

RESPONDING TO WRITING

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Before considering strategies for responding to student writing, it might be useful to think about some of the assumptions that inform grading and response in the specific context of your classroom.

What do you comment on? When? Why?

- Drafts
- Final revisions
- Content: focus, development, research, analysis, organization
- Style and mechanics

How do you comment? When? Why?

- Interlinear comments
- Marginal notes
- Summary endnote

How (and when and why) might you involve students in response?

- Peer responses (pairs or small groups)
- Self-evaluation (checklists; summary of revisions; reflection)

Nancy Sommers, "Responding To Student Writing"

Sometimes, we inadvertently give students conflicting messages. In "Responding to Student Writing" (*CCC 33.2*, May 1982, pp. 148-56), Nancy Sommers reviews the purposes and effects of teachers' comments on papers. Although the article is more than a few years old now, it continues to offer a useful perspective on responding. What follows below is a summary of Sommers's article.

Sommers provides examples of actual student comments. In each instance, the instructors have taken a lot of time and effort to show their students how to edit sentences with interlinear comments, but then the instructors also make marginal comments that ask students to expand paragraphs to make them more interesting to a reader. The interlinear comments and the marginal comments represent two different tasks. The interlinear comments focus on the text as a finished piece in need of editing. The marginal notes suggest that this text is a work in progress and that the student may need to do some further research to develop the meaning. The student is being asked, in other words, to edit and develop at the same time--a task that most writers would find difficult to do simultaneously. These two sets of comments (interlinear and marginal) make it hard for the student to sort out whether content or style deserves priority for revision and may create the impression that stylistic details need to be attended to before the meaning.

If teachers are commenting on texts to encourage revision, then the comments need to provide students with reasons for revising the structure and meaning of their texts. Conflicting comments collapse the processes of revising, editing, and proofreading and, as a result, students may mistakenly perceive the revision process as a rewording activity. We've probably all read papers where our students have followed every comment and have fixed their mechanical errors as requested, but where the "revisions" remain on the surface. The structure and meaning of the text itself does not improve at all (or, even more dismaying, it sometimes gets worse).

So, what can we do? We need to develop an appropriate level of response for commenting on a first draft, and to differentiate that from what's appropriate for response to a second or final draft. On a first draft, we need to shake our students' conviction that their drafts are already complete and coherent. Our comments need to offer students revision tasks of a different order of complexity and sophistication from the ones that they themselves identify. Such comments might:

- ask questions,
- register confusion,
- point to breaks in logic,
- note disruptions in meaning, or
- question missing information.

Comments on drafts need to engage student writers with basic rhetorical and conceptual issues.

Set Priorities in Your Comments

If feedback time is very limited and/or if you want students to focus on one specific aspect of their writing, you may decide to limit your comments on a draft to issues of highest priority. If you do this, be sure to let your students know that you are doing so and why; otherwise, they may assume that there is no further need for improvement beyond what you have marked. Here's an example of the type of note that explains priorities to students:

So that I may get your drafts back to you more promptly, first drafts of this project will receive written comments on issues of purpose and audience only. I consider the format and process criteria equally important, and your final drafts will be graded on these points, but you will have to rely on fellow students or others for commentary. (Thaiss 47-48)

The key to successful commenting (as much as there is one) is to have what is said in the comment and what is done in the classroom mutually reinforce and enrich each other. For instance, when an instructor sets priorities in commenting on drafts, those priorities should reflect the central goals of the current assignment and should also remind students of other strategies or resources (such as peer review).

Comments on papers provide another opportunity for teaching writing, just as classroom activities such as working together to revise a whole text or individual paragraphs can

help students see how the sense of an essay as a whole shapes many of the smaller changes.

Lindemann's Strategies for Response: Teaching through Comments

Erika Lindemann has a chapter on responding to student writing in her book *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (3rd ed.; Oxford UP, 1995). Her work reminds me that comments on students papers provide another teaching opportunity. Here are my favorite highlights from her advice for "teaching through comments." (I'm mostly quoting here.)

1. Read the paper once without marking on it.
2. Identify one or two problems. In deciding what to teach this time, view the paper descriptively, not to judge it, but to discover what the text reveals about decisions the writer made. (See above section on setting priorities.)
3. Assume that there's a logic to what appears on the page (even if it isn't your logic). Formulate tentative hypotheses to explain the problem you want to focus on.
4. Examine what the student has done well. Can this evidence help the student solve a problem elsewhere in the paper?
5. Now you are ready to begin commenting. You've examined the evidence, decided what you want to teach [with your comments], and identified specific examples of the problem (and perhaps its solution).
6. Use questions to call attention to trouble spots.... Preface questions with why, how, or what so that students must reexamine their own paper. . . .
7. Avoid doing the student's work. Rewriting an occasional sentence can give students a model to imitate, if you make it clear what principle the model illustrates.
8. Write out a careful endnote to summarize your comments and to establish a goal for the next draft.

Lindemann's advice assumes a "process" approach to teaching writing. That is, she recommends giving students feedback on drafts and then letting them revise so they can learn as they go. I often meet with my students in groups of about 4--outside of class--to discuss work in progress. Everyone has to provide copies of his/her work a couple days in advance so that everyone in the group has time to read and respond.

In my own comments, I try to identify a couple patterns--whether strengths or areas that need work--and then address them in a fairly long end note (a couple paragraphs) in which I try to praise their strong points while also suggesting new strategies for improving their prose. I try not to write all over their papers mostly because I remember how overwhelming a whole page full of comments can feel, but also to avoid the type of conflicting comments that Sommers warns against. Finally, I think Lindemann has a point: I cannot do my students' work for them. Instead, I need to think about my response can direct their attention so that the students begin to see their own mistakes and strengths.

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