PITCH: A GUIDE TO READING & COMMENTING ON STUDENT PAPERS

Created for PITCH Faculty

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Overview

Few faculty members look forward to the job of reading and evaluating student papers. Nonetheless, part of the idea behind PITCH is to do that job in ways that yield better results and do so more efficiently than before. This guide provides a few ideas that I hope will prove useful. Let's look at the process as having three stages:

- Preparation
- Reading and Commenting
- Evaluation

Preparation

- Your ability to read and evaluate assignments efficiently begins with an strong assignment sheet.
- Review the assignment sheet and list those requirements that the report must address.
- Review your own criteria for a well-written report and list those as well. You might prepare both of these in a checklist. Some graders decide to return such a checklist with the graded report.
- If you are using a rubric to evaluate reports, you can build the checklist feature into the rubric.
- Having these elements at hand will give you some clear standards for evaluating papers with consistency. If you're clear on the precise criteria for the assignment, and on your own standards, you will find grading easier.

Reading

- Read the whole set of papers quickly before you begin marking.
- Read the assignments in manageable chunks—say four or five reports at a sitting.
- Skimming the whole set of papers first gives you a good idea of the quality levels that differentiate strong reports from weak reports. Breaking the serious marking into stages helps you pay better attention to each paper and makes the whole job less overwhelming.

Commenting

- Be selective. A few thorough, directive comments will have greater effect than many fragmentary ones.
- Comment on strengths as well as weaknesses.
- Include summary comments at the end of the report.
- Make sure your comments reflect a hierarchy of some sort. Students should be able to tell the relative importance of the concerns you note.
- Avoid playing the role of grammar police. Comment on characteristic errors rather than every isolated error in punctuation or grammar. Focus on errors that draw attention to themselves and away from the content of the report.
- Students respond more readily to comments they do not have to decode, comments that tell them explicitly what they must do to improve the report.. Students will tend to reject comments that are exclusively negative.
- Summary comments help to distill your impression of the entire report; they also help students understand the grade.
- Students will attend to only so much revision before they invoke the Students' Law of Diminishing Returns. To paraphrase William James, there is some wisdom in learning what to overlook.

Commenting—Two Examples

- A passage with comments that give a student insufficient feedback for improvement:

- The results of the experiment are contained in Chart 1. A graph comparing the measured moment and the theoretical moment is shown in Graph 1. The plotted line is for the instance when $M_m = M_t$. The correlation of the moments should be a one to one ratio. When the face is partially submerged in water the moments are very close to the same. When the face is fully submerged, the moments deviate slightly more from each other. The measured moment differs slightly from the theoretical moment due to experimental error and error in measurement.

- The same passage with more directive comments:

- The results of the experiment are contained in Chart 1. A graph comparing the measured moment and the theoretical moment is shown in Graph 1. The plotted line is for the instance when $M_m = M_t$. The correlation of the moments should be a one to one ratio. When the face is partially submerged in water the moments are very close to the same. When the face is fully submerged, the moments deviate slightly more from each other. The measured moment differs slightly from the theoretical moment due to experimental error and error in measurement.

Commenting, continued. Example Two

CHAPTER 1 – PROJECT SYNOPSIS

1.1 Introduction

Edge Engineering has proposed to evaluate the economic feasibility of several replacement alternatives and develop a method to implement the most feasible option. The firm will investigate structural, transportation, environmental, geotechnical and hydrological aspects involved in this project.

1.2 Project Information

1.2.1 – Project Background

The project consists of a single lane bridge replacement in the town of Monroe, Maine located approximately 45 minutes southwest of Orono. The Monroe Center Bridge passes over Marsh Stream and provides passage into town for local residents along North Center Road. In 2000 the bridge was inspected by the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) and deemed no longer safe for vehicle traffic. Closure was due to settlement and shifting of the eastern abutment in addition to deterioration of load-bearing steel stringers. Repair cost estimates were reported to be in the millions. However, the present detour caused by the closure is an unacceptable inconvenience for area residents. Thus, the town of Monroe seeks an economical solution to repair or replace the existing structure .

Commenting, continued. Example Two

- **CHAPTER 1 – PROJECT SYNOPSIS**

1.1 Introduction

Edge Engineering has proposed to evaluate the economic feasibility of several bridge replacement alternatives and develop a method to implement the most suitable design option. The firm has investigated structural, transportation, environmental, geotechnical and hydrological aspects involved in this project.

Edge Engineering aims to design a replacement bridge for the Town of Monroe that meets their needs:

- *Structural Integrity*
- *Longevity*
- *Aesthetical Properties*
- *Economy*

To effectively accomplish said goals, Edge Engineering divided the project into four main components. *Phase I* involved a thorough investigation of the project site and existing structure. *Phase II* consisted of analyzing and designing a replacement superstructure to meet the needs of the town. Following the bridge design was *Phase III*, composed of designing new abutments to support the superstructure. Finally *Phase IV* was executed, which included preparation of a comprehensive design report addressing the needs of the Town of Monroe .

This report details work completed in each of the four phases, including analysis and calculations associated with designing the bridge structure, abutments and geotechnical work associated with new approach ramps.