

What Compositionists Talk About When They Talk About Responding to Student Writing Effectively

Some *Ideal* Guidelines for Effective Response to Student Writing:

- ✓ Before response – give a clear message about how the writing will be read.
- ✓ Personalize. Refer to the student by name.
- ✓ Never use red ink.
- ✓ The more you write, the more intimidated students will get. Be frugal and effective with your words.
- ✓ Offer some praise, and then explain to the writer why the writing works:
Good opening paragraph. You got my attention. Good detail. It tells me a lot about the place.
- ✓ Quote them. They love it. Choose a favorite line or section.
- ✓ Quote yourself. Refer to your writing prompt and class discussions about the assignment.
- ✓ Play back your way of understanding the writing:
So you're saying that _____?
- ✓ Make comments that are unique to the text (no “rubber stamps”).
- ✓ Offer strategies – pair criticism with instruction.
- ✓ Encouragement is fine, but constructive criticism is more valuable.
- ✓ Try to offer feedback that acknowledges the power dynamic between teacher and student.
- ✓ Teach one lesson at a time: Create a “scale of concerns.” Begin with rhetorical concerns before looking at sentence-level matters. When you do have to prioritize sentence-level concerns, “one way to define the most important [grammatical] areas is functionality; that is, the ones most important to address are those that most interfere with the reader’s understanding of what the writer wants to say ... regardless of their structural characteristics” (Harris and Silva, 479).
- ✓ Try to create comments that acknowledge context and place the writing within a larger process: “I am sure you will have more time to expand on this in your next draft”
- ✓ Ask questions, especially real questions:
What kind of friend? What did you father say, exactly? In what ways were the arguments developed? Were there statistics?
- ✓ Give students a path to revision: *I think you should do x first, and then focus on y.*
- ✓ Make sure they read all your commentary – or else all this work has been wasted. You may need to withhold grades for a while to achieve this.

With resources and ideas from Lunsford and Straub’s “Twelve Readers Reading,” Nancy Sommers’ “Responding to Student Writing,” Muriel Harris and Tony Silva’s “Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and Options,” and Peter Elbow’s “Ranking, Evaluating, Liking”

Now, Some *Pragmatic* Guidelines for Effective Response to Student Writing:

Efficient teachers can respond to a 5-page paper in 10 minutes, or a 10-page paper in 20 minutes.

To accomplish this, but to still offer more than just ranking, we need to be selective and intentional, formulaic without being robotic.

Try this:

- ✓ Summarize the main points of the essay.
- ✓ Select some details you like and “play them back.”
- ✓ Choose three things that the student needs to focus on for revision and make a series of suggestions.
- ✓ End with a few open-ended questions regarding the content of the paper.
- ✓ Repeat.

Also:

- ✓ Schedule your own time. Response is physically exhausting. Don't try to evaluate more than five papers in a row without some sort of mental and physical break.
- ✓ Don't try to respond to papers as the last thing you do before you sleep.
- ✓ Don't procrastinate. It is much easier to respond to 5 papers a day for a few days, than 25 in a row at 3 in the morning.
- ✓ Know when to stop. If a student paper is really poorly written, or seemingly plagiarized, or just unfinished, it is okay to stop reading and instead make an appointment to meet with the student. You will accomplish a lot more in a 10-minute meeting than you will in the next 20 minutes of wrestling with the paper.
- ✓ If your minimum expectations for the paper are clear, then it is okay to tell a student that they haven't met your minimum, and refuse to respond (or simply assign a failing grade).

And some other things to think about:

- ✓ If you are responding to student writing that will not be revised for a grade, still treat it as a work in progress, but also treat the student as a writer-in-progress: “In the future, in your writing, you may want to focus on _____.”
- ✓ If you are responding to writing on an essay exam or test, still look for ways to praise and to reflect. No matter the assignment, if you show you are a caring reader, students will remember this. They will also grant you greater authority to evaluate.
- ✓ If you use rubrics, consider allowing students some input into how the rubric is created.
- ✓ Consider asking students to write short reflective memos when they hand in their papers, and to staple these to their drafts. The memos should allow students to tell you what they were trying to do, and also what they need help with. These memos make responding **much** easier, because you can refer back to them, and they eliminate a lot of guesswork: “You admit that you wrote this at the last minute, and so it makes sense that this section is underdeveloped...”