

Responding to Student Writing – Principles and Practices Sweetland Writing Center

“Though there is much debate these days about the most effective methods of responding to student writing, there is a clear consensus about the least effective ways to handle student papers. Far too much of what teachers do with student writing is picky, arbitrary, unclear, or generally unhelpful.”

—Edward M. White (2007)

Some general principles

- Assessment of student writing really begins with assignment design, because that is the best time to determine what you want students to achieve with the assignment, and what constitutes a good response.
- Students value thoughtful feedback that engages them in dialogue with a reader making an effort to understand what they have to say.
- Reactive commenting and line editing result in fragmented and confusing feedback.
- Some of the most useful forms of commenting include (i) questions stimulating further thought, (ii) brief summaries of what the reader got out of the paper, and (iii) descriptions of difficulties the reader encountered.
- Offering your more detailed feedback on drafts that students will revise puts it to more efficient and effective use.

Some best practices

- To promote student writing as an act of communication, and not simply an exercise in meeting instructor expectations, read each essay as a *reader* first, and as a grader last.
- After you’ve read an essay once through without marking it, choose the two or three most important elements to highlight in a closing comment.
- Finally, insert selective marginal comments, questions, and praise to reinforce the end comment.
- If you are commenting on style, grammar, and punctuation, mark up a single representative paragraph as a model of patterns encountered throughout the essay.
- Distribute rubrics and other grading criteria in advance of assigning grades to a specific set of essays.

Some time-saving strategies

- Invest time in discussing and responding to student writing early in a course to achieve stronger writing throughout the semester.
- Skim a set of essays to identify common problems, and construct a handout addressing them, rather than commenting on them in each essay.
- As you skim the set, note the range of responses, so that you can focus your assessment of individual essays more precisely.
- Design assignments that teach particular skills, and then limit your comments to the success with which those skills are demonstrated.
- Stage assignments in parts, so that students can receive feedback on specific areas (thesis, introduction, topic sentences, e.g.) that will produce more successful completed essays.
- Assign low-stakes writing that reinforces learning, but can be read quickly, or not at all (and/or, use pairs or peer groups to respond, either in class or over CTools).
- Use peer groups to respond to drafts, even in very large classes, where you can distribute essays over email or CTools, and have students discuss the papers in sections, making note only of compliance.
- Ask students to turn in a self-reflective note on their essay's strengths and weaknesses along with their draft.
- When you have responded to student drafts, final essays need only a summative comment noting the success of the revision and the essay's overall strengths and weaknesses.
- If an essay is very confusing, or if the feedback you want to convey is highly complex, make a general note of the issue, and ask the student to schedule an appointment.
- Introduce students to the resources at the Sweetland Writing Center.

Some resources (and sources we've borrowed from here)

Gottschalk, Katherine, and Keith Hjortshoj. The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

Hedengren, Beth Finch. A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

Simons, Patricia. "Peer Review in a Large Class." Sweetland Writing Center Newsletter (Winter 2008): 8.

White, Edward M. Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher's Guide. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007.