*Responding to Student Writers*

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*Notes*

At its most fundamental, responding to student writing helps students become critical readers of their own work. The focus in this book is on written responses.

I like the quote in the introduction: “The writing teacher’s ministry is not just to the words, but to the person who wrote the words.”

The author reminds me that the work of commenting on students’ writing needs to be humane, thoughtful, and even inspiring---it’s serious business.

Why do students use some comments and ignore others? The author is honest---she doesn’t know.

For first-year students, teacher commentary is their most personal, most direct interaction with the college writing culture.

I liked this: “We comment on student writing not only to demonstrate the presence of a reader but also to help our students become that questioning reader themselves, because ultimately we believe that becoming such a reader will help them read and respond to their own thoughts and words and develop control over their writing.”

The comments are also a motivation for students to revise.

So far, in this book, I’m realizing that my approach to commenting needs improvement; however, technology is helpful---I’m thinking how I use Canvas and how students can get comments and responses more quickly and also we can enter a conversation about their work. I want to take up my colleague Jerri Harwell’s technique of using Canvas to leave oral comments. In a presentation we gave at SWADE (2015) she presented on this very tool and demonstrated how effective it can be. In fact, the author advises varying the style of comments: recorded oral comments, face-to-face, even podcasts.

Comments should aim at teaching one lesson at a time. I think this is very difficult, especially as I consider 0900 students; however, I realize why the author stresses this point.

The author’s research indicated the following: When students were asked to describe their best writing experiences two overriding characteristics emerged:

1. The opportunity to write about something that mattered to the student
2. The opportunity to engage with an instructor through written comments

I thought those answers were very informative and it has made me rethink my assignments to allow students to have even more choice over their topic.

This made me think: “Too many teachers’ comments are written to the paper, not to the student.” We need to switch from monologue to dialogue.

Keep this in mind: all students really want to know is “How do I write a good college paper?” Comments should be directed to helping them achieve this goal. Also, realize that there is no generic answer to this question and comments should be tailored to each student’s specific needs.

Something else to keep in mind: What will our students learn from our comments?

Overcommenting does more harm than good.

Positive comments must be included---this is so true. An encouraging tone is essential.

Commenting on different drafts: rough drafts need revision-type comments; final drafts should have phrases like, “on your next paper…”

Here’s an interesting idea: ask students to read through comments and write a one page revision plan in which they explain what they learned from these comments, as well as how they plan to use the comments when revising.

Here’s another interesting idea, that the author feels is the most effective method for engaging students in a dialogue about their writing: The Dear Reader Letter

1. What are the strengths of your rough draft? What are the problems of the draft?
2. What were the challenges you encountered writing your draft?
3. What is your thesis?
4. If you had two more days to write this draft, where would you focus your attention?
5. What questions are you asking about your draft that you want to make sure your readers answer?

This Dear Reader Letter would work well as a journal entry.

In responding to the Letter keep the following in mind:

1. Use student’s name
2. Highlight paper’s strength
3. Highlight weaknesses
4. Link marginal comments with end comment
5. Provide guidance across drafts, e.g., For your next paper focus on…
6. Reinforce the reader-writer relationship, e.g., I look forward to your next draft

Students want more detailed feedback. Marginal comments are evidence that I’m actually reading the essay. But be careful of the “brutality of good intentions.”

This is difficult because of time constraints but I should take the advice to read the paper once through quickly. This has many obvious benefits including a better idea of the overall lesson(s) I want to convey in the comments.

Okay, here is where I’m at fault, writing a comment like: be more specific. Really, I should be more specific! Ask questions to bring out the revision I’m looking for.

End comments send this message: I’ve read your draft and this is how it looks from my perspective. Marginal comments are usually short had whereas end comments are often written as letters. Marginal comments ask students to pay attention to local problems while end comments focus on global issues---but the message should be consistent.

The thorny issue of grammar and punctuation: can’t ignore it but correcting every mistake also sends a bad message. The author’s advice is to focus on patterns, e.g., verb tense problems, or subject noun agreement, or lack of punctuation. What I would say, however, is that many of my students have so many grammar and punctuation problems that it’s hard to know which ones to focus on. However, student should be their own editors and learn to use the writing center.

Great suggestion: students keep an editing log. Then they can recognize patterns themselves.

Here are the basic practices to keep in mind:

1. Be positive
2. Start a conversation
3. Share models
4. Discuss the purpose of comments
5. Go global (in a rough draft don’t worry about specific sentence-level grammar as this sentence may not even make it to the next draft, i.e., don’t waste time)
6. Know when to go local (identify patterns)
7. Continue the lesson
8. Teach one lesson at a time
9. Tread purposefully and lightly (in the margins suggest, don’t rewrite)
10. Foster reflection (Dear Reader exercise)
11. Revision plan (this could be a journal assignment too)
12. Refresh your memory (reread assignment rubric---also I like to have previous draft open on Canvas)
13. Put final comments in context
14. Provide a bridge (a transportable lesson for the next assignment)