

[← BACK](#)

## Uncommon Sense

MARCH 8

# Want to Build Better Writers? Help Students Find Their Own Voice

Ebony Lawhorn, Stephen Chiger



There were six magic words. Six words that signaled Amani, a student in Ebony's 5th grade class, was preparing to get laser-focused.

There were six magic words. Six words that signaled Amani, a student in Ebony's 5th grade class, was preparing to get laser-focused.

"Ms. Lawhorn, can you check this?"

When Ebony was in middle school, she remembers struggling to start writing assignments—not knowing the strength of her own voice, or even if she had one. As a teacher, she knew things needed to be different for her students. And that meant what she said next to Amani would make all the difference.

At a time when many of us are trying to figure out how to replicate in-person instruction across distances, it helps to remember that one of the most powerful things we can do as teachers doesn't need to happen in a physical classroom at all.

As Amani could tell you, in Ebony's class, feedback isn't the response to student writing—it's what drives it.

The way we speak to students reminds them of precisely who we think they are, signaling our faith and confidence in students' abilities.

"Her feedback boosted my confidence," reports Amani. "I secretly would sit there not thinking what I wrote was right, but then I'd go up to meet with her one on one and her feedback would make me realize I actually was doing well and I could do this."

**"If you help a child find their own voice, you empower them for a lifetime."**

[← BACK](#)

## Uncommon Sense

### Creating a Learning Partnership

How do we create this atmosphere? One way is viewing every chance to give feedback as the opportunity to build a learning partnership—or as Zaretta Hammond [calls it](#), an alliance. Hammond argues that asset-based feedback is:

- Actionable
- Specific and in the right dose (focused on 1-2 things)
- Timely
- Delivered in a low-stress, supportive environment

This resonated for us as a hallmark of the program we've worked to build at Uncommon: one that nurtures student growth and pushes them to be their best selves as writers. As Hammond notes, "Contrary to what we may think, simply giving feedback doesn't initiate change. ... You have to be able to be in conversation with students who are trying to stretch themselves."

So, what might that look like? Here's an example of the type of written feedback you'd find on Amani's paper, which draws from Hammond's writing on culturally-responsive teaching:

---

*Great work choosing evidence that links closely to your claim! As a writer, one thing you might try next is making that connection clear in your analysis. After your evidence, try revising your sentences so they answer the "so what?" I'm excited to see you tackle this next step! 😊*

If we dissect this feedback, a few principles surface:

- Notice and name what students are doing well
  - "I see you've already..." or "I see you know how to..."
  - "Remember when X was so hard? Now you do it so well!"
- When giving constructive feedback, affirm students' identities as writer and partners
  - "I think, as a writer, you're ready to..."
  - "I wonder if you might..." or "I wonder what would happen if..."
- Provide actionable steps
  - "... this moment, because it's the turning point, would be a great place to add the character's thoughts."
  - "... revise this thesis so it makes a how/why argument."
- Summarize at the end, acknowledge the challenge, affirm the student
  - "You've made progress on [your goal] and I think you're now ready to [xxx]."
  - "Your [xxx] was so strong, and I'm excited to see your progress on [xxx]."

The benefits of this approach extend beyond students hearing our feedback and toward helping them craft their sense of identity as writers and thinkers. This matters even more so for students whose voices have been actively and systemically marginalized in our culture.

If you speak up for a child, you'll empower them for a moment, Ebony points out. But if you help a child to find their own voice, you will empower them for a lifetime. You can see the full guidance we provide on this type of feedback [here](#).

**FREE GUIDE****LITERACY  
FEEDBACK  
ONE-PAGER**

[← BACK](#)

## Uncommon Sense

### Use Conferences to Deepen Your Alliance

These principles can help guide all of our interactions with students. For example, another place we can build students' sense of efficacy is in writing conferences, which can work just as well over video conference as in person. "Ms. Lawhorn had a huge impact on us," Amani reports, "because she inspired our ideas and helped to make our writing better by thinking more and digging deeper."

Here's [the guidance we provide for conferences](#), based on Hammond's asset-based feedback protocol.<sup>[1]</sup> If you'd like, you can watch a demo video that Steve filmed with our colleague, instructional fellow Shereka Ellington below.

It probably won't surprise you that [high-quality, individualized feedback correlates to higher student achievement](#), but that's not the most important reason to commit to it. High-quality, asset-based feedback helps connect us to our students, encouraging them to see us as allies and themselves as writers with something to say.

In that spirit, we'll give Amani the last word. Here's her advice to teachers: "Please be patient." Amani knows, as we wish all students to know, that we are on this journey together.

Empowering students to play a role in their own development requires time and intentionality, but it will pay off mightily in the long haul.

Now that's feedback we can take to heart.

**FREE GUIDE****1:1 OR SMALL  
GROUP WRITING  
CONFERENCES**



## 20.21 Literacy Feedback One-Pager

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Before Giving Feedback</b></p>    | <p><b>Prepare for Feedback</b></p>   |
|   | <p><b>SAVE TIME FOR FEEDBACK, NOT JUST GRADING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Save time in your schedule (e.g. on a Friday) to provide genuine, written feedback. Choose which assignments (or parts of assignments) would be most valuable for your students, since <i>you cannot physically do this on all assignments.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ You should always provide feedback on the destination writing for a unit. It's fine to rotate who gets detailed feedback on other assignments.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Remember:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Feedback ≠ Grading (feedback can be formative – on ET's or single body paragraphs)</li> <li>○ Feedback ≠ Editing (it's fine to target sentence-level errors, but feedback to thinking matters most)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>SET GOALS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On each assignment, pause to ask the class: What type of writing is this (e.g. persuasive, expository, narrative, analytical, creative)?</li> <li>• Ask students to set and record short- or medium-term goals for their writing, leveraging past feedback.           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ E.G. I will write a thesis that answers all parts of the prompt</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Ask students to name their goal when they submit assignments. Refresh yourself on these goals as you provide feedback. Growth feedback should focus on 1-2 topics.</li> </ul>  |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Deliver Dialogic Feedback</b></p> | <p><b>Deliver Feedback that Puts You In Dialogue with your Students</b></p>  |
|   | <p><b>DELIVER FEEDBACK AS DIALOGUE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Notice and name what students are doing well</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "I see you've already..." or "I see you know how to..."</li> <li>○ "Remember when X was hard? Now you do it so well!"</li> <li>○ "I bet you're proud of [this thesis]. It really [specific statement about effect]."</li> <li>○ "You've really moved me with this line because..."</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>When giving constructive feedback, affirm students' identities as writers and partners</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "I think, as a writer, you're ready to..."</li> <li>○ "As a writer, one thing you might try is..."</li> <li>○ "I wonder if you might..." or "I wonder what would happen if..."</li> <li>○ "We've been working on thesis statements. Can you convert this to a how/why claim?"</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Provide actionable steps</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "...this moment, because it's the turning point, would be a great place to add the character's thoughts."</li> <li>○ "... revise this thesis so it makes a how/why argument."</li> <li>○ "...revise this argument so it more clearly connects to the thesis."</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Summarize at the end, acknowledge the challenge, affirm the student</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "You've made progress on [your goal] and I think you're now ready to [xxx]."</li> <li>○ "Your [xxx] was so strong, and I'm excited to see your progress on [xxx]."</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>After Giving Feedback</b></p>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Devote class time to processing feedback</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Make a space in class on Fridays for students to process feedback, track their data, and set new goals. Suggest a goal for students using the goal setting documents in the RW handbook. (E.G. "Evidence use: 3")</li> <li>○ Celebrate student writing with opportunities to share.</li> <li>○ Have students save writing in a portfolio or writing folder and give opportunities to look back at where they've been.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Make physical space to celebrate student success.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Celebrate student growth in class displays. Consider displaying student goals to normalize these for all.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>  |



## 20.21 Writing Conferences One-Pager

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <p><b>Writing conferences</b></p> | <p><b>Confer with Students (small groups or 1:1)</b></p>  |
|                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notice what’s working and affirm your partnership             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>“I know you’ve been really making strides with your…”</i></li> <li>○ Ask the student: “What part are you feeling good about, and where can we partner?”</li> </ul> </li> <br/> <li>• Acknowledge the challenge of the task and affirm for the student your belief in their ability to succeed.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Reference past success for this student or for other students in similar situations.</li> </ul> </li> <br/> <li>• Deliver bite-sized feedback, affirming the student as a writer             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>“As a writer, one thing you might try is revising your thesis to make a how or why claim.”</i></li> <li>○ <i>“I think, as a writer, you’re ready to add some more detail to your climax. One way would be to add some of your protagonist’s thoughts.”</i></li> </ul> </li> <br/> <li>• Create a space for the student to react             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>“What do you think about this idea?” “Are you up for trying this?”</i></li> </ul> </li> <br/> <li>• Ask the student to roll-back the gap you found and the next steps.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>“So summarize for me. What’s our challenge and how will we approach it?”</i></li> </ul> </li> <br/> <li>• Affirm your belief in the student and how you’ll follow up.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>“I’ll look for this when I review your work, but if you’d like to talk about this further we could meet at [time and place].”</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul> |