While all writing feedback is challenging to deliver effectively, written feedback can be particularly daunting. How do we know if students are reading our written comments? Furthermore, will they know what to do with those comments after reading them? A common pitfall is that comments become an act of grade justification, since instructors assume (probably correctly) that the grade is often the student’s main motivator for reading their comments. However, if we want students to become stronger writers, we need to give them constructive criticism that goes beyond the grade on the paper.

The information in this handout is based on the premise that revision-oriented comments make the purpose of feedback clearer for both the writer and the reader/instructor. The types of feedback mentioned are meant to be applied to writing in progress (i.e., in response to an early draft of student writing).

Below are four types of feedback proposed in Genre Pedagogy in Higher Education: The SLATE Project, a study in online writing instruction for English language learners. Tutors in the SLATE project scaffolded academic writing skills, starting with instructors and students jointly writing texts online in a synchronous format and ending with students writing texts independently and receiving asynchronous instructor feedback. Here is a summary of their findings on best practices for writing feedback:

A Typology of Feedback

- **Hand-holding**: Directing the student on how to revise their text and explaining why that revision will make their writing more effective.
- **Bridging**: Explaining the problem to the student without directing them on how to fix it. Citing examples of the issue and giving general suggestions and/or multiple options for revising it.
- **Carrying**: Directing the student on how to revise their text without giving a rationale. Often used for mechanical or grammar errors.
- **Base-jumping**: Hinting at the writing skill that needs work without directing or explaining. This method is the riskiest, but it can be used when an instructor has previously explained the writing issue. Also effective for highly skilled writers.
Example of Hand-holding: “I recommend condensing this section because the ideas seem repetitive; it is more persuasive to concisely explain your point and then give examples (rather than repeating the point).”

Example of Carrying: “Change comma to a period here.”

Example of Bridging: “I noticed that your topic sentences in paragraphs three, five, and six were very similar, but those paragraphs are making very different points. How can you revise these topic sentences to introduce the specific points made in these paragraphs?”

Example of Base-jumping: “This part is confusing to me.”

References