. The floor is a true note. Everything above the floor is the alarm's exhibit.

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Why does speed advice miss the pen?

The internet is full of ways to grade faster. Some of them are fine as logistics. A timer. A bank. A stack in order. None of them work while the pen believes that a short comment is an accusation. You will adopt the timer and then write the definition anyway, and the timer will become another thing you failed. The problem is not minutes. The problem is who the comment is for.

A machine that writes the margin for you has the same hole. It can produce 30 comments in a breath. It cannot tell which of them is for the student and which is for your fear. If you paste them, you have hired a faster pen with the same boss. The sort is one you can run with a red pen you already own.

Lower your standards. No. The standards are not the wall. Shannon's eye is good. She can hear a buried idea. The wall is the inability to stop once the true note is on the page. The move is not carelessness. The move is a finish line on the comment, set before the pen starts. One job for this margin. Name the comma, or point at the idea, or ask the question. Not all three, and not a lesson.

Worth lives in Circle 1. Nowhere else.

Who is the comment for?

Circle 3 is what the student does with the comment, what the form said years ago, what a parent will claim you did not teach. You can write a beautiful margin and still not control any of that. The old sentence is the building's fingerprint. It is not a warrant that lives in your hand forever.

Circle 2 is the department that can agree what a floor comment is, the colleague who will look at one paper with you and say "that one was enough." Influence. You cannot force a culture. You can stop being the person who models the seminar.

Circle 1 is the pen stopping. The comment bank written once, which the quarter-grades chapter gives Shannon, so the definition has a home that is not every margin. The choice to name and not fix. That is the worth. The hours come back from that choice, not from a speech about the weekend.

What does one paper look like when the pen stops?

Take the essay Shannon has in her hand in the lot. Decent. A real idea in the second paragraph. A quotation the length of a grocery receipt sitting on top of it. The old pen writes the kind line, then the splice lesson, then the bracket, then four lines on quotation, then a question about whose idea it is. By the bottom of the page the student has been followed around the room.

The floor pen does three stops and then gets out.

First stop, the idea. One line, next to it, that proves you saw it. *I want to hear more,* or a plainer cousin: *This is the paper. Start here next time.* That line is for the student. It is not for the form.

Second stop, the comma, if the comma is the one error worth naming today. Write the name. Do not write the textbook. If you can feel the definition arriving, that feeling is the old sentence, not the student. The name is the comment. The repair is his, in class, where you already taught it, or where

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you will teach it once to the room instead of 30 times in secret.

Third stop, the quotation. A bracket, and four words, not four lines. *Too long. Your idea first.* Then the pen is done with this paper.

Count the comments when you are done with ten papers, not one. If the count is still near 30, the job line at the top of the session was a wish. If a paper has one line and the student needed the floor, add the floor and stop again. The public defender's letter is not a command to be cryptic. It is evidence that a short true note can do a job a long defensive note cannot. You can test it on Tuesday without waiting for a letter.

Give the session a time. When the time hits, the uncapped pen is a choice, not a fate. Cap it. The unfinished paper will be there on contract time. *Adequate* will also be there, in your head, and you can greet it by name without inviting it to write.

What do you do with the next stack?

Before you uncap the pen, write the job of the comment. One line at the top of the session, not on the paper. "Name the error" or "point at the idea" or "one question." When the pen starts the definition, you are off the job. Stop the definition. The student who needs the rule can get it in class, once, where everyone can hear it, not 30 times in secret.

Four words, on purpose, on one paper. Not as a stunt you do forever. As a test. Choose a paper where you would normally write the seminar. Write the one true line and nothing else. *I want to hear more,* if that is the truth. Or the name of the error and no glossary. Hand it back. See what the student does. Shannon's former student became the evidence. Yours might only say "cool" and make an airplane. That result is data about the seminar, too. The airplane was already going to happen. You do not have to fund it with your Sunday.

Catch the floor when you swing too far. If you have gone so short that a student who needed a real note got a code, that was too far. Add the sentence. The comment that matters is the floor. The practice is not minimalism. It is the end of the exhibit.

The hours the bag spends in the car are on How to stop taking work home. The Sunday the stack eats on purpose is on Teacher Sunday scaries. The form, and the feeling that one word made you a bad teacher, is on I feel like a bad teacher.

The opening, with eleven comments on page one and one word, *adequate*, is on the teachers page.

The book is the letter that says *I want to hear more*, and the pen that stops after the true line.

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Should I quit teaching?

The angry parent email

I feel like a bad teacher

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Tonight's move

On the next paper, write one true line where you would normally write five, and stop.

What to do

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