Responding to Student Writing Effectively and Efficiently

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Your comments on student work can help teach writing as well as explain and defend the grade. Fortunately, the most helpful ways of responding to students' writing—before, during, and after grading—also save you time and frustration. These guidelines are based on research studies of students' attitudes to grading and teacher commentary, as described on our webpages for Faculty and for Writing Specialists, and are distilled from good practice among experienced instructors and TAs.

Giving the Assignment

1. Help students see what role the assignment plays in course goals, especially for practicing ways of thinking in the discipline.
2. Ensure that students know what is meant by terms such as *essay*, *analyse*, *argue*, and *evidence*. (See related pointers in the advice file Designing Assignments.)
3. Indicate on the assignment sheet and in class discussion the expectations for each piece of work. Distribute and discuss your marking scale or rubric if you use one, or direct students to their official faculty statement about what grades mean. (For good examples and discussions of rubric design, see the books by Bean and by Walvoord and Anderson described on our page Books and Articles about Writing in the Disciplines.)
4. Showing good (and improvable) samples of past student writing to the class also clarifies expectations and sets standards. Present them as examples of possible approaches, not as models or templates. Among other elements to mention, pointing out appropriate ways of integrating and referring to sources can diminish many problems.
5. For major assignments, ask for sentence-form outlines or annotated reference lists well ahead of the due date. You can read them quickly and give brief preventive or encouraging comments. Investing your effort at this stage saves time pointing out preventable flaws in final papers. This practice also deters plagiarism.
6. Don't wait till the due date to find out what students' problems are—by then, they're your problems. Encourage students to ask questions in class. They may harbour misunderstandings about suitable sources, the place of personal opinion, collaborative work, etc. If students are reluctant to speak out individually, ask them to generate questions in small groups: three or four students together may realize they are all wondering the same thing.
7. Shortly before the due date, use ten minutes of class time to ask about students' progress and discoveries (e.g., "What useful material have you found?" "What surprised you in your

observations?" "What disagreements did you find among your sources?"). Or ask students to write quick answers in class to similar questions. Respond individually with a checkmark or a word of comment, or skim through the set and comment in class on patterns you see.

8. When students consult you in office hours, work on problem-solving along with them. Let them know that recognizing difficulties in a topic is a way of getting into depth about it. If they seem overwhelmed by the task of organizing the paper, don't just give a formula: ask them to tell you in four of five sentences why they have chosen a topic, what they want to say about it, and why that is worth saying. Then encourage them to build the paper from what they said. You may want to avoid looking in detail at the draft, so you don't get drawn into supplying ideas or promising approval of revisions. (Writing Centre instructors are also skilled at helping students in this way.)
9. You're not the only one who can give helpful comments on drafts. Students benefit greatly from participating in guided peer response groups. Consider using some class time (perhaps in the week before the due date) to get students to look at each other's drafts in pairs and answer focussed questions: "What was the most interesting idea in this piece?" "What points need further explanation?" Ask students to serve as authentic readers of each other's work rather than proofreaders. You are welcome to use handouts from this site to guide such discussions (for instance, the page defining thesis statements).
10. Don't try to do everything yourself. Encourage students to use other relevant resources. Let them know how to find handbooks on writing in your discipline, online advice on academic writing, and writing centres in their colleges or faculties. Other campus resources also provide help for anxious students, those with possible learning disabilities (e.g., striking discrepancy between oral and written performance), and students learning English as a new language. Follow up your recommendations by asking students about their learning experiences with these resources, and comment on any improvements you see in subsequent work.

While Marking

11. Don't write any more on the paper than the student is going to read and understand. Keep in mind that ambitious students are likely to be more interested in your comments than students who aim only at getting through.
12. Make the most comments on the things you care about the most. That's probably the content of your course rather than details of grammar or punctuation. Students become confused and sometimes resentful when their papers are covered with scribbled corrections.

13. When you get the pile of papers, don't plunge in with your red pen or your finger on the “comment” button. Look through the whole set (with your marking scale at hand), and get a

sense of overall patterns. If you are co-marking with others, this is a good stage to meet and clarify expectations, perhaps working out a rubric on the spot if you don't have one already. (It's worthwhile to pay course TAs for this type of preliminary "benchmarking" meeting—better than spending your time later correcting off-target grading.)

14. For marginal comments, using pencil lets you erase in case of second thoughts. Or word-process a list of comments matching numbers in the margins.

15. For final notes, the computer is invaluable: you can erase and revise, your notes are legible, and you have a record of what you said. Students see printed notes as respectful of their work.

16. For positive remarks, use personal pronouns and names ("Jenna, I enjoyed your succinct analysis of X and your cogent comments on Y"). Criticisms can be stated impersonally in terms of the paper, not the student personally ("This paper sets out accurate information about A but does not use method B to analyse it").

17. If you can't praise sincerely, describe partial success: "This paper summarizes the arguments of X and Y"; "You have put considerable effort into explaining your anomalous results"; "This work shows that you have understood the assigned reading."

18. To avoid a crashing "But," try putting criticisms in point form. They can be explicit directions ("Next time, check your paper in these ways: . . .") or suggestions for further consideration: ("I was left wondering about these points . . . ."). Avoid writing truncated marginal questions ("meaning?" "source?"), which can sound sarcastic or accusatory.

19. The most important stylistic criticism you can make is that a statement is unclear, or that you can't follow the argument in a specific passage. Try to indicate where you got lost, and why. This is appropriate even in timed writing like tests.

20. Correcting or noting *all* errors of style or grammar shows your annoyance, but research on student learning demonstrates consistently that it teaches very little. Pointing out two or three *kinds* of error, however, can show students how to focus their revision efforts. Back up your analysis with referrals to sources of help, and let students know you expect to see improvements.

21. If you feel you must indicate the volume of errors in a student's writing, draw a line or a box around a segment of text (preferably a middle paragraph), and circle the errors there. If the errors affect your grade, say so, emphasizing that they affect clarity of content and communication.

22. Students learning English make errors that fall into fairly standard and limited patterns, even if they look chaotic and pervasive at first sight. Given the patterns of second-language

acquisition, some errors are more tractable than others. If you want to comment on a few errors, see the notes below. (Our pages on multilingual students show other ways to help the English language learners in your class.)

- Vocabulary errors in key words and phrases can cause confusion and look unprofessional. Circle and correct these when they occur in titles, headings, and topic sentences, and encourage students to work on accurate usage in these areas in particular.
- Problems with *the* and *a*, and with prepositions like *by* and *in*, make for odd-looking prose, but don't usually create real barriers to understanding. These usages are complex and sometimes illogical in English, and errors are equivalent to "writing with an accent." It's not worthwhile to correct them aggressively, and it's unrealistic to expect quick improvement.
- Verb errors, on the other hand, especially in tenses and modal forms (*might, would, could*) can be learned. Again, don't proofread, but you could recommend that the student review usage of particular verbs forms or usages relevant to your discipline: e.g., present tenses for referring to literary texts ("Hamlet says") and for statements in discussion sections of science reports ("the results suggest"). Ask the student to check specifically for verbs as part of revision.
- Tell students about the courses, workshops, and individual instruction available for learning English thoroughly. Your recommendation can help motivate this investment of time and effort.

After Returning Papers

23. If many students display a particular weakness in reasoning or style, you can best explain it in a few minutes of class time, a printed sheet or a file in your Blackboard site. Offer examples of successes too.

24. Some problems need individual counselling, Leave some of your marking time for giving oral feedback. Make a succinct final comment and ask the student to come to your office and discuss a strategy for improvement.

25. When possible, offer the chance to rewrite for re-grading. Ask students to hand in the old version along with the rewritten one; then average the old and new marks. Ask also for a note on the strategies used in revising. This lets you stick to your high standards, makes the suggestions in your initial comments realistic, and demands self-assessment. Only a few students will take you up on the offer, but some of them will improve dramatically.

    Use a similar method to deal with grade complaints: ask students to write a self-evaluation in terms of the assignment prompt and its rubric, and to come and discuss the paper with you in person.