

Responding to Student Writing

Most instructors agree that university students should write more. In a recent survey conducted by the Writing Center and the Office of Analytical Studies, 85% of faculty respondents said that students learn more in a course which requires writing, and 96% said that good writing skills were important to success in their fields. Unfortunately, 63% of faculty reported that they do not have time to assign or respond to writing.

Writing Problems

The faculty who do assign writing report lots of difficulties. Typical questions and comments at faculty workshops include:

- "They don't seem to know what a sentence is. How can I help them?"
- "Do I have to mark all the errors, or should I just grade on content?"
- "There are so many errors that I can't understand the paper. What can I do?"

Grammar Doesn't Help

Strange as it seems, a grammar course is not what these students need. A substantial body of empirical research has accumulated that shows that teaching grammar does not improve writing ability. George Hillocks Jr., in *Research on Written Composition* a book-length survey of recent empirical studies in composition, concludes: "The study of traditional school grammar (i.e., the definition of parts of speech, the parsing of sentences, etc.) has no effect on raising the quality of student writing. Every other focus of instruction examined in this review is stronger. Taught in certain ways, grammar and mechanics instruction has a deleterious effect on student writing. In some studies a heavy emphasis on mechanics and usage (e.g., marking every error) resulted in significant losses in overall quality." (248)

Writing Practice and Feedback

If teaching grammar won't help, what will? One factor is the amount of reading a student does. Good readers are usually good writers.

However, writing practice is also necessary, and such practice is relatively useless without feedback. It is helpful to think of a writing assignment as initiating a dialogue between student and instructor. The assignment itself is the first conversational turn, the first draft is a response. The instructor's comments are another turn in the conversation, and the revised draft is another response.

Some instructors feel that they must mark every error in order to demonstrate that they have read every word of the paper. Others ignore errors and respond only to content. The right strategy is probably somewhere in-between, although most instructors treat this as an all or nothing decision.

What is Your Role?

The key to deciding what strategy to take is in deciding what role it is appropriate for you to take in the situation. Are you responding as a proofreader or editor, as if the paper is going to be published? Are you taking the role of a reviewer or critic? Or are you a teacher or a coach, trying to diagnose what is going wrong and how it can be improved?

If you are going to mark papers, here are some general principles to keep in mind:

It is generally a waste of time to mark a final draft of any paper, unless you are doing so simply to justify a grade. If you are going to

make a thorough response to a paper, it should be done at a point where there is still an opportunity to put your suggestions for improvement into practice.

If the appropriate role for you to take is as a teacher or coach, **don't mark every error or flaw**. Most students need help setting priorities for improvement. When a student receives a paper covered with red marks, each mark has equal weight and the writer doesn't know what to work on first.

If you don't have time to respond to the whole paper, **mark a representative sample**. Some instructors mark sentence-level problems in one or two paragraphs, then draw a line to indicate that they will respond only to content after that point.

It is often best to respond as a reader, not as a critic. As you read the text, if you lose the train of thought or are confused, simply say so. Even if you can puzzle out what the writer means, the initial confusion indicates that there is a rhetorical or stylistic problem that the writer should deal with.

First impressions are often the best guide to what the major problems are. The problems that jump out from the text are usually the ones to deal with first. The problems that appear after careful analysis are probably more subtle, more difficult to remedy, and of less immediate importance. Going with your first impression also speeds up the process of responding to writing.

However, you should **avoid making marginal comments which contradict other marks**, as when an instructor makes detailed stylistic and grammatical corrections and then writes in the margin "You don't need this paragraph."

If at all possible **arrange to have a brief conference with the student**. In preparing for the conference you can mark the paper for yourself, making notes about the things you want to discuss with the student. For many writing instructors this is the most efficient arrangement, because the paper-marking goes quickly when you don't have to be concerned about thoroughly explaining concepts to the student in written comments, and the conferences can be short because you have already read the papers and made a plan for each one.

Finally, in addition to pointing out the major problems in the paper, **tell the writer what he or she does well**. We all need praise and encouragement, in addition to constructive criticism.