

Responding to Student Writing

Responding to student writing can sometimes feel overwhelming, and yet, as one student reported while participating in the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, feedback “makes the difference between just reading the assigned books and actually taking the course.” Students read comments to inform revisions, clarify assignment expectations, learn disciplinary conventions, reflect on progress, and engage with readers. You can make this experience as rich as possible, as well as more efficient and manageable, by making strategic choices in feedback.

Crucially, effective responses to student writing, whether in **formative or summative feedback** opportunities, take the writer seriously as an apprentice scholar, respond with generosity and honesty, prime students for success by pointing them toward the highest impact areas for improvement, and underscore that writing is a dialogue between a writer and readers.

Some strategies for responding to student writing effectively:

- **Identify assessment criteria.** Whether with a **rubric** or otherwise, identify in advance what you’re most hoping to see, and in your responses, draw on established course terminology.
- **Observe strengths.** Writers benefit from knowing where their own best work lies, so that they can better replicate it.
- **Limit quantity.** Confine your responses to the highest-order concerns, refraining from marking every mistake or revision suggestion. This will establish priorities for students, rather than overwhelm them, and will relieve you from feeling obligated to respond to everything.
- **Mark patterns.** Draw students’ attention to patterns in their writing, both positive and in need of improvement. For example, you can point out that they have improved consistently with their topic sentences, or, instead of noting all grammatical errors, you can recommend attention to subject-verb agreement, noting a few instances of it on a single page and prompting them to find and correct the rest.
- **Pose questions.** Instead of correcting, or providing language for a stronger answer, pose questions in your marginal or holistic comments. For example, you might ask, “How does this conclusion follow from the evidence you cite? I actually drew the opposite conclusion,” or “I don’t quite see the connection between this point and the next—can you clarify the relationship in your next draft?”
- **Ensure clarity.** Marginal comments can powerfully communicate to students the reader’s experience of engaging with the text. Make sure, though, that your shorthand is legible to students: if you use symbols, provide a key; if you use check marks, consider also qualifying what’s strong about that area; if you use question marks, consider also briefly formulating your question.

References

- Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- Harvard Writing Project. *Bulletin Special Issue: Responding to Student Writing*. 2000. Digital.
- Sommers, Nancy. “Across the Drafts.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 58, No 2, 2006, pp. 248-257.

See also

Evaluating Student Work
Formative and Summative Feedback
Using Rubrics