

Ways to Respond More Effectively to Student Writing

By Laurie McMillin

First year students will come to college with particular ideas about writing and what counts as good response to it.

They may be used to

- getting a lot of feedback on editing rather than feedback that deals with revising (re-seeing) the piece
- doing only one or two drafts
- getting all their response from teachers
- thinking of response as grading
- writing to fill out someone else's prefabricated model

They may value surface clarity over the complexity of thought

They may believe that there are hard and fast rules about grammar and writing, such as:

Don't use contractions.

And don't start a sentence with "and" or "but."

Never use the first person. (I never do.)

The truth for students is that

- not all response has to include grading
- not all response has to come from the teacher
- good writing is the result of a number of processes, including rethinking, rewriting, response and editing
- some "rules" are actually matters of style, preference, expediency.

The truth for faculty is that

- response is more than grading and can be done by the teacher, by other students, and by the writer herself in a variety of ways
- effective response should take into account the *context* of writing and its *stage* in the writing process
- some perceived writing problems may actually be part of a student's struggle to learn new concepts and discourses rather than evidence of a lack of skills

I've asserted that not all response has to include grading and not all response has to come from the teacher. What's that mean?

TEACHERS can respond to student writing through conferences, small group workshops, large group workshop, email, as well as through written comments on papers

PEERS can respond to student writing through response pairs, small groups, letters, response sheets, and large group workshop

WRITERS can look at their own work by creating cover sheets, or by using response sheets and freewriting

How teachers can respond to writing

Some teachers fear assigning writing because they think they have to grade and respond to everything. That is just not true! If the writing is informal, a journal entry, or a bit of freewriting, it would be a waste of time to focus on grammar. Sometimes students learn simply from *writing* itself – whether or not the teacher responds copiously to their work. (For more on this see “Handling the Paper Load” and Peter Elbow's “Writing to Learn not to Demonstrate Learning.”)

Elbow argues that it's important to distinguish two very different goals for writing: there is *writing to demonstrate learning* and there is the less commonly used *writing for learning*.

The goal isn't so much good writing as coming to learn, understand, remember and figure out what you don't yet know. Even though low stakes writing-to-learn is not always good as writing, it is particularly effective at promoting learning and involvement in course material, and it is much easier on teachers--especially those who aren't writing teachers.

These different kinds of writing require different kinds of responses. For more informal kinds of writing, the teacher might need only to see that it is completed, ask a question, make an X. Please see Elbow for more ideas.

Conferences. Consider meeting individually with students to talk about their writing. These short meetings -- from 5 to 15 minutes – can help you understand the writer's intentions and can help the writer understand how you as a reader respond to his/her work. Sometimes in these meetings your heads will be bent over the paper together, to talk about a knotty intellectual question; sometimes they can involve a conversation about your expectations for the assignment, their understanding of the material, or their particular writing issues.

Group workshops. In group workshops the professor's voice becomes one of many. Of course, few will forget the professor's position of power, but it is often useful to find that classmates and the professor agree about a paper, or that the group is split, etc. This encourages the writer to understand her work as communication with readers – it can also help encourage her to discover and determine her own intentions and purposes.

How peers can respond to writing

Students frequently learn a lot about writing from each other – by reading each other's work and by having their work read and discussed by others. Don't underestimate the power of peer review (or over-estimate your own powers to affect student writing!)

Students can share their writing with each other

by reading it aloud in class

by passing their work around the class until everyone has read everyone else's paper

by posting their work on Blackboard before class and reading (and sometimes responding to) each other's work

by responding to each other's ideas in a letter or an email or on Blackboard

by working in small groups

by having each student turn in a paper to be read in a guided workshop that helps to identify the paper's main idea, strengths, weaknesses, and which also responds to the writer's questions about his/her work.

A note on small group and large group workshops: many people find it useful to provide students with a list of questions about the paper (main idea, strengths, weaknesses, the writer's questions about the piece) to which readers first respond in writing, either inside or outside of class. This gives the discussion a form, and it also puts the emphasis on the paper and not on the writing. Over the course of the semester, the questions generally become understood: they are the questions writers begin to ask of their own work.

Another way to emphasize the work and its revisability (rather than the writer) is to focus responses on the paper by only allowing to speak about the work at the beginning and end of the discussion.) See a sample cover and response sheets at <http://www.oberlin.edu/rhetoric/resources/students/guides.html>

How students can respond to their own work

There are many ways to encourage writers to return to their work; doing so helps them get over the notion that one draft is enough, and it encourages them to become more critical readers of their own work. Some techniques:

- Have students read their paper (or a portion of it aloud) -- to the class, to you, to a small group. They will tend to pick up what's clunky or confusing as well as understand how others respond to it.
- Ask them to take their "finished" draft and re-read each paragraph. They should look for the main idea of the paragraph, consider how the paragraph advances the discussion, and write their responses in the margin. These comments can then become a basis for revision.
- Have writers "freewrite" (jot down whatever comes to their head, without worrying about sentences, grammar, etc.) or list their own questions about their writing. Sometimes just articulating the questions is enough to help them rethink their work, but you could also have a reader respond to these questions.

CATEGORIES OF AND CONTEXTS FOR RESPONSE

I hope it's clear that as the teacher, you are not in this alone. And when you do decide to respond to student writing, it is useful to recall that there are different categories of response

- Big picture stuff – development, ideas, discipline-specific orientations
- Structural stuff – organization, form
- The sentence-level stuff – grammar, typos, spelling, punctuation, usage, ESL/EFL

In responding to student work you should consider the *context of writing* -- what it is supposed to accomplish, where it's going. If it's a draft you need not spend a lot of time on sentence-level things that will be revised out of the piece. Your time will be better spent discussing the student's ideas and suggesting ways to revise -- really look again -- at the paper.

For an excellent essay on response, see Nancy Sommer's classic "Responding to Student Writing" at: <http://www.jstor.org/view/0010096x/ap020142/02a00030/0>