



RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

Did you know that, according to research, students rarely read your comments on the final draft of a paper? Instead, they look only for the grade. Why go to all that work? Is there a better way? There is indeed.

A helpful overview of best practices by SUNY Cortland cites a number of studies showing that commenting on students' early drafts is the most effective way to get their attention (Kennedy). When students attend to your comments, they improve their writing as well as their understanding of your field. In other words, by responding to students' writing in draft stages, you can intervene in their critical thinking and writing processes.

Often, in our zeal to highlight all the ways a paper could be or should be improved, we neglect the value of positive reinforcement. Yet, John Bean reminds us of our own anxieties when we ask a colleague to comment on our drafts and then adds that "we sometimes forget these feelings when we comment on students' papers" (p.239). Paul Diederich adds, "Noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly. . ." (qtd. in Daiker, p.105).

The following suggestions may help you respond more efficiently and more positively to your students' writing.

- As part of your written assignment sheet, state the criteria upon which the writing will be evaluated. This saves you from commenting on *everything* and gets students to focus on what is most *important*.
- Require and respond to early drafts. Students pay the most attention to comments on early drafts. Students can then use your comments while revising. You will write comments to help students write well, rather than to justify a grade. In other words, you will be responding to the contents of the paper rather than pointing out and correcting errors.
- Try reading the whole set of papers quickly *before* you write any comments. You need to benchmark the range of performance in the class. Your comments are likely to be more fair and on target. You can also make a list of important comments for the whole class, which saves the effort of writing the same comment repeatedly to individuals. You will also discover if your assignment was not clear.
- Students will interpret your comments as reflecting your priorities. Comment first on *global* issues, including responsiveness to task, handling of key issues, logic of the argument, depth and complexity of support, or helpful organization. If most of your comments are about lower-order issues, such as spelling or commas, then those are the issues that students will address. If you just sit down and start marking a paper, you will notice and mark little things. You need to train yourself to work at the global level.
- If there are serious grammar or style issues, make one or two comments such as "*Try combining some of your short sentences into more complex patterns. Attached is a sheet that provides several examples of what I mean.*" or "*Your misuse of semicolons and commas seriously weakens your paper. Check your handbook or go to the Writing Center to learn how to solve the problems.*"
- Make positive, specific comments. These can range from "*You are adding a lot of informative details about the change in the birthrate*" to "*This paragraph is very persuasive because you first state your claim and then back it up with examples*" to "*Your helpful introduction prepares the reader for your key arguments*" to "*I like the way you carefully define the foreign trade dilemma.*" Acknowledge writing that is clear or research that shows extra effort and thought.
- Write constructive comments that students can act upon, such as "*Add some data or a chart here to support your point*" or "*Reread the section on jury selection. I think you will see that your position is not clear on the issue of over- representation of minority jurors*" or "*This point about stem cell*



research could be a very powerful closing to your paper” or *“This point is interesting, but it doesn’t tie in with your point about family structure—can you find a way to make it connect?”* Such comments help students understand a problem with their writing while helping them develop a critical approach that can be used in later writing assignments. Such comments help students think through writing problems without providing answers or corrections.

- Comment on the draft as a member of the student’s intended audience—as a reader, not as a critic. Comments such as the following can help the student see the importance of choosing an audience and writing to it: *“I expected statistics on divorce rates here”* or *“Are you giving too much basic information for your technically savvy audience?”* or *“I like the way you surprised me at the closing with a counter-intuitive position.”*
- Write legibly. If students can’t read your comments, they can’t make changes.
- Don’t shut down the student with too many comments. When you limit both the length and the frequency of your comments, students know they—not you—are in charge of the paper. More importantly, too many comments can overwhelm students or encourage them to make changes only where you have commented.
- Use open-ended questions to stimulate critical thinking: *“Could you be more specific concerning the titration design?”* *“I want to believe you. Do you have more support for the potential for developing cross resistance?”* *“Have you considered looking at this issue from a feminist point of view?”* *“I got confused here. Could you clarify your argument about change in character with evidence from the novel?”* *“Have you thought about the way Carl Sagan approached this?”*
- Check yourself for vague comments such as *“This is confusing,”* *“Good,”* or *“You are off track here.”*
- Responding to writing doesn’t always mean responding in writing; set aside a time, if possible, to hold brief (5 to 10 minutes) conferences with students who want help. The conference might be when they are first planning a paper, while the class meets in a computer lab to work on drafts, when they have a very rough first draft, or after you have commented upon a draft. A few minutes in conference can make a big difference.

USEFUL SOURCES:

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Daiker, Donald. “Learning to Praise,” *Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research*. Ed. Chris M. Anson. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989. 103-113.

Kennedy, Mary L. *The Online Manual for Writing Across the Curriculum*. SUNY Cortland. 4 Oct. 2002. 4 Feb. 2004. <http://www.cortland.edu/english/wac/index.html>

Useful websites:

<http://cstw.ohio-state.edu/wac/resources/handouts/respondingfaq.htm>

<http://cstw.ohio-state.edu/wac/resources/handouts/techniquesforresponding.htm>

<http://web.usf.edu/~lc/wac/respond.html>

