

Comp Quickreads

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Reading Student Writing Rhetorically

The Triage Approach

The following procedure was developed for writing tutors by Dr. John Edlund, now at Cal Poly Pomona.

Skim the draft quickly to find the major problems or areas of possible improvement.

Respond to the draft by identifying problems at the global level, the sentence level, and the grammatical level.

Global/Rhetorical (the paper as a whole)

Considering the audience and format required by the assignment or the purpose for the writing:

- Do the content, tone, organizational scheme, and other characteristics serve the writer's intention?
- What fairly simple changes would immediately improve the paper's readability or effectiveness?

Syntax/Style (Readability or sentence-level negotiation of meaning)

- Is the text "readable" (easy to process)? If not, what is the problem?
- Are any sentences awkward, unclear, or incomprehensible?

Grammatical Systems

- Are there consistent problems with particular grammatical forms?
- Can "consciousness raising" facilitate acquisition of these forms?
- What would you put on a "personal proofreading checklist" for this student?

Instructors in all disciplines recognize the importance of writing to learning. Three-fourths or more of instructors respond that students learn more in courses where writing is required, and nearly all say that good writing skills are important to success in their fields. Why then do nearly two-thirds of instructors report that they do not have time to assign or respond to writing? As any experienced instructor knows, this survey data is not contradictory. When most instructors report not having time to assign writing, they are probably referring to not having time to respond to student writing.

Careful reading of and commenting on student writing can be very time-consuming, but it doesn't have to be. Here are a few simple changes that can dramatically reduce the time required to comment on student writing:

1. Instructors can incorporate more low-stakes writing in their courses, where students gain the benefits that come from increased writing without instructors suffering the burden of increased "grading."
2. Instructors can create more effective writing assignments that help students identify the purpose, audience and genre of the assignment and therefore produce better work.
3. Instructors can develop clear grading criteria that help students understand how their work will be evaluated, and help instructors evaluate that work.
4. Instructors can read more "rhetorically" and less prescriptively.

Arguably the most controversial of the above suggestions is the last, and yet adopting it would probably have the greatest positive impact on instructor workload and student writing. For

many instructors much of the time spent responding to student writing is really time spent editing someone else's text. While instructors should pay some attention to correctness and clarity, usually the student's greater need is rhetorical.

To read rhetorically is to read as the audience, to assume the position of reader for the writer and respond accordingly. The shift is subtle but powerful. The teacher is the authority and pronounces on correctness and incorrectness. The reader is not the authority (the writer is) and can only comment on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the presentation. When the instructor responds rhetorically, the discussion about student writing shifts from rules and prescriptions to purposes and choices.

Emphasizing the rhetoric of student writing focuses attention on the effects (intended and unintended) produced by the writing and the kinds of questions readers ask, which can be divided into the following categories:

Focus: What is the text about? Does the writer tell me early on or do I have to hunt around to find it? Do I always know what the focus of the text is or are there places where I'm unsure? Has the writer neglected to discuss other aspects implied by the main idea(s)?

Development: Is special and detailed knowledge required to understand what the writer is saying? Does the writer (incorrectly) assume readers possess this knowledge? Is the evidence or description adequate to the task? Am I persuaded by the evidence? Is the description detailed enough for the writer's purpose?

Organization: Is the organization of the material effective given the writer's purpose? Does the writer recognize and effectively employ the conventions of this genre?