Responding to Student Writing

The following tips build on several assumptions: that more effective and reflective learning is our foremost aim, not just cleaner texts (we want better writers, not just better writing); that the teaching of writing is a complex process that happens in a relationship; and that students must assume their responsibilities in that relationship. Teacher response should not only, or even mainly, justify a grade; it should not only, or even mainly, give students a step-by-step prescription for how to fix a draft. It should instead get students involved in a conversation about their ideas and writing, offer them strategies for how carry out their own projects within appropriate disciplinary frameworks, and help them develop an agenda for revision.

1. Put more time and energy into formative comments on drafts than into summative comments on final submissions. Formative advice sets an agenda for revision while students still have time to do something about it; evaluative or summative comments deliver judgments. These two kinds of feedback are often entwined, but our responses to drafts should tip toward formative advice while our responses to final submissions should tip toward summative feedback. Research tells us that students grow as writers more from formative than from summative feedback. And note: If you give ample formative comments on a draft, you earn the right to give scant evaluative feedback on the final draft (you can simply give a grade, a quick remark, or checks in a grid). Students can come see you if they have questions about their grade.

2. Help students discern two or three priorities for revision. Research tells us that when students receive a draft with lots of comments on it, they have a hard time determining what is most important. They then tend to fix the sentence-level errors but avoid engaging with the macro-level concerns. In your responses, rank your top 2 or 3 priorities for revision: “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 address that you should…” As those comment templates suggest, you might also distinguish between priorities for global revision and for sentence-level editing. Be careful to avoid the game of telling students what to fix and how to fix it; instead, challenge them with tasks, questions, options, and problems.

3. Never line-edit an entire student text. Do the first 20%, then stop. After that, you can put small checks in the margin to the right of each line to indicate how many errors are in the line. This speeds your reading and puts the responsibility for editing where it belongs: with the student writer. Research suggests that with the checks, students can find and correct about half of their own editing errors (and if they read the text aloud to themselves, they can often do even better). If they have trouble finding the reason for some checks, they should seek help. Important note: Use the check system to signal only copy-editing problems (grammar, syntax, usage); even after the first 20% you should still engage with the student’s ideas, use of evidence, organization, and style.

For early drafts, why copy edit at all? Instead, focus on macro-level concerns (purpose, focus, organization, coherence of argument, etc.). A focus on sentence-level grammar and usage too early in the writing process can sabotage substantial revision. After all, why should you and the student work toward polishing a paragraph that might get cut out entirely because it doesn’t jibe with the purpose or structure of the paper? Attention to line editing makes more sense once the purpose, content, and organization are well established. And note: Be sure to announce why you’re not copy-editing anything at this point in the writing process and remind students that they remain accountable for cleanly edited final drafts.

4. Try marginal comments that emphasize a readership. Rather than jotting brief judgments, 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.”
5. **Require students to do self-assessments.** Cover letters and process notes can prompt students to evaluate their own work, and most students (but not all) will do this surprisingly well, which speeds along your grading. The cover letters also contribute to other key learning goals: encouraging students to be better critics of their own work and more reflective learners.

When submission time comes, require students to arrange their cover letter, final submission, drafts, peer review sheets, and sources all in one folder, in a prescribed order. This gives you a window on the development of the project across time, which allows you to comment on the student’s *writing and revising process* in your response; it also guards against plagiarism and saves you grading time by making all relevant documents readily accessible.

**More Tips**

- Our own assessment of writing in 7 departments shows that higher order concerns (quality of analysis, interpretation of data, ability to structure complex ideas, etc.) are the greatest shortcomings of UConn student writers. After scoring essays anonymously, faculty in none of the 7 departments ranked mechanics/sentence-level editing ranked as the greatest writing concern. Students most need your formative commentary on higher order concerns.

- Make several sample student papers available to your class. In 2010 UConn seniors were surveyed about their W courses, and in response to the question, “Which practices or resources do you wish that your instructors had included in your W courses?,” the most frequent response was a call for more samples and models (preferably in response to the same assignment) that they could look to for guidance. The runner up was a call for more peer review.

- Find things to praise. If you don’t affirm what is working well in a paper, it could disappear from future writing. Affirm what is going right or what seems promising as much as you critique what needs work.

- Distribute evaluation criteria or a grading rubric *with your assignment*. Students should know in advance how you will assess their writing. Rubrics that are customized to the assignment (and to what you have taught to date) often work better than generic rubrics.

- 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.” You might even include a category for “taking risks” or “engaging high degree of difficulty” in your grading rubric.

- Remind students that attention (or lack of attention) to style and proofreading is not just about following nit-picky 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; surface errors also prompt most readers to look harder for *other* problems in the paper.

- 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; recorded audio comments also work well. And there is no need to duplicate your oral remarks with written comments—instead make the student responsible for taking notes during the conference or listening to your audio file a few times.

- If totally flummoxed about how to respond to a paper, start by simply describing it, by “saying back” what you see: “In your opening I hear you saying/doing ....And then you go on to...And then you seem to...”