The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing
Fifth Edition

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the same game with no grammar instruction, suggesting to Sandra L. Stotsky and to Richard Van de Velde that active manipulation of language, not the grammar unit, explained the earlier results. 48 More recent summaries of research—by Elizabeth I. Haynes, Hilary Taylor Holbrook, and Marcia Farr Whitehouse—support similar conclusions. Indirect evidence for this position is provided by surveys reported by Betty Bamberg in 1978 and 1981, showing that time spent in grammar instruction in high school is the least important factor of eight factors examined, in separating regular from remedial writers at the college level.49

More generally, Patrick's Scott and Bruce Caenziger, in "Reference Sources for Composition Research: A Practical Survey" (CE, 43 (1983), 766-768), note that much current research is not informed by an awareness of the past. Put simply, we are constrained to reinvent the wheel. My concern here has been with a far more serious problem: that too often the wheel we reinvent is square.

It is, after all, a question of power. Janet Timig, developing a consensus from composition research, and Aaron S. Caron and Lawrence V. Castiglione, developing the implications of language theory for education, come to the same conclusion: that the thrust of current research and theory is to take power from the teacher and give that power to the learner.50 At no point in the English curriculum is the question of power more blatantly ignored than in the issue of formal grammar instruction. It is time that we, as teachers, formulate theories of language and literacy and let those theories guide our teaching, and it is time that we, as researchers, move on to more interesting areas of inquiry.


Nancy Sommers

Responding to Student Writing

More than any other enterprise in the teaching of writing, responding to and commenting on student writing consumes the largest proportion of our time. Most teachers estimate that it takes them at least 20 to 40 minutes to comment on an individual student paper, and those 20 to 40 minutes times 20 students per class, times 8 papers, more or less, during the course of a semester add up to an enormous amount of time. With so much time and energy directed to a single activity, it is important for us to understand the nature of the enterprise. For it seems, paradoxically enough, that although commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student writing, it is the least understood. We do not know in any definitive way what constitutes thoughtful commentary or what effect, if any, our comments have on helping our students become more effective writers.

Theoretically, at least, we know that we comment on our students' writing for the same reasons professional editors comment on the work of professional writers or for the same reasons we ask our colleagues to read and respond to our own writing. As writers we need and want thoughtful commentary to show us when we have communicated our ideas and when not, raising questions from a reader's point of view that may not have occurred to us as writers. We want to know if our writing has communicated our intended meaning and, if not, what questions or discrepancies our reader sees that we, as writers, are blind to.

In commenting on our students' writing, however, we have an additional pedagogical purpose. As teachers, we know that most students find it difficult to imagine a reader's response in advance, and to use such responses as a guide in composing. Thus, we comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because, ultimately, we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing.1

Even more specifically, however, we comment on student writing because we believe that it is necessary for us to offer assistance to student writers when they are in the process of composing a text, rather than after the text has been completed. Comments can create the motive for doing something differently in the next draft, thoughful comments can create the motive for doing something differently in the next draft. Without comments from their teachers or from their peers, student writers will revise in a consistently narrow and predictable way. Without comments...
This appropriation of the text by the teacher particularly when teachers identify errors in usage, diction, and style in a first draft and ask stud-
ents to correct these errors when they resubmit their work; much compels the student to appreciate the importance of the errors that are all out of proportion to
how they should view these errors at this point in the process. The comments
may not be so bad if students were only instructed to correct errors, but,
more often than not, students are given contradictory messages; they are
commanded to edit a sentence to avoid an error or to condense a sentence to
achieve greater brevity of style, and then told in the margins that the particu-
lar paragraph needs to be more specific or to be developed more. An example of
this problem can be seen in the following student paragraph:

In commenting on this draft, the teacher has shown the student how to edit
the sentence, but then commands the student to expand the paragraph in
order to make it more interesting to a reader. The interlinear comments and
the marginal comments represent two separate tasks for the student; the inter-
linear comments encourage the student to see the text as a fixed piece, frozen
in time, that just needs some editing. The marginal comments, however, sug-
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meant to edit and develop at the same time, the remarkable contradiction of developing a paragraph after editing the sentences in it reproduces the confusion we encountered in our teachers' commenting styles. These different signals given to students, to edit and develop, to coordinate and elaborate, represent also the failure of teachers' comments to direct genuine revision of a text as a whole.

Moreover, the comments are worded in such a way that it is difficult for students to know what is the most important problem in the text and what problems are of lesser importance. No scale of conciseness is offered to a student with the result that a comment about spelling as a comment about an awkward sentence is given weight equal to a comment about organization or logic. The comment that seemed to represent this problem best was one teacher's comment to his student: "Check your commas and semicolons and think more about what you are thinking about." The language of the comments makes it difficult for a student to sort out and decide what is most important and what is least important.

When the teacher appropriates the text for the student, in this way, students are encouraged to see their writing as a series of parts: words, sentences, paragraphs—and not as a whole discourse. The comments encourage the students to believe that their first drafts are finished drafts, not invention drafts, and that all they need to do is patch and polish their writing. That is, teachers' comments do not provide their students with an inherent reason for revising the structure and meaning of their texts, since the comments suggest to students that the meaning of their texts is already there, finished, produced, and all that is necessary is a box or word or phrase. The processes of revising, editing, and proofreading are collapsed and reduced to a single trivial activity, and the students' misunderstanding of the revision process as a rewriting activity is reinforced by their teachers' comments.

It is possible, and it quite often happens, that students follow every comment and fix their texts appropriately as requested, but their texts are not improved substantially, or even worse, their revised drafts are inferior to their previous drafts. Since the teachers' comments take the students' attention away from their own original purposes, students concentrate more, as I have noted, on what the teachers commanded them to do than on what they are trying to say. Sometimes students do not understand the purpose behind their teachers' comments and take these comments very literally. At other times students understand the comments, but the teacher has misread the text and the comments, unfortunately, are not applicable. For instance, we repeatedly saw comments in which teachers commanded students to reduce and condense what was written, when in fact what the text really needed at this stage was to be expanded in conception and scope.

The process of revising always involves a risk. But, too often revision becomes a balancing act for students in which they make the changes that are requested but do not take the risk of changing anything that was not com-

SOMMER'S / RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

measure on, even if the students sense that other changes are needed. A more effective text does not often evolve from such changes alone, yet the student does not want to take the chance of reducing a finished, albeit inadequate, paragraph to chaos—to fragments—in order to rebuild it, if such changes have not been requested by the teacher

The second finding from our study is that most teachers' comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rather-stamped, from text to text. The comments are not anchored to the particulars of the students' texts but rather are a series of vague directives that are not text-specific. Students are committed to "think more about [their] audience, avoid colloquial language, word the passive, avoid stipulations at the end of sentences or conjuncts at the beginning of sentences, be clear, be specific, be precise, but above all think more about what [they] are thinking about." The comments on the following student paragraph illustrate this problem:

Before being your reader, what you are going to write about...  

'my sixties it was drugs, in the sixties it was rock and roll. Now in the eighties, one of the most controversial subjects is nuclear power. The United States is in great need of its own source of power. Because of environmentalists, coal is not an acceptable source of energy. Solar and wind power have not been specific yet received the technology necessary to use them. It seems that nuclear power is the only feasible means right now for obtaining self-sufficient power. However, too large a percentage of the population are against nuclear power claiming it is unsafe, with as the only effective way to many problems as the United States is having concerning energy. It seems that the public is so quick to "can" a very feasible means of power. Nuclear power should not be given up on, but rather, more nuclear plants should be built.'
One could easily remove all the comments from this paragraph and rubber-stamp them on another student text, and they would make as much or as little sense as the second text as they do here.

We have observed an overwhelming similarity in the generalities and abstract commands given to students. There seems to be among teachers an accepted, albeit unwritten canon for commenting on student tests. This uniform code of commands, requests, and glossings demonstrates that the teacher holds a license for vagueness while the student is commanded to be specific. The students we interviewed admitted to having a great difficulty with these vaguer directives. The students stated that when a teacher writes as if student writing was easily altered in their teacher-training or in writing workshops they had been trained in various prevailng techniques, in constructing assignments, and in evaluating papers for grades but mostly students are told that they have done something wrong and that there is something in their text that needs to be fixed before the text is acceptable. But to tell students that they have done something wrong is not to tell them what to do about it. In order to offer a useful revision strategy to a student, the teacher must anchor that strategy in the specifics of the student's text. For instance, to tell our student, the author of the above paragraph, "to be specific," is to place;...does not show our student what questions the reader has about the meaning of the text, or what breaks in the logic exist, that could be resolved if the writer supplied information; nor is the student shown how to achieve the desired specificity.

Instead of offering strategies, the teachers offer what is interpreted by students as rules for composing. The comments suggest to students that writing is just a matter of following rules. Indeed, the teachers seem to impose a set of abstract rules about written products even when some of them are not appropriate for the specific text the student is creating. For instance, the student author of our sample paragraph presented above is commanded to follow the conventional rules for writing a five-paragraph essay—to begin the introductory paragraph by telling his reader what he is going to say and to end the paragraph with a thesis sentence. Somehow these abstract rules about what five-paragraph essays should look like do not seem applicable to the problem that this student is creating. Nor are the rules specific strategies he could use when revising. There are many alternative ideas ready to be explored in this paragraph, but the rules do not help the student to take stock of his or her ideas and use the opportunity he has during revision, to develop those ideas.

The problem here is a confusion of process and product, what one has to say about the process is different from what one has to say about the product. Teachers who use the method of commenting are formulating their comments as if these drafts were finished drafts and were not going to be revised. Their commentary 'vocabulary has not been adapted to revision and they comment on first drafts as if they were justifying a grade or as if the first draft were the final draft.

Our summary finding, therefore, from this research on styles of commenting is that the news from the classroom is not good. For the most part, teachers do not respond to student writings in the help that revision gives us which will help students to engage with the issues they are writing about or which will help them think about their purposes and goals in writing a specific text. In defense of our teachers, the criticism, that when a teacher writes as if student writing was easily altered in their teacher-training or in writing workshops they had been trained in various prevailing techniques, in constructing assignments, and in evaluating papers for grades but mostly the students have been trained to act upon the same set of assumptions in reading student tests as we follow in reading literary texts. Thus, we read student tests with a knowledge of what the students should have said or about what we should have written, and our biases determine how we will comprehend the text. We read with our preconceptions and preoccupations, expecting to find errors, and the result is that we find errors and not the results that we find errors and not the results that we want to find in this text.

Wh athletic we look instead of reading and responding to the meaning of a text, we correct our students' writing. We need to reverse this approach. Instead of finding errors or showing students how to patch up parts of their texts, we need to sabotage our students' conviction that the drafts they have written are complete and coherent. Our comments need to offer student revision tasks of a different order of complexity and sophistication from the ones that they themselves identify, by forcing students back into the closet to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning.

Not if the comment of a text is lacking in substance or meaning, if the order of the parts must be rearranged significantly in the next draft, if paragraphs must be restructured for logic and clarity, then many sentences are likely to be changed or deleted anyway. Then it would be more fruitful to concentrate on the abstract usage errors or sentence structure that are likely to disappear before the next draft is completed. In fact, to identify such problems in a text at its early first draft stage, when such problems are likely to have an impact, can give a student a disproportionate sense of their importance at this stage in the writing process. In responding to our students' writing, we should be guided by the recognition that if it is not spelling or usage problem that we as writers first worry about when drafting and revising our texts.

We need to develop an appropriate level of response for commenting on a first draft, to differentiate from that from the level suitable to second or third drafts. Our comments need to be suited to the draft we are reading. In a first or
second draft, we need to respond to as any reader would, registering questions, reflecting befuddlement, and noting places where we are puzzled about the meaning of the text. Comments should point to breaks in logic, disruptions in meaning, or missing information. Our goal in commending an early draft should be to engage students with the issues they are considering and help them clarify their purposes and ideas in writing their specific text.

For instance, the major rhetorical problem of the essay writer by the student who wrote the second paragraph (the paragraph on nuclear power) [p. 377] quoted above was that the student had two main arguments running through this text, each of which brought the writer into question. On the one hand, he argued that we must use nuclear power, unpalatable as it is, because we have nothing else to use; though nuclear energy is a problematic source of energy, it is the best of a bad lot. On the other hand, he also argued that nuclear energy is really quite safe and therefore should be our primary resource. Comments on the student's first draft need to point out this break in logic and show the student that if we accept his first argument, then his second argument sounds contradictory. The teacher's comments need to engage this student writer with this basic rhetorical and conceptual problem, in his first draft rather than impose a series of abstract commands and rules upon his text.

Written comments need to be viewed not as an end in themselves—a way for teachers to satisfy themselves that they have done their jobs—but rather as a means for helping students to become more effective writers. As a means for helping students, they have limitations; they are, in fact, disembodied remarks—absent from the students. The key to successful commenting is to have what is said in the comments and what is done in the classroom mutually reinforce and enrich each other. Commenting on papers assists the writing course in achieving its purposes: classroom activities and the comments we write to our students need to be connected. Written comments need to be an extension of the teacher's voice—an extension of the teacher as reader. Exercises in such activities as revising a whole text or individual paragraphs together in class, noting how the sense of the whole dictates the smaller changes, looking at opinions, evaluating actual choices, and then discussing the effect of those changes on revised drafts—such exercises need to be designed to take students through the cycles of revising and to help them overcome their anxiety about revising that anxiety we all feel at reducing what looks like a finished draft into fragments and chaos.

The challenge we face as teachers is to develop comments which will provide an inherent reason for students to revise; it is a sense of revision as discovery, as a repeated process of beginning again, as starting our own, that our students have not learned. We need to show our students how to seek in the possibility of revision, the discoveries of discovery—to show them through our comments why new choices would positively change their texts, and thus to show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing.

NOTES
1 C. S. Keilbach and L. Brunson, "Teacher Commentary on Student Writing: The Use of the Art," English Journal, 10 (Fall 1981), 1-3.
2 For an extended discussion of revision strategies of student writers see Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Academic Writers," College Composition and Communication, 31 (November 1980), 378-386.
5 For an extended discussion of this problem see Joseph Williams, The Phenomenology of Error, College Composition and Communication, 34 (May 1983), 162-168.