

Responding to student writers: Best practices

Preparing to respond

- **Be positive.** The goal of commenting is to offer encouragement and honest assessment. Look for strengths and help students build on those strengths.
- **Start a conversation.** Think of responding as teaching, not correcting — especially in early drafts. Responding is most fruitful for students when you engage them in a dialogue.
- **Share models.** Share with students a rough draft and the final draft of the same paper. Let them see that true revising is often a renovation project rather than just patchwork and fixes.
- **Discuss the purpose of comments.** Spend class time talking with students about comments. Introduce them to the types of comments you give, and explain any symbols or shorthand you use.

Responding to rough drafts

- **Go global.** Resist asking students to patch and edit before they develop their ideas. Asking students to think about grammar, punctuation, and word choice in sentences that may not make it to the next draft could be a waste of your time and theirs.
- **Know when to go local.** In a rough draft, you might identify patterns of sentence-level, or local, errors instead of marking individual errors. Identifying patterns — representative strengths and limitations — helps students gain control over their writing and saves you time.
- **Continue the lesson.** Responding is more effective when the language of comments grows from discussions in the classroom. Students shouldn't be encountering terms or ideas for the first time in the margins of their papers.
- **Teach one lesson at a time.** Reading an entire draft, quickly, before commenting may actually save time. Ask: What single lesson (or two) do I want to teach here? And how will my comments teach this lesson? Avoid overcommenting: An individual writer can learn only a finite set of lessons when revising a single paper.

Encouraging revision

- **Tread purposefully and lightly.** Avoid leaving too heavy a footprint in the margins of students' papers. Use your comments to show students how to start revising without suggesting specific language for the revision.
- **Foster reflection.** Ask students to submit a cover letter or a Dear Reader letter along with a rough draft. Such a letter reminds students that they are writing for a reader, allows them to begin a dialogue about their work, and provides an opportunity for them to articulate any concerns about their draft.
- **Require a revision plan.** When you hand back drafts with your comments, assign students to review the comments, perhaps during the final fifteen minutes of a class, and to write a one-page revision plan in which they explain what they learned from the comments and how they plan to use the comments as they revise.

Responding to final drafts

- **Refresh your memory.** Before responding to final drafts, reread the assignment and the expectations you may have listed for students. Doing so keeps the commentary tied to the assignment.
- **Put final comments in context.** On a final draft, evaluate the strengths and limitations in the context of the assignment's goals. Responding is far easier when the goals of an assignment have shaped the language and lessons that prepared students for the assignment.
- **Provide a bridge.** Writers develop their skills over time. It's too much to expect that first-year writing teachers can cover every lesson students need in order to write successfully across the curriculum. Make sure your comments on final drafts do double duty. Final comments can evaluate success in relation to the specific assignment, but they should also provide a bridge — a transportable lesson — to the next assignment or to assignments in other courses.