Responding to Student Writing

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5 Quick Fixes to Improve Student Learning and Ease Teacher Frustration

1. Never line-edit an entire student text. Do the first 20%, then stop. After that, put small checks in the margin to the right of each line to indicate how many errors (if any) are in that line. This speeds your reading and puts the responsibility for editing where it belongs: with the student. Research suggests that with the checks, students can find and correct more than half of their own editing errors (and if they read the text aloud to themselves, they can usually do even better). If they have trouble finding the reason for some checks, they should seek help from you, a friend, or the University Writing Center.

> → Use the check system to signal only *copy-editing* problems (grammar, syntax, usage). You should engage with the student's ideas, use of evidence, organization, style, etc. throughout the draft.

2. Don't line-edit at all on early drafts if you expect students to revise significantly. A focus on sentence-level editing too early in the writing process can sabotage substantial revision. After all, why should you and the student work toward polishing the prose of a paragraph that might get cut out entirely because it doesn't fit well with the purpose or structure of the paper? Line editing makes more sense once the purpose, content, and organization are set. Be sure to announce *why* you're not copy-editing anything as ideas and structure are in flux, and remind students that they remain accountable for a cleanly edited *final* draft.

3. Try comments that emphasize a readership. Rather than jotting brief judgments or commandments or praise in the margins, try comments that get students thinking about you and other audiences *as real readers*. Get them involved in a *conversation* about their ideas-in-process. Consider the following alternatives to typical marginal comments:

> "awkward" → "I get confused here because…" or "The wordiness and repetition here will frustrate readers" or "Most readers will find this jump too jarring—you need to rearrange or insert a transition."

> "good" → "I like how you've narrowed your thesis compared to the earlier draft. Now the claim is actually debatable—academic readers can get their teeth into it."

> "no" or "weak" → "Most anthropologists will find the evidence in supporting this claim far too meager. Do you have anything else to back it up? If not, you'll need to abandon or rethink the point".

> "Be specific!" → "Most sociologists will wince at your vagueness here—you seem to be hiding behind generalities or playing it too safe. If you sharpen your claim, they'll take you more seriously."

4. Distribute evaluation/grading criteria *with your assignment.* Students should know in advance how you will assess their writing.

5. Require students to do self-assessments. Cover letters, checklists or process notes can prompt students to evaluate their own work, and most (but not all) will do this surprisingly well, which meets a key learning goal: getting students to be good critics of their own work. Cover letters can also speed along your grading.

More Tips

- Comments should **get students involved in a conversation about their writing**, not just deliver good news/bad news or justify grades. Before jumping to correct or grade, engage with a student's ideas: remark on the writing process (earlier drafts? minimal or substantial revision?); muse on alternatives; share personal connections; refer to class readings, lectures and discussions; suggest future lines of inquiry; etc.

- If you don't affirm what is working well in a paper, it could disappear from future drafts or assignments. Find things to praise. Affirm what is going right, what seems promising.

- **In your response to a draft, rank your top priorities for revision.** Even if you list a whole raft of problems, select two or three things for the student to focus on when revising. ("The most promising thing I see here is... The two most important things to address as you revise are... As for style and editing, the most persistent pattern of error I see is... and to fix that you should...")

- The comment above is an example of *formative* advice: it sets an agenda for revision while students still have time to do something about it. *Evaluative* or *summative* advice delivers judgments. These two kinds of feedback are often entwined, but **our responses to drafts should tip toward formative advice while our responses to the final version should tip toward summative feedback.**

- If you give lots of formative comments on a draft, you earn the right to give scant evaluative feedback on the final draft (a sentence or two, checks in a grid).

- Call students on when they are playing it too safe, restating the obvious, listing points rather than building an argument, retreating to the 5 paragraph theme, etc. For example, jot "You seem to be playing it safe here. The best intellectual work involves risk" or "Try something harder."

- Remind students that their attention (or lack of attention) to style and proofreading is not just about enforcing rules; instead, it has real consequences. Alert them to the fact that even a few surface errors invite readers to question the intelligence and commitment of the writer; editing errors also spark most readers to look harder for *other* problems in the paper. Do they really want to encourage a skeptical frame of mind in their readers (and graders)?

- Make explicit your "not even in the ballpark" standards – and stick to them! For example, if you require a 3 paragraph cover letter and students write two sentences, they're not even in the ballpark: simply hand back the folder ungraded. If your grading rubric sets a minimal standard for alignment with the assignment, or a required number of sources, or a clear limit on editing problems, don't compromise with a C- or D if a paper falls below those standards: matter-of-factly return the paper and invite the student to revise for a passing grade.

- Responding to student writing need not always be done in writing. Fifteen-minute individual conferences, for example, can stand in for a page of written comments. And there is no need to duplicate your oral remarks with written comments—instead make the student responsible for taking notes during the conference.

- **When submission time comes, require students to arrange their research notes, drafts, peer review sheets, and cover letter all in one folder, in chronological order.** This gives you a window on the development of the project across time, guards against plagiarism, and saves you grading time by making all relevant documents quickly accessible.

- Recommend (but don't require) a visit to the University Writing Center at any stage during the writing process.