Responding to Student Writing

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Goal(s) of Commenting on Student Writing

- Tell students where they are
- Help students improve their writing
  - On the paper in question
  - Over the course of the semester
  - In life
Factors That Influence Comments

- Are they demonstrating writing skills, knowledge or understanding of material, or both?
- Will the students be able to revise the essay?
- Is this an early, middle, or capstone assignment?
- Is it an in-class or take-home essay?
- How long is the essay?

Focused Responses

• Helpful when multiple writing assignments given during a semester

• Helpful for longer papers or papers with multiple weaknesses

• Helpful if students will be submitting multiple drafts
Focus Responses

• You don’t have to address everything!
• Put down your pen
  - Sometimes you have to let yourself read and enjoy it!
  - Fight the urge to correct every mistake—
    • Inhibits learning
    • Takes more time
• Students are overwhelmed or discouraged by too many comments
Focus on Learning Outcomes

• Include purpose (learning outcomes) on assignment

• Focus grading on stated purpose

• For example
  – Research
    • Comment on integration of sources, validity of sources, etc.
  – Writing in the style of discipline
    • Comment on structure, language, organization, etc.
Focused Responses

• Focus on “higher order” problems first
  – Organization
  – Thesis statement
  – Meeting basic requirements of assignment

• Address other concerns in future drafts
  – Support and content
  – Save grammar for final draft if possible
Content Focus

• For use with graded informal writing
  - In-class response papers
  - Short essays on exams
• Response focus will be on what students must show they know
• Simply check off required elements
  - No need to mark grammar, etc. if it doesn’t contribute to the grade
  - Students confused/frustrated by things marked that don’t contribute to grade
The Question of Revision

**Revised**
- Focus on major concerns
  - Did they do the assignment properly?
  - Thesis and organization
  - Support
- Try to choose no more than 3 types of problems
- For minor concerns, point out a few examples, but leave the rest for students to find

**Not revised**
- What is the purpose of your comments?
- Limit comments—point out one or two examples of errors
- Explain that you expect them to apply comments to future papers
Early/Mid-Semester Assignment

• Scaffolding
  – First/Early assignments have more comments than later assignments
  – Errors should decrease as semester progresses
  – You should mark fewer of them to encourage independence in revision

• Inform students of expectation that comments be applied to future assignments
End-of-Semester Assignment

• Not intended for revision
• Crunch time for you
• No need for in-text comments: Put down the pen!
• Unlikely students will read them anyway.
• This is a good place to use the rubric alone.
Explaining Your System

• Your expectations of them
• Where students can expect to find certain types of comments
• Function of comments
• Your shorthand (give them a reference guide)
• Pet peeves
• Walk them through using a rubric.

Summarizing Comments

• “Spark Notes” for embedded comments
• In comments section of rubric or on the last page of the paper
• Gives students a clear, concise assessment of the assignment
  – Keeps students from being overwhelmed
  – Encourages students to think for themselves
• Good place for praise
Next Steps

• Numbered or bulleted
• Sets up expectations of students for the future
• Lays out expectations in a clear and understandable way
• Keeps things simple
• Limit Next Steps to 3 or 4:
  – Gives students focus and reassurance
  – Gives them something manageable to work with
Importance of Praise

• Writing scares students: 4 out of 5 students are not “proficient” writers—and most know it.
• Feedback has a profound and lasting effect on students.
• It is not about reassuring or “false praise.”
• It is important always to find something good about an essay.

Grammar!

• Good grammar ≠ good writing
• Focus grammar comments on one or two patterns of error
• Comment on “higher order” grammar issues first
  – Problems that inhibit reader understanding
  – Fragments, subject-verb agreement, word use
• No need to point out every spelling error
  – Focus on discipline-related words first
  – Then a few others
  – Remind them to use spell check
Grammar!

• If you don’t know specific grammar terminology, write the correct version over a couple of errors and refer students to grammar websites for help
  – OWL at Purdue (owl.english.purdue.edu)
  – Blue Book of Grammar (grammarbook.com)
  – Grammar Girl (grammar.quickanddirtytips.com)
  – Grammar Bytes (chompchomp.com)
Myths about Commenting

• Red pens
  – Are not scary
  – Lots of ink in any color is scary

• Praise sandwich
  – Students will recognize it
  – Once they see the pattern, they doubt your sincerity