

13 Ways of Looking at Responding to Student Writing¹

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1. No professor is capable of making comments so profoundly wonderful that a student will become a perfect writer on the basis of remarks on a single paper.
2. Unskilled writers are largely unable to assign levels of importance to comments made on their papers. In other words, they are likely to treat equally a comment that the argument of an essay is confusing and a comment that the essay contains several misspellings. Moreover, since comments on surface errors are more easily addressable (though error types themselves are not necessarily easily and permanently resolved), students are likely to attend to them and not to more serious problems in logic, idea development, focus, or order.
3. Teachers have a finite amount of time to spend responding to writing. There is evidence that time spent meticulously annotating every aspect of a student's paper does little good. This is especially true if the comments are rubber stamp ones: "awkward," "be specific" and so on.
4. Students learn to write by writing, and while judicious advice is helpful, there is a gap between knowledge and performance. A steady diet of being closely edited doesn't mean that a student will necessarily internalize what he or she needs to do in future tasks.
5. Set ground rules for yourself, and clearly convey to students what they can and cannot expect in terms of your response. For example, tell them (or include a response sheet that tells them) that your written comments will address only one main strength and one main area for improvement, if that's what you choose to do. Cover other aspects of the paper with a response or grading rubric. 1. "The most effective aspect of this paper is ____ (or, "The best section of this paper is on page) 2. "The one thing that would most improve this paper or ones like it in the future is _____"
6. "Edit" only a fraction of a paper: a selected paragraph or page. Make clear up front that you do not aspire to be exhaustive. See recommendation 3.
7. Make good student papers available to illustrate features of strong work.
8. Develop a response rubric, that is, a list of elements of the paper, with values you can check off. Typical broad criteria include: focus, thesis, argument; organization; clarity of development; quality and quantity of evidence or support; ambition (degree of difficulty); format; correctness; and style. However, each element may look different in different situations. Use general rubrics to develop ones tailored to specific assignments.
9. As you write assignments, consider how you might respond to the kinds of writing those assignments might yield. It doesn't "cheapen" the assignment to reveal criteria to students up front. You might provide more scaffolding to students at the beginning of the semester
10. Require students to tell you the specific aspect of the paper on which they'd most like to get feedback from you, then reserve most of your comments for that aspect. You might want to give them a menu of features to select from or, at least, explain to them why very general requests won't yield them much help (e.g. "Does it flow?")
11. Have students write a cover memo in which they describe their strategies in writing the paper and what they perceive its strengths and problem areas to be.
12. Use brief marginal comments to call attention to "higher order" aspects in the paper, usually content or development. A "good" or a "yes" or a "?" or an "evidence?" go a long way. Use squiggly lines (or what you will) to call attention to sentence errors or hugely rough spots (but remember that your goal should be to teach). Don't feel compelled to mark everything, and certainly don't edit everything.
13. In courses with multiple assignments give students "vouchers" good for one detailed commentary per term. They should reserve that for the time they want you to read a paper as you would a manuscript submitted to a journal.

¹ Sorry Mr. Stevens.



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Articles on Evaluating Student Writing

Listed below are articles on this topic from the Campus Writing Program library. Short summaries and citations are provided when available.

- **Elbow**, Peter. "Taking Time Out from Grading and Evaluating While Working in a Conventional System."
- **Harris**, Muriel. "Evaluation: The Process for Revision."
- **Haswell**, Richard H. "Minimal Marking."
- **Hays**, Janice N., Kathleen M. Brandt, and Kathryn H. Chantry. "The Impact of Friendly and Hostile Audiences on the Argumentative Writing of High School and College Students."
- **Holt**, Dennis. "Holistic Scoring in Many Disciplines."
- **Kline**, Nancy. "Writing as Translation: The Great Between."
- **Lees**, Elaine O. "Evaluating Student Writing."
- **Linn**, Robert L., Stephen P. Klein, and Frederick M. Hart. "The Nature and Correlates of Law School Essay Grades."
- **MacAllister**, Joyce. "Responding to Student Writing."
- **Mallonee**, Barbara C., and John R. Breihan. "Responding to Students' Drafts: Interdisciplinary Consensus."
- **McDonald**, W.U., Jr. "The Revising Process and the Marking of Student Papers."
- **Odell**, Lee. "Responding to Student Writing."
- **Onore**, Cynthia. "The Student, the Teacher, and the Text: Negotiating Meanings through Response and Revision."
- **Rieber**, Lloyd. "Paraprofessional Assessment of Students' Writing."
- **Robertson**, Michael. "Writing and Responding."
- **Rose**, Mike. "Education Standards Must be Reclaimed for Democratic Ends."
- **Slattery**, Patrick. "Encouraging Critical Thinking: A Strategy of Commenting on College Papers."
- **Sommers**, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing."
- **White**, Edward H. "How Theories of Reading Affect Responses to Student Writing."

Elbow, Peter. "Taking Time Out from Grading and Evaluating While Working in a Conventional System." *Assessing Writing* 4.1 (1997): 5-27.

Conventional grading is only one segment of evaluation, yet the practice is so ubiquitous that it is difficult to take time-outs from grading. Elbow offers a variety of suggestions for incorporating non-graded writing into a conventional grading system. While freewriting is one method, contracting for a letter grade encourages students to write better through achieving certain tasks. The instructor's comments help students realize that readers intellectually engage with texts, and that good writing facilitates this dimension to texts. Within this context, then, non-graded writing helps to serve the pedagogical aim of the course. The article has an appendix showing a sample 'B' contract, a sample 'A' contract, and a discussion of the rationale behind the contracts.

Harris, Muriel. "Evaluation: The Process for Revision." *Journal of Basic Writing* 1.4 (): 82-90.

Describes types of evaluation that can be offered by teacher or peers at various stages of the writing process. How to tailor feedback to each stage; how to encourage students to become better self-evaluators.

Haswell, Richard H. "Minimal Marking." *College English* 45.6 (1983): 600-604.

Argues for a "minimal marking" approach to grammatical/mechanical mistakes in student writing: simply indicate, using a check in the margin of the paper, where such mistakes are, and force the student to pinpoint and correct them. Presents data indicating that students can and do correct mistakes marked in this way, most of the time. The technique also reduces the number of errors that

appear in first drafts.

Hays, Janice N., Kathleen M. Brandt, and Kathryn H. Chantry. "The Impact of Friendly and Hostile Audiences on the Argumentative Writing of High School and College Students." *Research in the Teaching of English* 22.4 (1988): 379-387.

Study of argumentative papers written by high school seniors and college undergrads to either friendly or hostile audience. Papers were holistically scored, rated for variables related to audience activity, and writers ranked on Perry scale. Perry scale rank correlated better than demographic variables with holistic score. Significant relationship found between audience activity, Perry scale rank, grade level, and holistic scores.

Holt, Dennis. "Holistic Scoring in Many Disciplines." *College Teaching* 41.2 (1993): 71-74.

Outlines methods used in holistic scoring: determining general standards for an assignment, making comparative judgements about quality. Explains adaptations for assessing writing in particular circumstances and across disciplines.

Kline, Nancy. "Writing as Translation: The Great Between." *How Writers Teach Writing*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992. 175-187.

Argues for an analogy between writing and translating: both involve taking words in one language (internal or external) and translating them into another language (external or differently external). Writing is always done in this place between one's own internal language and the words on the page.

Lees, Elaine O. "Evaluating Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 30.4 (1979): 370-374.

Discusses how to comment profitably to student writing. Divides marginal commentary into correcting (overemphasizes errors), emoting (elicits 'So What?'), describing (doesn't help student revise), suggesting (might help this paper, but not others), questioning (might get student to rethink), reminding (could connect lecture to paper), and assigning (can actually get student to re-see the issue).

Linn, Robert L., Stephen P. Klein, and Frederick M. Hart. "The Nature and Correlates of Law School Essay Grades." *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 32 (1972): 267-279.

Study attempting to determine what characteristics of essays written by law students were most strongly associated with the grades given those essays by law professors. Results: student grades higher if they identified major issues and stuck to those; used transitional phrases; argued for a particular conclusion while presenting both sides of the argument; used legal jargon; and wrote neatly and without mechanical errors.

MacAllister, Joyce. "Responding to Student Writing." *Teaching Writing in All Disciplines: New Directions for Teaching and Learning* No. 12. Ed. C.W. Griffith. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982. 59-65.

Argues that the best way to improve student writing is to eliminate 3 beliefs: that instructors should comment a lot on student papers; that they should know a lot of grammatical rules; and that the most effective comments from the instructor are on the final draft. Also recommends peer review.

Mallonee, Barbara C., and John R. Breihan. "Responding to Students' Drafts: Interdisciplinary Consensus." *College Composition and Communication* 36.2 (May 1985): 213-231.

Author describes results of faculty workshops and cross-curricular collaborations among faculty. There are several areas of consensus in dealing with student writing, e.g., decide how to deal with mechanical errors; come up with a common terminology to refer to writing; develop a process of responding to papers (e.g., suit responses to a purpose; don't mark up the final draft too much; use checklists that prioritize things, etc.).

McDonald, W.U., Jr. "The Revising Process and the Marking of Student Papers." *College Composition and Communication* 29.2 (1978): 167-170.

Discusses how to respond appropriately to preliminary drafts of student papers. Among first things to look for: a focus or thesis (which may be at the end rather than the beginning of the paper). Also

of first importance: content, coherence, and clarity. In later drafts can concentrate more on grammar/mechanics.

Odell, Lee. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 24 (1973): 394-400.

Odell suggests that teachers' responses to student writing should identify and refine the strategies of students' mental processes. These strategies include focus, contrast, change, reference to sequence, reference to physical context, and classification. He analyzes several examples of student writing to explain useful response techniques.

Onore, Cynthia. "The Student, the Teacher, and the Text: Negotiating Meanings through Response and Revision." *Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research*. Ed. Chris Anson. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989. 231-260.

One of the advantages of process writing is that it allows the writer to engage with the material in a deeper, more sophisticated way. The assumption is that process that involves this sort of engagement will automatically result in a better text. This is not necessarily the case. In preliminary study of the effects of teacher commentary upon three students' writing, the student whose work was judged most improved was also the student who had resisted any problematic engagement with the material, while the student whose work was judged to have declined throughout the process was the student who had engaged more deeply with her material. The results of the study did indicate that writing can be used to further inquiry, but the methodology was flawed.

Rieber, Lloyd. "Paraprofessional Assessment of Students' Writing." *College Teaching* 41.1 (1993): 15-18.

Describes a way to get around the problem of evaluating student papers in large classes, specifically a large business writing class: hire paraprofessionals to evaluate the writing. Authors hired people with extensive editing experience to edit students' papers for grammar/mechanics, and for technique or strategy used (thesis statement with examples, compare/contrast). Editors also conduct one-on-one tutorials with students.

Robertson, Michael. "Writing and Responding." *Writer's Craft, Teacher's Art: Teaching What We Know*. Ed. Mimi Schwartz. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. 115-124.

Describes the author's approach to commenting on or responding to student writing, which is based on his experiences with an editor at a NYC magazine and is based on a medical/diagnosis analogy. Gives 4 principles to use in responding: most comments should be aimed at revision; respond to content; establish a dialogue; and point out general principles of good writing.

Rose, Mike. "Education Standards Must be Reclaimed for Democratic Ends." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 3 July 1991: A32.

Discusses calls for higher standards of evaluation in school, and the equality vs. excellence debate. Argues that "clearly defined standards that are employed fairly facilitate learning" and show students that their teachers have high expectations (thereby encouraging students to meet those expectations). Questions: can we raise standards without teaching the test? Can we devise coherent standards and explain them clearly to students? Shouldn't we explain to students how the standards came about, and be willing to change them as times change?

Slattery, Patrick. "Encouraging Critical Thinking: A Strategy of Commenting on College Papers." *College Composition and Communication* 41 (1990): 332-335.

Suggests types of comments that can be made on student papers to encourage critical thinking: a support response and a challenge response.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 33.2 (1982): 148-156.

Study of comments by professors on student papers. Findings: Profs' comments have effect of appropriating text from students to profs. Profs' comments are not text-specific and, in fact, could be put anywhere on any paper. Suggestions: don't comment on mechanical errors on first draft; provide comments that force students to rethink or clarify their position on an issue.

White, Edward H. "How Theories of Reading Affect Responses to Student Writing." *Teaching and Assessing Writing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985. 100-119.

Discusses theories of reading: does the meaning reside in the text or is it constructed by the reader? Current theory supports the latter, that reading is a process of interaction between reader and text. Also currently popular are theories of writing as a process, and measurement of writing using holistic scoring. Author ties these trends together.

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Responding to student papers

Responses to avoid and productive advice to give

By Jessica Mosher

Editors' note: In this special double issue, we reprint an article from *Teaching with Writing*, the Writing Intensive Curriculum newsletter of Oregon State University (Volume 7, #1, Fall 1997). Jessica Mosher has used up-to-date research on teacher's comments on student papers and students' responses to those comments. Responding to student writing is difficult territory. How can we respond in ways that will lead to learning, not merely justify the grades we put on papers? Mosher has provided an excellent guide. We thank the author and Vicki Collins, editor of *Teaching with Writing*, for allowing us to reprint the article and to post it on our web site.

ACCORDING TO ROBERT CONNORS, early in the twentieth century a number of grading scales were proposed by which teachers rated student writing. Subsequently, many teachers only deemed it necessary to assign a letter grade to those papers, a grade scrawled out in ominous red ink. The grade did not explain what the teacher thought of the content, the mechanics, the style, or even the organization of the paper. The student was left to understand the reasoning behind the grade on his/her own, hoping to find an answer by the time the next paper was due. However, by the 1950's the manner in which teachers approached papers began to change. Teachers realized that letter grades alone were not aiding students in sharpening their writing skills. As teachers realized that rating scales truly were only serving "as instruments for administrative judgment rather than for student improvement," they gradually abandoned them (Connors 204). Teachers began addressing students' papers with more care, viewed essays as "real audiences," and regarded marginal and end comments as the most effective ways of explaining to students what needed attention in their writing (204).

The use of marginal and end comments is still in practice today, and current research is revealing "what teachers have long suspected, hoped, or assumed: that students read and make use of teacher comments and that well-designed teacher comments can help students develop as writers" (Straub, "Students' Reactions" 91). Therefore, teacher commenting should not be undervalued because sometimes the most productive way of approaching a student's writing is through written response.

But a teacher must also be warned. While commenting is a way of guiding a student to another writing level, a teacher must be cautious in how he/she chooses to comment. Because writing teachers shape writers, a teacher needs to understand that not all commenting is useful, and some comments may even be damaging (Sperling 177). This essay reviews recent scholarship on responding to student writing and discusses different types of responses to student writing including what types of responses teachers should avoid and what types of responses teachers should embrace.

When commenting on student papers, what appropriate guidelines, then, should a teacher follow? Richard Straub, in "Students' Reactions to Teacher Comments: An Exploratory Study," discusses what students believe is most useful in the way of teacher response. Straub introduces nine categories of teacher comments: focus, specificity, mode, criticism, imperatives, praise, questions, advice, and explanations.

1. Focus. The focus of a comment usually refers to what kind of comments the teacher makes: global (ideas, development, organization) or local (wording, sentence structure, correctness) (100). Students did not prefer one over the other and believed that both were useful when reviewing their papers. One concern students did have is with the teacher commenting on the ideas of the paper, a global issue. This concern regarded "authority" and how certain comments appeared to work "against the ideas that were already down on the page" (101). Students also reacted negatively to teacher attempts to correct or revise words or sentences. The students regarded this as the teacher's attempt to claim their writing authority because they saw the corrections as a reflection of "the idiosyncratic preferences of the teacher" (101).

2. Specificity. In all cases, the students wanted the teacher's comments to be specific. Students did not "respond favorably to any comment that they saw as unclear, vague, or difficult to understand" (Straub, "Students' Reactions" 102). For example, a teacher who stated "you need more evidence to support your main point" needed to state what evidence the student should have used, or at least suggested some directions the student could take in order to find more evidence. The consensus was that "comments that were specific and elaborate" were much more useful than those that were vague (102).

3. Mode. In mode, or the tone of the teacher's voice, the students preferred comments that "sounded helpful and encouraging" rather than those that were terse and seemed "harsh and critical" (103). A comment such as "Not so. See above," made the students become defensive and caused them to leave the material as it was initially written.

4. Criticism. When it came to criticism, students preferred comments that were more like reader than teacher responses: students "felt these comments had a softer tone, and they appreciated the way the comments offered an individual reader's perspective on the writing" (105). For example, while students found the comment "You've missed his point" as offensive because it came "right out and [said that the paper was] bad," they found the comment "I hear LeMoult saying something different--that drugs are so dangerous to society largely because laws make them illegal" as objective and words they could easily work with during the revision process (104). Therefore, students appreciated teacher responses that focused on what the student was trying to say, and those that helped him/her see where he/she could change the

wording so that the writer's own message would become clearer (105).

5. Imperatives. The practicality of imperatives, or commands, was debated in the Straub article. While most students believed, as currently hypothesized, that imperatives were useless and suggested the teacher's attempt to control student writing, others saw imperatives as a worthwhile way of commenting. A student said that "even though it's telling [a student] how to write the paper, it's basic info that would make the paper more effective" (106).

6. Praise. Praise was always welcome in students' papers, but again they wanted the praise to be specific and to be "accompanied by an explanation of what the teacher saw as good" (106).

7. Questions. Interestingly, the efficiency regarding the use of questions in a paper was debated. While students did "appreciate the freedom and control over their writing" that questions allowed, sometimes the students were unclear on where to go with the questions (109). Students who complained about the overuse of questions stated that they "wanted more direction and a clearer sense of what the teacher wanted" (109).

8. & 9. Advice and Explanations. The overwhelming majority of students thought that advice and explanations were the key to productive revising. Students said that advice such as "in your next draft try to focus on developing more convincing arguments against legalized drugs" identified the problem "in a way that [made] the teachers seem like they cared" (107). Advice that was most favored was advice that suggested instead of commanded ways to approach revision, and advice that was followed by an explanation. The teacher would thus be praised if he/she added to the above sentence, why don't you add "point by point, your opponent's view, as clearly and objectively as you can" so that "then you can deal with each of his arguments and show the weaknesses in his position?" (109). The most productive comments thus not only gave advice, but also showed how to carry the idea of the advice throughout the paper.

In summary, although students did not appreciate comments that were sternly voiced and appeared to take control of the paper's ideas and organization, they were appreciative of comments that suggested how to restructure or add to their ideas. Generally, students realize that they need direction in their writing and understand the importance of teacher commenting, but only take heed of the teacher's suggestions if they are worded as just that--as suggestions and not commands. Straub, in another article titled "The Concept of Control," states that "all teacher comments in some way are evaluative and directive" and "in all comments, a teacher intervenes in the writing" (247). It is the way that the direction is presented, it is "how [teachers] receive and respond to the words the students put on the page that speaks loudest in our teaching" (246), and determines if the student is going to follow or ignore the comments. For example, in Straub's essay, two teachers give the same advice, yet in very different ways.

While Edward White "is more willing to tell the student what she would do best to work on through directive comments," Peter Elbow becomes the "sounding board for the writing, one who plays back his reading of the text and subtly injects evaluations and advice for revision within these reader responses" (245). Both teachers had the same message, one that stressed a strengthening of the argument, but they had different ways of approaching the reader, one less intrusive than the other. The student will be more responsive to Elbow's comments because they are friendlier and more suggestive than White's. Elbow's comments are "among the least

controlling modes of response since they do little more than dramatize how the words are being understood by an individual reader, not by someone in charge of judging, criticizing, or improving the writing" (243).

Successful commenting can be explained in analyzing the ways that commenting has *not been* productive according to past research. What kinds of responses should teachers avoid on first drafts?

Summer Smith in "The Genre of the End Comment" suggests that teachers avoid the generic comment. Examples of generic commenting are "good" or "nicely done" as an end comment, the "awkward" as a marginal comment, and the use of generalities such as, "you worked hard on planning this paper--the outline was a good idea" (Smith 254). Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford suggest that generic comments are created by the "attempts of teachers to squeeze their reactions into a few pithy phrases, to roll all their strength and all their sweetness up into one ball for student delectation" (Connors 200). Summer Smith suggests that the tendency for instructors to write "generically" stems from the fear of damaging a student's "fragile self-esteem" (250). Moreover, "the educational institution also exerts power over the teacher's commenting by determining the focus of the teacher's curriculum . . . and by requiring that the teacher return the papers with comments within a specified period of time" (250).

Although teachers may think generic comments do not harm students, they do more harm than good because they do in fact offend students. In general, generic comments give students "the impression of hastiness" and are viewed as "insincere statements" (Smith 254-55). A student expects constructive criticism from a teacher and when he/she receives a general and hastily written comment, not only is he/she insulted because the teacher appears not to have dedicated much time to reviewing his/her paper, and thus has seemingly regarded his/her ideas as insignificant, but he/she is also led to believe that revision is useless. In the end, what a teacher receives is a crude final draft because the generic comments led to students putting little effort into revision (254).

Another problem is found in the way teachers present positive vs. negative feedback. In research conducted by Connors and Lunsford in 1993, negative commenting dominated teacher responses to student papers (210). While it is true that students sometimes regard negative comments as more useful than generic comments (because negative feedback at least guides the writer to correcting something in the paper), their usefulness largely depends on how they are phrased. In most of the papers analyzed by Connors and Lunsford, teachers spoke harshly to students, with comments like, "Learn to use subordination . . . You are still making comma splices! You must eliminate this error once and for all. Is it because you aren't able to recognize an independent clause?" (210) and, "You know better than to create comma splices at this point in the semester!" (215) While these comments undermined the student's ability to recognize errors, other comments only included a few words which insulted the intelligence of the writer: "Handwriting--learn to type" (211). These comments did not motivate the writers to revise, but only caused the writers to push the paper aside and ignore it. Again, this form of responding to papers causes the students' final drafts to be presented to the teacher in crude form.

A third type of response to avoid is one that takes away the authority from the writer. In this

type of commenting, the teacher assumes control over the student's words on the page. There are several ways to do this, but one is found in the tendency for the teacher to edit the paper instead of actually responding to it. As stated previously, before the 1950s, the "most widely accepted idea was that teachers just were to correct, perhaps edit, and then grade student papers" (Connors 201). In more recent years, not only do teachers claim authority over a student's text by their tendency to edit, but also by their tendency to be directive in their comments for the paper as a whole (organization, form, style, etc.). In "The Concept of Control in Teacher Response," Richard Straub describes the typical "directive" teacher:

She concentrates on formal propriety, using terse, sometimes elliptical, comments that tell the student . . . in no uncertain terms what is wrong and what must be changed. . . . [This teacher] has a definite and rather narrow agenda for the writing . . . and she gives little attention to the content of the writing. . . . It is a clear instance of a teacher's imposing an idealized text on the student, her own model of what counts in a piece of writing, and how that writing ought to appear, especially formally and structurally, without any real concern for the writer's purposes and meaning. (226)

Students, says Straub, can identify a directive teacher by the many imperative comments found scattered throughout the paper that attempt to "assert authority over the student (236). Examples of these are: "Revise the opening to begin your argument," "Focus this paragraph on this argument and develop your case," "Make this into a full closing paragraph," and "Be sure you focus each paragraph on its central idea" (236).

A teacher who is directive is largely criticized by current composition theorists because in making these imperative comments, and in correcting "errors," the students do not learn from their own mistakes. Students do not "retain a greater responsibility" for their writing and tend to recommit the same errors in future papers (Straub 223). The directive teacher is also criticized because he/she does not allow the writer to have a voice. The paper's sentences and paragraphs are largely those created by the teacher. Thus, because the writing is largely the teacher's words and voice, and not the student's, the student is not able to engage in critical thought, thought that inspires him/her to, as Peter Elbow says, "wallow in complexity." The student's writing may be superficial and remain at a novice level.

A fourth type of response to avoid is one that reflects the biases of the teacher. One specific study conducted by Melanie Sperling investigated the commenting techniques a teacher used for what she considered A to C students. The comments for the A student, Manda, were much more positive and facilitative than for the C student, Mohan, where the comments were negative and tended to be more directive. Overall, "to Manda, the teacher-as-reader often showed herself as positive, peer-like, and sympathetic to Manda's own world experience," whereas for Mohan, "the teacher-as-reader often showed herself as negative, didactic, and focused on mechanics instead of his text" (192).

Although the difference in comments had to do somewhat with the different feedback that each student required, Sperling indicates that the comments rather reflected what the teacher valued as "interesting" writing versus "boring" writing (189-90). Throughout the evaluation of the writing, the teacher often related her own experience to the writer's experience.

Interestingly, Manda's world experiences were closer to the teacher's own than Mohan's, which possibly indicates that the grade that resulted had to do with a subjective rather than an objective view of the writing. The teacher was using an emotional bias to comment on and grade students' papers. Furthermore, the result of these comments did not seem to benefit Mohan in improvement of his writing. Sperling states that Mohan's grade remained a C throughout the course, and the errors that he committed never ceased (180). Therefore, this information encourages a teacher to reconsider his/her way of perceiving a student's writing and understand that different students will write differently because of heterogeneous experiences. Just because a teacher cannot relate as well to one experience as to another does not mean that the latter student deserves a lesser grade. As Sperling suggests, we should "be conscious of the ways in which our readings of and responses to student writing can vary from student to student and text to text" and realize that "as we come to understand more about our perspective as readers, we may have a touchstone for shaping different student experiences with different writing types" (201).

Overall, teachers should take into consideration different modes of response in order to reach beginning writing students in the most productive and effective manner. Although research is still needed to discover the long-term effect of marginal and end comments on student writing, it is certain that for the present time, teacher response aids a student in his/her revision, but only if it is worded carefully and concretely. Research sheds light on what "good" or "well-designed" advice may be according to beginning writing students, and teachers should understand what "good advice" entails when commenting on student papers. When advice is worded in an "appealing" way and is thorough, students acknowledge that "feedback and revision are valuable pedagogical tools" and that the improvement of their drafts is a result of these tools (Ferris 316).

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Notes on the rhetoric of written response

Jessica Mosher's research and advice correspond closely to what the Writing Assistants have discovered in their experience with The Write Project. Following are excerpts from a handout used in the Writing Center as a guide to responding to student drafts in the Project. Faculty may also find them helpful in responding to student papers.

- Get a sense of the whole draft. Read the introduction and conclusion, to find out where the paper is going and where it gets to. Look for a topic or theme statement in each body paragraph. What is the writer trying to do overall (audience and purpose)? How does that square with the assignment?
- Begin your response with a summary. Tell the writer what you understand the draft to be saying. Having done that, you'll find it much easier to write your response.
- Try does/says analysis when you can't quite put your finger on a problem. You can ask, "What is this paragraph doing?" (role in the paper) and "What is this paragraph saying?" (summary of topic) when paragraphs are not clear. If a paragraph is underdeveloped or confusing, point the writer to another paragraph in the draft that is clear and well developed, and suggest that the writer try treating the problem paragraph in a similar way.
- Write marginal comments at points where you feel something needs to be said right there and not at the end. But be careful not to insert too many comments, or the writer will just feel overwhelmed.
- End with a comprehensive summary of strengths and weaknesses, plus a note of encouragement. This is your chance to prompt the writer to action. A three-part end comment like the one suggested by Erica Lindemann is a good format:
 - Devote at least one full sentence to commending what you can legitimately praise; avoid undercutting the praise with but (e.g., don't say "I like your introduction, but the paper is disorganized").
 - Identify the problems the writer most needs to work on, and explain why they make understanding the piece difficult.
 - Suggest a goal for the writer to work toward in the revision or the next assignment.
- If there are several mechanical problems or awkward sentences, comment on one paragraph as a sample, to show the writer where the problems are and to suggest corrections. Tell the writer that the rest of the draft needs similar editing.
- Respond in the first person. The "I" will make you sound like a reader, not just a grader.

Instead of saying, for instance, "This paragraph is confusing," write: "I'm having trouble figuring out what this paragraph is saying."

- Write text-specific comments. Generic-sounding comments give the impression that you don't really care about this draft or this student. For instance, "Your thesis is good" sounds hollow. What is the thesis? What makes it good?
- Praise specific things the writer has done well. Do not give general praise like "Great paper!" or "Excellent paper!" When you point out strengths, point to specific places in the paper that illustrate those strengths.
- Keep the tone positive and encouraging. Find specific positive things to say. When you find something good, comment on it right there where you find it, and also refer to it in your general note at the end.
- Keep the language literal. Avoid metaphoric language. Metaphors can easily be misunderstood. Even a seemingly obvious one like "You really hit the nail on the head here" is uninformative. What literally corresponds in the writing to the nail? to the head? to hitting? If the writer is ESL, your meaning might be totally obscure.
- Avoid sarcasm and humor. Even the most innocent humorous comment can be misunderstood as mocking or sarcastic.