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Faculty Only

By David A. Kenny

This column is written for faculty and I ask all students to stop reading. Believe me, what follows is pretty boring as it deals with issues of percent contribution to TSA plans and the formatting of PTR forms.

Now that I have gotten rid of the students (students never read anything they do not have to), we get to what the column is really about. It has been brought to my attention by my crack staff (Is crack an adjective or a noun?) that some faculty members are telling students honestly and clearly what they think of their papers. They write marginal comments on papers such as: "This sucks," "You should consider a career change to writing graphic novels," "You do not create a 10 page paper by changing margins and fonts," and "At least, you did not waste any good ideas in this paper." While being direct may be the most honest strategy, you are going to face whining students who are going to complain about you to your department or area head. Also, you need students to come up with studies, run those studies, enter your data, analyze the data, write up the study, have them be second authors, and go to Starbucks to get you a low fat mocha frappuccino with no whip cream. The smart and successful faculty member is never direct, and this column is going to

show you how to indirectly communicate to students.

We all know about metacommunication: the communication underlying the actual communication. In making comments on student papers use some of the phrases that indirectly communicate our real feelings:

Say "Citation" when you mean to say "Do not recycle your harebrained ideas as scientific."

Say "Transition" when you mean to say "This idea can only have come out of your posterior."

Say "Statistical assumptions satisfied?" when you mean to say "Your undergraduate assistant must have clicked on the wrong box in SPSS."

Say "Great results!" when you mean to say "You must have made up the data."

Say "You need to write the abstract" when you mean to say "There is no way in the world I could ever write a summary of this."

Say "You have a creative way of expressing yourself" when you mean to say "I have no idea what you are saying."

Say "Tightly argued" when you mean to say "At least I did not have read 20 pages of your turgid prose."

Say "Take a broader perspective" when you mean to say "Not every reader is a 25-year old yuppie from

the east or west coasts of the United States.”

Say “Did you run spell check?” when you mean to say “My name is Kenny not Kenney.”

Say “Good point” when you mean to say “Everything before this sentence was nonsense.”

Say “Too bad, low power” when you mean to say “How did you ever expect to get statistically significant results, when due of your laziness you ran only 15 participants?”

Say “You have done so much work on this, I should not be coauthor” when you mean to say “I do not want my reputation to be flushed down the toilet.”

Junior faculty also need to learn how to read a paper quickly. Many a time I have had a pressing obligation (e.g., a 5-hour golf game or a three-martini lunch with my dean), and I need “to read” a 20 page paper in 5 minutes. Here are some ideas: Just look at the formatting of the paper and comment on that; e.g., suggest changing the format of the headings and the references, and then say “I will read this paper when you change it to the appropriate style.” If it is in the right style, just say “I plan to submit this paper to a journal in another discipline and this paper needs to be changed to the appropriate format for that journal.” Also write a few question marks next to the Method section and then say, “I cannot read further

because the method is not clearly stated.”

But what do you do if you only have a minute? Here are some tips. Send an email and say that you misplaced the paper. Another quickie is to write at the top of the paper: “We need to talk about the paper.” Also put random check marks or periods throughout the paper. Finally, there is the never-fail strategy: Write on the first page the following: “Excellent and insightful treatment of the topic!”