

Responding to Student Writing

It should be comforting for teachers to know that nothing they say about, write on, or do to any given student's paper will turn that student magically into a brilliant writer, able to meet any writing challenge with success. Each assignment simply offers to students an opportunity to "try on" a different writer's hat, practice using the skills they've learned to date, and be creative in ways both familiar and unfamiliar. Consequently, every writing assignment you create should be limited in its scope: it should have clear and specific learning objectives. The clearer and more specific you can be about those learning objectives, the easier and more effective you can be in responding to student writing.

The following advice pertains to "writing-to-communicate" assignments, those formal paper assignments which ask students to adopt and adapt the professional styles, genre conventions, and subjects of your discipline.

Responding to Rough Drafts

If your aim is to teach through your responses on students' texts, then you **must** offer the students an opportunity to revise once they've received your feedback. As you probably know from your own experience, research indicates that comments made on final drafts tend to be easily forgotten--or not read at all. And you have better things to do than waste your time.

The basic advice: Create a hierarchy of commenting concerns, explain clearly what those concerns are to the students, and abide by the hierarchy religiously. A good general hierarchy of concerns is as follows:

1. **Global Rhetorical Issues.** Has the paper met the basic requirements of the assignment? Is the subject matter appropriate, is there a clear argument, does the paper evince reasonable consciousness of the appropriate audience? Basically, will the whole paper require substantive revision?
2. **Coherence Issues.** If the paper "checks out" on global rhetorical issues, where does it fall down on coherence? Is there extraneous or missing information? Are the arguments and logic muddled? Should it be rearranged?
3. **Style Issues.** Is the language appropriate? Are the sentences strong?
4. **Editing Issues.** Are there consistent problems with particular grammatical, punctuational, or citation conventions?

Each paper will require a new set of learning objectives, so the above list must not be allowed to hold true in every case. Set your own hierarchy, and **do not make comments on lower-level concerns until you've covered the most important ones.**

There's no point in carefully editing a paragraph that you hope the writer will change dramatically anyway--or even throw entirely away.

Put your hierarchy of concerns in writing, give it to the students, and let them know clearly that even if your comments all pertain to, say, level one of the hierarchy, that doesn't mean that the students don't have to try to meet a high standard on levels two, three, and four.

Some Specific Strategies

- Use comments in the margin to ask specific questions, respond as a reader, and note error patterns.
- Use an overall comment, usually at the end, to state the paper's successes and provide clear directions for revision.

- It's OK to respond as an interested, informed reader: "Fascinating!"; "I'm confused--why do you think the firm should invest in expansion and remodeling rather than securities?"
- **Do** note successes. Students need positive reinforcement as much as negative critique.
- **Don't** write too much; a blizzard of comments covering a multitude of concerns is confusing and overwhelming for many students.
- The most useful kind of comment on a rough draft is one that clearly assigns a new task for the next draft. "On your next draft, work to order your points more coherently"; "As a reader, I simply need more data before I'll be able to accept your conclusions."
- Take the opportunity to point out learning resources (books, online sources, the Writing Center).
- Note patterns of error in grammar, punctuation, or convention: "I noted several comma splices with an X in the margin--you may wish to work through these sentences with a tutor in the Writing Center"; "Some of your citations don't conform to correct APA style."

Responding to Final Drafts

If you have time, offer at most two specific suggestions for future improvement. Otherwise, simply justify the grade as clearly and specifically as you can. Tell how the paper is strong first, then how it's weak. Don't comment on all successes and failures; simply articulate the key ones.

Some Characteristics of Less Effective Responses

- Vagueness, vagueness, vagueness
- Hostility or mean-spiritedness
- Complicated coding schemes without some clear explanation of what the codes mean
- Contradictory assessments or directions
- Simply too much or too little commentary

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