

# Responding to Student Writing

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## Chapter 6



*Constructive criticism is always key. Be objective and motivating. If you believe in me, I'm sure to believe in me too.*

Carisa, senior in Communications

*Giving examples or rewording something I have written instead of just saying it's wrong is the best way. Show me a better way instead of just telling me I'm wrong.*

Ashley, sophomore in Television, Radio, and Film

*At UC Berkeley the instructors gave each student a one to two page evaluation of their essays. It followed a certain format. First, the instructor would repeat what they thought your argument was. Then, they would point out the strengths of the essay. Then, they would give you a point by point synopsis of how the essay could be stronger. This is the method I use now, when I give feedback to students. I found it to be extremely helpful, in terms of both letting the student know that you understood their work, and that you can be trusted to give good feedback.*

Diana, Ph.D. student in Religion

*I think the most essential hurdle to surpass in improving writing is being able put your work out there for criticism and being able to accept that criticism without taking it on a personal level. I always remind myself that all great writings were once pages of incomprehensible and incoherent dribble. If you doubt this, just ask any great writer.*

Marcel, Ph.D. student in the School of Information Studies

We have all been students and teachers in some way, shape, or form and, as the quotations on the facing page illustrate, we know what we like best and least in the form of feedback. When considering how to respond to student work, it may prove useful to reflect on what we have found helpful for our own work and then to make some decisions about how we will respond as teachers to our students. Importantly, we need to be aware that students can learn best when we provide feedback while fostering both a challenging and supportive learning environment in our classrooms. This chapter provides a guide for thinking about how to respond to student work; developing strategies to maximize time and effectiveness of comments; giving constructive feedback; negotiating understandable expectations; and respecting the diversity of learning styles and backgrounds of our students. The end of this chapter also poses some questions to encourage reflective teaching. Embedded within these sections is a continued discussion of how feedback includes more than comments on papers. Feedback can be given through electronic mail, in person, or on a listserv; it can also be facilitated through peer review or encouraged by having students respond to their own work. We can successfully engage students and teachers in their writing and learning by using some of these and other techniques.

## **What and How to Respond to Student Work**

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When responding to student work, it is important to ask yourself questions like: “What is the focus of my response?” or “What am I responding to?” What follows is a discussion of three key areas that often come up with regards to this topic: issues of grammar vs. content, differences in our classrooms, and dealing with difficult issues. While keeping these things in mind, I will discuss some of the ways in which we can actually respond to student work.

### **Grammatical Issues vs. Content**

How much attention do I pay to grammatical issues versus content when reading a paper? The answer to this question, of course, it varies by discipline as well as instructor and by the general view of what constitutes a well-written paper. Although you may feel that grammar may not be something that your discipline or department as a whole focuses on, you should ask yourself how you, as a teacher, want to respond to this topic and do some reflecting of your expectations on this issue. Generally speaking, most instructors find it easiest to focus on content and to highlight grammatical mistakes more loosely; however, different disciplines may require that one pay even greater attention to grammar. The way a paper is written (style, grammar, spelling) is linked to the content and often times (although not always) to the strength of the main argument. Perhaps more importantly, the way a paper is written also relates to the power of com-

munication and how an author effectively conveys his or her perspective to various audiences. Thus, when responding to writing, instructors serve students best when they comment on a blend of all of these aspects of the paper. Certainly how and what you respond to will be up to you and will develop as you continue in your teaching career. Managing your time in giving feedback also comes with practice and will be discussed later in this chapter.

## Differences in our Classrooms

You may have students in your classroom whose native language is not English, who have a learning or other disability, who use slang in their papers, or who graduated a particular high school which emphasized a certain way of writing. None of these situations produce better or worse writers; however, we work in a setting where at times we must conform to certain notions of the *correct* ways to write. As you work to find your style in responding to student writing, consider the needs of individual students and acknowledge and honor differences in a broad sense. You must also think about what you will comment on when framing your responses. Your role as an educator is to strike a balance between getting students to think about academic discourse while also allowing and being open to different styles and modes of expression and communication. In this way, you will be challenging your students and making them aware of certain modes of communication while simultaneously showing your support for the variety of cultures, abilities, voices, and perspectives that our students bring to the table. A great way to do this is to be honest with your students and to have a discussion with them regarding your expectations and/or include a policy in your syllabus.

See Chapter 2 for ways to facilitate discussions of course expectations.

Writing activities may also raise issues specific to certain disabilities. Some students have physical and cognitive difficulties with writing, but writing activities and assignments can be constructed to allow these students to demonstrate their learning. It is important, and required by universities, to include a statement of accommodation in your syllabus:

***Special Needs:*** Students who have any condition, either permanent or temporary, which may affect their ability to perform in this class, are strongly encouraged to contact the instructor at the beginning of the semester. Adaptations of teaching methods, exams, and class materials may be made as needed to provide for equitable participation.

Most importantly, you must know your students. This sounds like a simple task, but I have found that sometimes students who have special needs and/or have a fear of writing will not approach you until later in the semester as they do not want to be seen as receiving special treatment in the course or be labeled as different. It is of the utmost importance to be approachable and flexible so that these students will feel comfortable learning in a safe and inclusive environment that values and honors differences. Refer students to the Writing Center or the Office of Disability Services for further assistance.

See Appendix for more information on campus resources.

## Dealing with Difficult Issues

When giving assignments, we sometimes don't think about the impact they may have on our students. For example, in a women's studies, sociology, or English courses or in courses that look at statistics, laws, or policy related issues, we might ask students to comment on an article or novel that discusses rape. This topic as well as other topics such as abortion, hate crimes, eating disorders, how power works, and others may cause students to react in certain ways. Some may have had a friend or family member with a similar experience or they may have had experience with the topic themselves. You may get a variety of responses such as: a student may not be able to do the paper because of the discomfort they feel, a student may write a paper telling you of their experience, a student may write an incredible paper using theories you've discussed in class to analyze the topic, etc. What is important is that, as responsible educators, we have an obligation to anticipate and respond to these issues as much as possible.

See Appendix for Counseling Center referral information.

I am not arguing that you change the way you give assignments, but what is important is to be prepared for some of the responses that you might get and to be reflective about your responses since they have an impact on students' lives. Usually, what works well is to respond to these types of issues in person so that you may communicate more effectively with your student. Depending on the issue at hand, you may want to consult with the chairperson of your department or faculty teaching mentor so that they may guide you on how to most responsibly respond. Lastly, as most of us are not trained professionals in this area, we should not attempt to provide professional assistance. It is sometimes appropriate to suggest that your student schedule an appointment with a counselor or psychologist. In these instances, it is important that the utmost confidentiality be used, however, if you feel that the life of your student or another person is at risk, you should contact the appropriate persons immediately.

## How Should I Actually Respond?

*I don't like getting e-mails. In my class last semester my professor did everything on e-mail. I didn't like that because you can never really understand what EXACTLY they are talking about, nor can you see it.*

—Cristie, sophomore in Management

*I prefer longer responses which I seldom receive. A lot of times TAs are in a hurry to get papers back to students and they don't spend enough time on feedback. When you receive a longer response, it makes you feel like the TAs spent time reading your paper and this feedback can be very beneficial to you as a writer.*

—Sarah, sophomore, Public Relations

As these quotations highlight, there is no right or wrong way to respond to students. So how do we think about how to respond to their work? Generally speaking, a blend of both positive and constructive feedback works best, while giving specific attention to where exactly students can improve. Consider the following questions before responding to students. I have also highlighted some of the pros and cons with regards for each of these response strategies.

### ***Should I write my comments on their papers or attach a separate sheet of typed feedback?***

Writing comments on the paper may prove faster in some instances and more personal to some students, but it also may not give some students the length of feedback that they need. Typed comments may be a faster and better way for some to give feedback (depending on how fast you type and how legible your handwriting is!) and provide the student with a good overview of the strengths and weaknesses of their work, but it may seem too formal for some students and teachers. A combination of both of the above is sometimes preferred. How you develop your own personal style will, of course, change over time and with your teaching experiences. Another way to think about how you actually respond is to ask yourself: *How do you want your students to use these responses? Do you want them to edit what you have suggested and resubmit it? Do you want them to reflect on how their work fits in with the larger literature? Is your goal to get them to think of their work in new ways?*

### ***Should I send feedback via e-mail or meet with my students?***

In the new age of information technology, it is important to use technology to our benefit while also recognizing that there are certain limitations to its use. As the student of

the quote at the beginning of this section asserts, there is something to be said for meeting with a student as well as providing comments over email. A combination of both is preferable when providing students with feedback.

### ***Should I use red ink, another color, or pencil?***

Sounds like a silly question, right? Some are of the opinion that it does not really matter, but others prefer to avoid the authoritative connotations of red ink. Others like grading in red ink as it gives them the air of authority that they feel they need. Still others comment on issues of grammar in pencil and comment on issues of content with pen. One teacher, in an effort to save time and encourage student input, puts a red question mark next to a comment that needs further elaboration. The students are then told that if they have such a mark in their essays that they may come visit him during office hours to discuss what it means. After such a discussion, the student may or may not receive full credit for their answer. Where you stand on this will undoubtedly be influenced by your experiences as a student and teacher. What I encourage you to do is to think critically about why you choose the pen you choose and what difference (if any) that makes to you and your students. If you are facilitating a peer review where students provide each other with feedback, you might want to have a class discussion devoted to giving and receiving peer feedback.

### ***Should I use a student's name when providing comments?***

Some feel that this helps to personalize the process of providing feedback; others prefer to show that they are grading papers anonymously and not paying particular attention to who wrote the paper. Both models can work, but I encourage you to reflect on this as you find your own teaching style. Also, consider how you might respond to students via a class listserv and how to encourage them to respond to each other and let them have a say in establishing online feedback guidelines.

## **Strategies to Maximize Time and Effectiveness of Comments**

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Teachers use a variety of feedback models as a way to maximize time and effectiveness of comments. This section will outline and provide brief examples of five different types of feedback: using a grade rubric, peer review, mid-semester conferences with the instructor, a poster conference in class, and group feedback. Each of these exercises is a way to provide feedback to your students in a constructive way and some of them are an excellent way of trying to make your classroom a collaborative space. In each of these examples you can also ask your students: What do you want feedback on?



## Teaching Ideas: Example Comments Using a Grading Rubric

### Assignment Two Evaluation Form

**Name:** *Brian*

| Criteria   | Possible Points | Your Score |
|--|-----------------|------------|
| <p>Introduction: Is the introduction clear and does it state how the paper will be organized?</p> <p>Comments: <i>Nice organization. I like how you set up the reading telling him/her what you will do in your paper and how you will link it to themes of the course.</i></p>  |                 |            |
| <p>Summary of articles used for assignment: Are the four articles summarized effectively?</p> <p>Comments: <i>Summary of Smith article needs reworking. What are her major points and what is she trying to argue? How does that link up with other texts in the course?</i><br/> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>See me if you need help with this.</i><input type="checkbox"/></p> |                 |            |
| <p>Links to other course texts: Does the student use the four articles to analyze other course texts?</p> <p>Comments: <i>Again, Smith article needs further clarification. How is her analysis of power relevant here? How does she draw on other authors' perspectives of power?</i></p>   |                 |            |
| <p>Organization, Grammar, Spelling, and use of Language: Is the paper well organized and is the student conscious of grammar, spelling, and language?</p> <p>Comments: <i>Excellent! A great improvement from assignment 1.</i></p>  |                 |            |
| <p>Conclusion: Is the conclusion clear and does it revisit and wrap up some of the major themes of the paper?</p> <p>Comments: <i>Well thought out conclusion and formulated analysis.</i></p>   |                 |            |
| <p><b>Total:</b></p>   |                 |            |
| <p>Overall Comments:</p> <p><i>Brian <input type="checkbox"/> your paper is well-organized and written and makes some nice connections to the major themes we've been talking about in class. You need to fine tune where I've noted in your paper, particularly in the summary of your fourth article and how it links up with the course. Overall, great job!</i></p>          |                 |            |

## Grading Rubric with Comments

Grade rubrics are often used by professors who work with one or more teaching assistants in an effort to maintain consistency in grading and evaluating student work. They are also a useful way to show students the strengths and weaknesses of their work. What exactly is a grading rubric? The best way to understand a grade rubric is to see an example. The example on the facing page provides an example of how to make comments using a grading rubric. It could be used to evaluate a student's paper and be attached to the last page of the individual's paper. Overall, comments on a grading rubric usually take the following forms:

See Chapter 7 discussion on how to use a rubric to assign or tally grades.

- Questions are particularly useful if what you are grading is a part of a longer project
- General comments on style, technique, and argument.
- Open ended responses.

## Peer Review

Another example of how to maximize time and the effectiveness of your comments while also allowing for greater collaboration in the learning process is to do a peer review. The peer review process is one that engages students as both active teachers and learners of their work and holds them accountable for their own learning experiences.

### Peer Review Activity

General Instructions:

- Instruct students to bring 3 copies of their drafts
- Break them into groups of 3.

Step 1: Prediction Activity

Read **ONLY** the first paragraph of the draft. Based only on what you read, predict what the writer will discuss in her draft. Possible questions to consider:

- *What is the focus of this paper?*
- *What main and mini (primary and secondary) claims will she discuss?*
- *Who is her audience and how does she address it?*
- *What writing strategies does/might she make?*

Respond to these questions (or others) in a paragraph or two. Spend a few minutes discussing predictions in groups and give the predictions to the writer.



## Peer Review Activity (Cont'd)

### Step 2: Backwards Outlining

Read through the rest of the draft. Construct an outline by identifying the main points made in the essay draft and arranging them in an outline format. Briefly respond to the following questions at the end of the outline and give to writer.

- Consider how the outline is organized. Does it make sense? What suggestions do you have for revising?
- Consider the outline's coverage. Does the writer include enough information? Too much? What would you add or remove to make this paper more effective? Why?

(Source: Tracy Hamler Carrick, CCR PhD student, Syracuse University)

## Other Forms of Feedback

Other examples of providing feedback include having students participate in mid-semester conferences with the instructor and a poster conference that occurs within the classroom. When choosing a response method, be sure to consider where students are in the writing process.

**Mid-semester conferences** are an opportunity for each student to check-in with the instructor so that they may receive feedback in a verbal and one-on-one format. Students with different learning styles and preferences can benefit from this type of feedback in addition to the written feedback that they get on their papers and exams. It is often helpful to have students submit work to be reviewed before the conference.

**Poster conferences** within the classroom are another way in which students can benefit from verbal feedback from both the instructor and their peers. Creating a poster and brief presentation on their research for the course, gives students the opportunity to ask for feedback on their work in a constructive way. Also, it forces students to define and articulate the main points, structure, resources, etc. of their projects, even if the work is still in progress.

**Group feedback**—addressing the class as a whole when you return papers either in the classroom or via a listserv—is one quick way of providing feedback. In this way, you can make suggestions for improvement for the next assignment by highlighting some of the things that students did well and recommending how they

can improve. By seeing what their peers are doing, students can also learn from each other in this way and may view their learning more collaboratively. This feedback method is efficient for providing feedback on common concerns, but it is no substitute for individual guidance.

**Online feedback** in the form of email, web boards, or other web programs are another opportunity for giving student written feedback.

It is important to mention here that you will be balancing your own role as both a student and a teacher and through trial and error you will find the most effective way to provide students with valuable feedback in a timely fashion. Part of this is learning to set boundaries for your students. For example, I do not respond to student requests for feedback on a draft before a paper is due unless they get it to me at least twenty-four hours ahead of time. I tell my students this ahead of time so that they know what and when I will respond. Another way might be to stop reading emails at five o'clock or a time that you see suitable so that you may also complete your own work. This helps both you and your students become better managers of time while still giving and receiving constructive feedback. This leads us into our next section of this chapter, which explores how to give and encourage others to give (in the case of a peer review) useful constructive feedback.

## **Giving Useful Constructive Feedback**

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How do you know when something is both useful and constructive? Students are oftentimes preoccupied with the grade they receive and not the written feedback as a whole. Because of this, some instructors actually choose not to give an official grade on papers until the final grade for the course, which the university requires them to submit. This method may or may not work well depending on what other types of feedback you arrange to do in your classroom. Overall, I recommend that a good way of knowing whether you've given students useful constructive feedback is to ask them.

One way in which you can see if you are providing your students with useful constructive feedback is to take about fifteen minutes of class time mid-semester and ask them to do a free write about what they like about the feedback they have gotten so far in the class and what they would like to see more of in their experience. You will have to make clear that you are not soliciting whether or not they are happy with their grade thus far, rather you are asking them how you can help them to better succeed in your course. If you choose, you can have them do this in an anonymous way so that they will feel more free to write what they really want to say regarding this topic. Another strategy is to informally ask students when they come to office hours how they have felt

about the feedback they have received. In this way, you can begin to engage students in this discussion and also get them to express their needs.

## Developing Understandable Expectations and Delivery for Feedback

A key to knowing how to give useful and constructive feedback is to discuss expectations at the beginning of the semester. One thing that I do with my students on the first day of class is to give them a handout, which clearly states my office hours, how to

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#### **My Expectations of You:**

- Be on time.
- Come prepared.
- Think critically/Be respectful.
- If you need assistance, please ask.
- Do your best.

#### **Your Expectations of Me:**

- 
- 
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#### **Your Expectations of Your Colleagues:**

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contact me, and perhaps most importantly, my expectations of them. I also have a space for them to tell me their expectations of me, which they can write on the handout and then I write on the board. Finally, I have them do expectations of each other as a class and write those on the board as well. This is particularly useful if the syllabus is designed and distributed by another instructor. This method has worked incredibly well and can be revisited mid-semester if necessary. Importantly, this tool is a way of setting the stage for discussions that will be challenging and analytic in nature without targeting specific people for their values and perspectives. It sets the tone that everyone in the room brings a valuable contribution to the class and

that we need to both actively listen and speak in order to fully participate in the learning process. Above is an example of the handout that I give.

Certainly, this style might not work for everyone; however, it may be a useful place to start. It might also be possible for students to write about the expectations that they have of themselves for the course. I have found that students like the idea that they have some ownership of the classroom space and that their opinion was solicited and valued.

See Chapter 7 for more in-depth discussion of evaluating writing.

Since a major goal of this chapter is to encourage interdisciplinary conversations among teachers about how to respond to student writing, a challenge becomes how to model how to do this while speaking to such a diverse audience. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, we have all played the role of students and teachers at one time (and most of us are doing both simultaneously!) and so I will conclude this chapter with a list of questions for us to think about as we respond to or facilitate peer responses to student writing. There is, of course, no perfect way to respond and much of what works we learn through trial and error, but here are some questions to keep in mind as you develop your own teaching style:

- What do I want my students to take with them when they leave my class?
- When responding to student writing or facilitating responses to student writing, what strategies can I use that will best foster a challenging and supportive learning environment?
- How can I encourage my students to be both active teachers and learners in the writing process?
- What are the boundaries for my classroom? Am I open to having students write about and learn from experiences in the field, personal experiences, or other experiences that may come up?
- What are the different methods of feedback that I can give and facilitate my students to give to each other with regards to writing?
- Do I share my own research with my students as a way of describing how receiving feedback on my own writing has shaped my current perspective on an issue?

Responding to student writing is a major responsibility of a teacher. By being reflective about how we do this or encourage our students to do this enriches the learning experiences for students and teachers alike.