

# Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

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## Responding to Student Writing

### Basic Principles for Responding to Student Writing

1. Students benefit more from responses to “**in-progress**” writing than from responses to “finished” writing.
2. Students benefit more from responses that focus on **form and content** than from responses that focus on mechanics.
3. Instructor comments (ideally) should help students understand their weaknesses *and strengths* as writers.
4. “Marking” grammar, style and other mechanical problems **should be limited** to only a portion of the essay and carried out with the aim of moving students towards independence (i.e. helping students become better editors and proofreaders of their own work).
5. Instructors should be prepared to respond differently to student writing depending on the timing of the intervention. Early responses should be **facilitative**, helping students to discover their own solutions. Later responses might become more **directive** if students are unable to respond effectively to earlier guidance. Final responses can be **evaluative**, but should still focus on what the writer can do to improve the draft, even if there will be no opportunity to revise.

Last week a small (but select!) group of writing instructors met in the English Department Seminar room for the first “Composition Conversation.” The topic was responding to student writing and faculty discussed the type and timing of their responses to student writing and shared ideas about managing workload. The conversation revealed general agreement about the basic underlying principles (see sidebar), but also a diversity of approaches used to achieve those ends.

The first distinction that emerged was between responses that attempted to help students revise and develop drafts and those concerned with assessment. This distinction has a long history in composition pedagogy, with the emphasis both in theory and practice on responding to early drafts to facilitate effective revision. Ideally, teachers read drafts and offer immediate feedback, which writers use to improve the effectiveness of their drafts. The reality, however, is complicated by a range of factors.

First, discussion participants noted the tendency to “slip into marking” grammar errors and other local issues and thereby lose track of the larger, global and rhetorical issues that were probably of greater importance (see sidebar for a discussion of this problem). Second, participants called attention to the problem of class size. While it is possible (and advisable) to comment with some frequency on early and intermediate drafts in an ENGL 095 or ENGL 096 class of fifteen to nineteen students, instructors struggle to continue this practice in ENGL 101 or ENGL 102 with class sizes of 27 or 28. In these larger classes, the instructor’s response to student writing tends to come at the end of the process as a final assessment of the student’s work. As everyone

acknowledged, it is unclear how effective these “final comments” are in helping students become better writers.

Instructors offered several strategies for making final comments effective. One instructor avoids handing back essays at the end of class and instead sets aside class time during which students are required to read through their commented-upon drafts and are encouraged to ask questions about the comments. Another instructor suggested that we could make more explicit our expectations (as teachers) that the comments on one essay be “carried forward” to the next writing assignment. A third instructor shared her strategy of using different color ink for different kinds of comments, a practice that helps students see the different ways in which readers respond to their texts.

Besides making sure that students read and understand our comments, participants also discussed strategies for easing the workload. First, instructors noted the importance of avoiding excessive marking, a time-consuming process that produces very limited results. Second, instructors reiterated the importance of peer review and peer responses as appropriate and effective interventions in the writing process. Third, some instructors shared their use of checklists and rubrics to simplify commenting and evaluation. Finally, some instructors discussed an in-class activity that trained students to become the “graders.” Both the use of rubrics and the use of peer groups to assess student writing are topics of their own and so will be treated later in subsequent articles.

The next Composition Conversation will be on Tuesday, October 20 on the topic of “Conferencing.”