

## Responding to Student Writing

(adapted from Richard Straub)

- Before you start to read a set of papers (optimally, even as you put together the assignment and talk to the students about the writing they are to do), **consider the aims of the assignment. Decide if the assignment is meant to advance student learning or to evaluate student progress.** How does what you are looking for here mesh with what you have been working on or what you intend to work on in the class? Decide what your main focus will be—and what you will generally *not* deal with in these papers.
- **Decide how long you'll take with each paper**—and how many you'd like to have finished in an hour or two. Do all you can to stick to the plan. You may not be able to keep up, but you've got a goal in mind.
- **Learn the uses of directive, facilitative, corrective, and evaluative forms of commentary.** Without criticism and calls for changes, there would be less direction in your responses. Without comments that play back the text, ask questions, provide reader responses, and offer explanations, there would be less help and encouragement in your commentary.
- **Look to engage students in an inquiry into their subject by treating what they have to say seriously and encouraging them, in turn, to take their own ideas seriously.** Write out your comments, especially the most important ones, in full statements. Short, cryptic comments, abbreviations, and a lot of editorial symbols may too readily be taken as the hasty marks of an editor or critic...or the pouncing corrections of a teacher.
- **Focus your commentary on no more than two or three concerns in a set of comments,** making sure that your comments reflect your priorities and advance the goals of the course. Students do best when they can work on a couple areas of writing at a time.
- **There's no need to address every instance of a problem or, for that matter, every success.** Select key instances and build your response on them. Leave the rest for the student to identify and work out on his or her own.
- **Don't overwhelm the writer with comments.** It's not the number of comments that distinguish informed teachers' responses from those of uninformed teachers; it's what you do in the comments you provide. Instead of being comprehensive, try to cover less ground and be more effective with what you do take up.
- **Concentrate on higher order concerns (HOCs).** Emphasize matters of content, focus, organization, and purpose in your comments.

- Depending on the goals of the assignment, **try to minimize time dealing with lower order concerns (LOCs)**. Employ minimal marking for errors: punctuation, grammar, spelling, and other local conventions. Instead of marking and explaining every error, just put a tick mark in the margin next to the line where the error occurs. Leave it up to the student to locate and correct the error. Encourage the students to make an appointment with the Writing Center if they have trouble identifying these errors.
- **Keep an eye always on the next work to be done:** the next draft or the next assignment the class will take up. Make comments that are geared toward improvement, not simply the assessment of a finished text.
- **Read the student's text in terms of its (stated or assigned) rhetorical context.** Does it achieve the purposes it sets out to achieve?
- **Tie your responses to the work you've been doing in class and to your immediate and long-term goals.** Use the key terms of the class in your responses.
- **Take advantage of the many uses of praise:** to recognize a job well done, to teach a principle, to underscore successful strategies, and to encourage students to continue working on their writing. Use praise in one area or in one passage to build confidence for tackling others.
- **Fit your comments to your own strengths and style as a teacher,** and along the way look to add to your strengths as a responder. No one way of responding will work, or work the same way, for every student or with every assignment. It is necessary, then, to develop a repertoire of responding strategies to meet the demands of different students and different settings.

Adapted from Richard Straub, "Guidelines for Responding to Student Writing" (*Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. Duane Roen et al, eds. Urbana, IL National Council of Teachers of English, 2002).