

Responding to Student Writing

Whether you dread or look forward to digging into that pile of student papers, responding to student writing is a time-consuming task that is an important part of the work we do to help our students to learn and to improve their skills as writers. This edition of the CTL Bulletin offers some tips for responding to student writing to help you to respond more efficiently and effectively and perhaps enjoy this task a little more.

General Tips

- ❖ **Start with a specific assignment** Responding to student writing is easier to do when you start with an assignment that provides clear instructions and expectations for students. Provide specific information about what students are being asked to do and how they will be evaluated. Include information about what you comment on and if they will have the opportunity (or be required) to revise their work.
- ❖ **Don't comment on dead drafts** Research indicates that students do not internalize comments made on final, or dead, drafts and apply them to future writing assignments. Limit dead draft comments to explaining the assignment grade rather than aiming to improve writing skills. These comments are more effective when they are made on drafts that students will be asked to revise or rewrite.
- ❖ **Write legibly** If instructor comments are to have any chance of being read by students, legible handwriting is the first condition for that to happen. If you have horrible handwriting or don't wish to shrink your writing to fit within margins, think about responding electronically. Using electronic files rather than hard copies allows you to type your responses (e.g., with MS-Word's "Insert Comments" function or by composing comments within the document in a different font and color) ensuring that they are legible and allowing you to use as much space as you need. Yet another technique involves creating audio comments for students (see Sipple & Sommers reference and link below).
- ❖ **Don't read too many papers at once** It is better to read a few papers at a time to avoid tiring out and slipping into a less stringent *or* more rigid commenting and rating routine. After a break, it helps going back to the last paper or two you read before in order to make sure you remain consistent.
- ❖ **Have students self-evaluate** The purpose of giving writing assignments is not just to assign grades but to help students become more self-reflective learners. The best way to do this is by challenging them to become critics of their own work. Give them the criteria you use to assess their work and ask them to apply these criteria before they hand in a paper. Faculty have been successful with this approach by giving students scoring sheets or rubrics that clearly express the expectations for a good paper. (Another CTL Bulletin on how to use such tools will follow later this semester!)
- ❖ **Invite students to meet with you** Make a specific invitation to students to come to you for one-on-one conferences to discuss your comments. These can be brief sessions in which you can explain your comments and discuss any questions the students have. This kind of dialogue is particularly helpful for working on higher-order comments such as the ideas and organization.

Tips for Composing Your Comments

- ❖ **Phrase comments as support** Sarcastic or impatient comments rarely lead to improved student learning. Phrase your criticism as questions or suggestions. Indicate major errors of logic, confusion, or organization, but don't comment on every point that strikes you as problematic. Be supportive in your comments to invite dialogue with your students and encourage them to improve as writers.

- ❖ **Avoid vague one-word comments** Given time and space constraints, we are often tempted to react with comments such as “awkward,” “unclear,” and “vague.” Students are often just as confused by such comments as you are by their prose. Be specific about what needs clarification or improvement.
- ❖ **Identify strengths and main weaknesses** Your feedback should help students focus on the most important aspects of their paper, i.e. what it does well and what needs improvement. Those comments should be most prominent and not be buried under lots of detail on grammar, style, and spelling.
- ❖ **Avoid over (and under-) marking** Don't correct every error and respond to every idea. Treat the student paper as a “teachable moment” that allows you to illustrate the two or three major areas where increased student effort would benefit the most. On the other hand, don't score a paper without having justified through your comments why the student deserves a particular grade.
- ❖ **Focus on errors that indicate cognitive confusion** Comments in the margins should focus on sentences in which the writing confuses the reader and leads to ambiguity or complete lack of understanding. Avoid commenting on issues related to personal writing style or surface-level issues that do not impede understanding.
- ❖ **Write an end comment** After making marks within the paper or in the margins, compose a short end comment. Begin this comment with a comment related to your interest in the student's ideas or a positive comment on some aspect of the student's work. Conclude the end comment with specific points for revision (e.g., a “next steps” section) that you expect the student to make.

Dealing With Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling Errors

- ❖ **Don't worry about every error** Many of the errors that students make in their writing are actually mistakes. They are the result of students not carefully revising and proofreading their work. Many of these errors disappear through multiple drafts without the errors indicated on initial drafts.
- ❖ **Don't correct student errors** Correcting errors on student papers can actually do more harm. Students become overwhelmed by the number of corrections. Students can also be distracted by these surface errors and subsequently do not work on higher-order issues such as organization and development of ideas. Correcting or indicating every error also prevents students from gaining the practice to find their own errors.
- ❖ **Resist the urge to identify every error** Research suggests that students can find their own errors and can improve their grammar, punctuation, and spelling skills if they are required to locate and correct these errors on their own. Rather than correcting or identifying each sentence error, use a mark in the margin to indicate to students that the sentence contains problems or mark a few errors and make a note that other similar errors exist throughout the paper.

Want to learn more about responding to student writing?

Workshops: Workshops on responding to student writing or other topics related to writing can be designed for departments or small groups of faculty. Contact the CTL secretary, Diane Gritton, at x4467.

Online Resources: Go to CTL website and click on “Curriculum & Teaching” and then on “Topics on Writing for Instructors” for links to resources on responding to student writing and other topics related to writing.

References & Sources

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