

ABOUT RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

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The main point of this memo is to give some simple, concrete, practical guidelines for commenting on student papers. But these will make most sense if I start off with a few larger observations.

It's clear that students learn from doing extensive writing. It's not clear that they learn from our comments on their writing. Extensive research has shown that when students read our comments, they frequently misunderstand what we have written.

We have reason then to be humble in our commenting--and also to try to be as strategic as we can: to try to figure out how to spend our efforts in ways most likely to be of use--and least likely to be a waste of time. To put it differently, we should follow the dictum of our better paid fellow professionals: "At least do no harm."

The fact is, there is no right or best way to respond to student writing. The right or best comment is the one that will help this student on this topic on this draft at this point in the semester--given her character and experience. My best chance of figuring out what is right for this student at any given point depends on knowing about what was going on for her as she was writing. (Did she think she was supposed to sound detached and uninvolved or is this timidity? Was she struggling hard on this paper or getting confused or just being lazy?)

Therefore if I have to write substantive comment on student papers, I try to ensure that I can do so on the basis of some information from them about "where they are at" with this paper. That is, I ask for a short piece of "process writing" or "writer's log" or "cover letter" with any major assignment. I ask them to tell me things like: what they see as their main points; the story of how they went about writing and what it was like for them as they were writing; how did they get their ideas; what were some of the choices they made; which parts went well or badly for them; were there any surprises; and above all what questions they have for readers. If it is a revision it's particularly helpful to ask what changes they made and why. Reading the cover letter usually helps me decide what to say in my comment. Often I can agree with much of what the student has said--sometimes even being more encouraging about the essay than the student was. With process writing, my comment is not the start of a conversation about the writing but the continuation of a conversation that the student started.

Process writing is not so easy for lots of students. But it is helping them get better at learning to see their own thinking and writing more clearly and to be more aware of their writing process. In the beginning I often do practice sessions in class on the day that a paper is due.

Other suggestions

--It helps to be clear about the criteria that we feel are most important for this assignment--rather than trying to think about "quality in general." Grids are one way to articulate criteria clearly. (See the handout on grids.)

--I find commenting much easier if I read the whole piece before making any comments--except sometimes putting straight and wiggly lines where I am pleased or somehow bothered. I save lots of time by reminding myself that students can seldom benefit from criticism of more than two or three problems. The most crucial decision in commenting is which problems to focus on, and I can't make

that decision till I read the whole paper through. Most of my bad commenting comes from jumping in with marginal comments as I am reading: I am more likely to waste my time on something that turns out to be a minor issue; or make some passing remark that the student misunderstands; or say something that's actually wrong ("you obviously don't understand x"--when later on it's clear that he does understand x); or get caught up in a little spasm of unhelpful irritation. If I settle for just making straight and wiggly lines during my first reading, these serve me as reminders when I am trying to decide at the end what are the few main things I need to say. Even when I want to give movies of my mind--to tell the story of my reactions as I was in the process of reading--I can usually do this more clearly and helpfully by waiting till I've read the whole piece.

--I try not to mess up students' papers (especially final drafts) by writing on them. When I put anything on them I write only in light pencil, never ink--usually making just straight and wiggly lines and at most a couple of phrases (e.g., "I stumbled here"). I prefer commenting on a separate sheet not only because I can write more quickly and neatly on my computer, but also because this method makes me comment as a reader about effects rather than as an editor trying to fix the text. Not putting ink on their papers sends an important message about them owning and being in charge of their own text, them being writers--and most of all a message about me not trampling on their texts.

--When I return papers to students with comments, sometimes I take five minutes right then and ask them to write me a short note telling what they heard me saying and how they are reacting to it. This helps me learn when my comments are unclear or when students misinterpret my words or react in ways I don't expect. These are often fascinating short pieces of writing.

--One of the most useful kinds of response is often overlooked because it seems too simple: to describe the paper as well as I can: what are its main points, its subsidiary points, how is it structured?

--When I comment on a draft, I can make my comments positive suggestions for revising rather than negative points in an autopsy. Even when I am commenting on a final version, I can frame our comments in a positive, forward looking way--"Here's what to work on in your next paper"--instead of just saying, "Here's what didn't work."

A final down-to-earth note on epistemology

When students don't read or heed our comments very well, we shouldn't necessarily assume carelessness or ineptness. I think students understand--sometimes consciously, sometimes not--how untrustworthy our comments can be. They may not talk about epistemology, but they see different teachers asking for very different things but calling it "good writing."

Let me point then finally to an important source of trustworthiness or epistemological validity we can call on when we write comments. We can write comments that are at least true, if we tell our reactions and frankly acknowledge their subjectivity--even if they are true only for one reader. (Examples: "I started out sympathetic to what you were saying, but in the third paragraph I began fighting you--getting irritated and starting to disagree with the very point I was ready to accept in the beginning." Or, "For the whole first page I was wondering what your opinion was about this volatile issue, and I couldn't tell. But it wasn't bothering me; it was kind of intriguing. I was hoping you wouldn't plop down with a flat-footed black or white position, and it was a great relief to see you torn or conflicted.")

When we write comments that purport to be true in general or true for other readers, we are very likely to be wrong. (Examples: “You have too many asides and anecdotes.” Or, “You should move this third paragraph to the beginning.”) Even when we write “unclear” we are saying what some other good readers would quarrel with. But when we write about what happened to us in reading, we are paying students the intellectual respect of trying to avoid lies.

There is an enormous pedagogical power that comes from this truth-telling. Students often fight our more impersonal “verdicts”--in part because they sense how questionable they are. Often we win such disputes only by resorting to institutional authority--which further undermines our students’ shaky faith in teacher judgments. When, on the other hand, we simply tell the truth about what happened to us as we were reading, students cannot doubt or quarrel with us: what we say has a higher chance of actually heard.

If we are willing to say, “Unconvincing for me,” instead of “Unconvincing,” students are more likely to pause, listen, and think--instead of just resisting, or else unthinkingly giving in to authority. Besides, magisterial shorthand words like “Awkward” are often extremely unclear. I’ve been trying to learn to translate that word into what is more accurate and honest with phrases like, “I stumbled here,” or “I’m lost,” or “This felt roundabout.” Even though it sometimes costs me a few more words, I try to avoid an impersonal God/truth voice in my comments.

Besides, when we give students our frankly acknowledged subjective reactions, we are treating them as writers: “Here are my reactions: you decide what to do about them.” By treating students as writers, we help them learn to treat us as real readers instead of just sources of impersonal verdicts. And interestingly enough, our subjective reactions are often surprisingly universal.

To sum up. Writing comments is a dubious and difficult enterprise. In my view, these are the things that in the end are least likely to waste our time or cause harm: to get students to want to write; to read what they write with good attention and respect; to show them that we understand what they have written--even the parts where they had trouble getting their meaning across; and respecting them and the dialogue to tell them some of our thoughts on what they are writing about. Surely what writers need most is the experience of being heard and a chance for dialogue.