

## **Responding to Student Writing: The Teacher as Constructive Reader**

A Workshop for Faculty New to the First Year Seminar Program at Oberlin College  
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by Leonard A. Podis  
with Emily Ascolese

Although I have taught college composition for thirty-five years and have been published and anthologized on the subject of responding to student writing, some of my most memorable experiences with the topic date to my own college days. Fortunately the responses I received to my papers often gave me the support and motivation I needed to keep going. Unfortunately, however, my teachers' responses sometimes provoked strong feelings of self-doubt and insecurity. On the positive side, for example, one of my American history papers—on education among the Puritans—was actually read aloud to the class by my professor as a great example of a history paper. Though I was embarrassed by the unexpected attention, I was nonetheless immensely proud, too. But another of my essays that same year, in Psychology 101, received an “F” and a scathing comment from the professor, who indignantly observed that I obviously had no idea what I was talking about (which, in retrospect, I recognize was doubtless the case).

Even in my major, English, I was never totally sure when I submitted a paper whether it would be received with appreciation or contempt. My research essay on the novels of Anthony Trollope was lauded as a wonderful exploration of the man's work, while my critical piece on Salinger's *Nine Stories* was the object of such blistering scorn that the professor who assigned it wound up having second thoughts about letting his TA's brutal comments remain in the margins. Unfortunately, the TA had used permanent ink, so when the professor decided to remove some

of the harshest comments, he had to cut them out with scissors. The paper was thus returned in a mutilated state, with a miserable grade affixed.

I can offer more examples of the wide range of responses I got to my undergraduate writings. For instance, my essay on Herrick's poem, "Delight in Disorder," "brightened up [the professor's] long evening of grading," or so he said in the end comments. Yet my paper on conceptions of kingship in Shakespeare's history plays (cleverly titled "'Uneasy Lies the Head that Wears the Crown'") provoked derisive comments from a TA, comments the professor admitted—after I had stormed his office to seek redress—were "perhaps a bit acidulous." (Scurrying to the dictionary to look up acidulous, I found it defined as "somewhat acid in . . . manner.")

Of course responding to writing encompasses a broad range of activities and practices. It can cover something as minor as deleting the apostrophe from "its" (I-T-S) when used as a possessive pronoun or something as major as commenting at the end of a paper that you found the analysis so illuminating that you'd like to encourage the student to think about submitting the piece for publication. In my experience, faculty members who are not in English or rhetoric departments are sometimes hesitant to teach writing-intensive courses because they believe they don't know how to respond properly to student writing. By this they usually mean that they are not trained to identify and analyze errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, or that they cannot comment knowledgably on stylistic infelicities. To such expressions of fear and insecurity, I usually respond by assuring colleagues that if they do scholarly writing in their disciplines, they are perfectly capable of teaching writing to their students. Indeed, even in English studies, there has been a shift toward responding to papers as a *constructive reader*, not as an examiner focused on grammatical correctness. Specialists in composition studies have issued warnings that

it is unhelpful to “overcorrect” papers for mechanical errors because students tend to tune out when confronted with such a barrage of technical negativity. Such a negative focus even has a name: it has been dubbed “the deficiency model” of writing pedagogy.

In decrying the deficiency model, some scholars have raised questions about the reliability of style manuals that identify usage errors that probably aren’t even errors. For example, Joe Williams, in “The Phenomenology of Error,” discusses the famous writer E. B. White’s inconsistent relationship to error. Williams observes that White, in his role as co-author of *The Elements of Style*, prohibited a number of usages that he himself continued to employ in his role as an essay writer (for instance, the use of “which” as a restrictive modifier). As far as Williams could tell, White remained unaware of the fact that he broke his own usage rules—but since he was E. B. White, no one (including White himself) bothered to look for the errors, and so no one found them. One of the pedagogical implications Williams draws from his study is that a major reason teachers find so many errors in students’ writing is that they are *looking* for them. He notes that if we were to read student work with a mindset closer to the one we adopt when we read professional pieces—that is, if we were to abandon the deficiency model—we would find—and mark—many fewer errors.

In our session today I’d like to concentrate more on “higher order” approaches to responding to student writing than on copy-editing and error correction. First, however, I’d like to say a word about the list of criteria for judging student writing that Oberlin College has used for the last twenty years. (It appears on p. 10 of the FYSP resources booklet Laurie has given you.) Because I originally drafted this list (or “rubric” as some prefer to call it), I am familiar with many of its advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, it spells out some important properties of student papers, qualities that we as teachers often find it helpful to look for and to

comment on, and which students generally find useful in composing good papers. On the negative side, it is only a list of textual features, and therefore it has little to say about the process by which those properties can be achieved. In other words, it dwells only on the “what” of academic papers, not the “how.” Another major problem with the list is that it is geared mainly toward argumentative papers in the humanities. So it is limited in its disciplinary applications. It will not prove very helpful in most science courses, for example, where students may be asked to adopt formats and styles geared toward scientific inquiry.

To help us get at the idea of response as “constructive readership,” I want to refer to some recent research of Nancy Sommers, director of the Expository Writing Program at Harvard. Sommers conducted a longitudinal study of writing at Harvard, following about a quarter of the class of 2001 from matriculation to graduation. She found that responding to writing is “the most significant contribution an instructor can make to the education of a writer. . . .” The responses students received to their writing proved to be “powerful enough to convince students they could or couldn’t do the work in a given field . . . and contributed, more than any other single factor, to [students’] sense of academic belonging or alienation.” Sommers goes on to observe that unfortunately “. . . much feedback does not shape either the writing or the writer. Too many comments go unread,” according to Sommers’ study, “because, as one student reported, ‘the feedback is written to the paper, not to the student.’ At its worst,” Sommers notes, “feedback gives students no hope in themselves as writers and leaves them confused, about both their strengths and weaknesses. But at its best,” she says, “feedback exposes students to the demands of a critical audience, [thus facilitating] the transition from writing that is private and idiosyncratic to writing that is public and shared.” In the words of another participant in the

study, a good response to a student's paper "doesn't need to be monumental. It just needs to say 'I read your paper and here's what I think.'" (2005 CCCC Program Directory 114).

But even when commentary is focused on what Nancy Sommers calls "the demands of a critical audience," it's important, I think, that we recognize some potential pitfalls to such an approach. The best intentions can backfire if we attempt to push students' papers too hard in the directions we think they should go. A student in my teaching and tutoring course identified this problem while discussing her struggles to be a helpful peer tutor. I will quote at length from her journal entry:

The problem with critical reading is that . . . [once] the reader begins to respond to the paper, she begins to "own" it in some ways, or at least feel quite strongly about it. . . . For a [writing] tutor, [attending to the needs of] the paper is almost like watching a growing child, but it's like day care. You have to nourish it as well as you can, but you have to remember that it's not your own. When the time comes, you have to let go and hope that you made a positive change. I don't think I would be [remiss] in saying that I have to be somewhat more "dispassionate" in reading the papers of [my] tutees. I have to treat them as other people's "babies" and not as manifest art or [as] communication that can and must be perfected till it's, well, perfect. That is not my function. That is not how I can make any kind of real, positive change. I must help the tutee, not the paper.

Studies of instructors' response patterns have, unfortunately, shown that most have not attempted "to let go" of the quest for perfection in their students' papers. Many teachers, the studies show, follow a tradition of either (1) *appropriating* student work or (2) *scolding* and

*berating* the student for writing ineptly. Appropriating student work might involve criticizing a paper for diverging from a model text that exists in the teacher's imagination. Comments of this type are "You failed to consider ABC in your analysis!" or "You completely misinterpreted the role of PQR in the novel!" Examples of scolding and berating include such comments as "Don't do X!" or "You must avoid Y" or even "Who cares about Z?". Sometimes such an approach may intimidate students into improving their command of writing, but more often than not, in my experience, it leads them to disengage from genuine dialogue with a readership.

In recent years, my own style of commentary has evolved toward a form of "constructive readership." While I still mark grammar and style issues, I usually do so in moderation—although there are exceptions: for instance, students who have specifically asked me to identify all their errors. I also comment on matters of form and organization, to the best of my ability. Another kind of response that I've been trying to develop and refine is to show writers what their papers make me think when I read them. In order to do this, I try to approach the paper, as much as possible, as a "real" text, a bona fide piece of reading, not a flawed exercise that exists to be "torn apart by the teacher." So, I find myself writing a lot of responses that provide what Peter Elbow, a prominent scholar-teacher in composition studies, has called "a snapshot of [the teacher's] thinking."

What does this kind of response look like? I can give some examples. When one student wrote "Every piece of writing shows us something about the personality of the writer" and followed up with her reasons for saying so, I responded with, "A fascinating point. I think you are right. I'm wondering if you think there's any difference in the *degree* to which different kinds of texts reveal their author's personality. For example, would an author's personality show through to the same degree in a novel as in an essay or a poem? Or even in the descriptions on

the back of a box of cereal or in the instructions in the owner's manual for an electric knife?" Significantly, in her subsequent revision, the student acknowledged my question and actually addressed it.

Here's another example. One of my composition students wrote the following: "As I age, the magical aura that surrounded everything around me during childhood steadily dissipates. The fantastic and the miraculous increasingly seems to have a simply scientific explanation." Here is the response I wrote in the margin: "Great insight! Have you ever read Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality?' He mourns the loss of childlike wonder as he has grown older." (In the interest of full disclosure, I should add that I also made a grammatical correction in the margin of his paper. He wrote "The fantastic and the miraculous increasingly *seems*," so I corrected it to "seem," and explained that his subject was plural.) While these sample comments that offer "snapshots of my thinking" might make it seem that I am trying to appropriate my students' papers by showing them the direction in which to take their essays, I am, more often than not, just trying to share with my students what I thought on reading their papers. I think this response technique helps students to feel that I am taking their writing very seriously, and it seems to motivate them to do their best work.

My intention to communicate to students what their writing has caused me to think may be most evident when I make a personal or autobiographical response, stepping briefly outside my role as disciplinary expert and lab-coated analyst of rhetoric. I don't make autobiographical comments very often, but I sometimes do, and I can share an example with you. The student in this case was a performance major at in the Conservatory, and she wrote the following in her essay on the topic of whether or not it was justifiable for her, in light of her family's financial sacrifices, to remain at Oberlin, with its exorbitant tuition:

One of the problems I face many days is the fear of not “succeeding” in music. By “succeeding” I mean getting a job. I am not the type of musician who must be famous to feel like she has succeeded. . . . [Yet my] dream . . . in music is to make a living off it after I graduate. [However, the] music industry continues to become more and more competitive, and as I look at all the talent [out there], I begin to wonder if I will ever have what it takes to become [established].

Besides marking a few small wording problems, I responded with the following marginal comment:

An important point. For what it’s worth, I had similar worries about ever getting a job as a professor. There were 1,000 applications for every job the year I applied. It was *very* discouraging. Yet somehow, as you see, things worked out all right in my case. Maybe it can happen for you, too, but certainly only if you don’t give up on your dream!”

I’ll make a disclaimer here that I am not necessarily recommending autobiographical responses, because I know that a lot depends on the situation. However, I see such comments as a valuable addition to my own repertoire.

Now I don’t want to give the impression that my thinking as a constructive reader and my resultant comments are always positive, as in the three examples I’ve just given. Here’s a response I made on reading a paragraph in which a student was waxing enthusiastic about the virtues and benefits of small town living as opposed to urban life. As the paper was otherwise critiquing an article about political correctness on the Oberlin campus, I was a bit confused by his inclusion of the paragraph, and I wrote, “This is a valuable discussion of small town dynamics in its own right, but it isn’t very clearly connected to your critique of Weisberg’s

article.” In this case, since I felt that the student’s paragraph weakened his essay by apparently digressing from his critique, I was obviously thinking that it would be best if he would take my thoughts to heart in revising the piece. Still, I like to think that I managed to stop short of appropriating his essay or pressuring him to produce some Ideal Text I envisioned in my mind. I was mainly hoping he would conclude that if I found the paragraph tangential, other readers might do so, as well. If I recall correctly, he did omit the paragraph when he revised the essay.

I want to emphasize another important component of responding to writing in the spirit of constructive readership. Specifically, I believe teachers should encourage responses from classmates. To enable such responses, I want to suggest using what I call a cover sheet or response sheet. This is a form that student writers fill out and attach to their drafts when exchanging papers with peers for feedback sessions or when presenting a paper to the class in a workshop setting. The cover sheet, I tell my student writers, gives them an opportunity to have a voice about their papers outside of the papers themselves. It is also a vehicle through which they can have some influence on how their paper gets responded to—that is, they can use it to focus the attention of their readers on certain questions they would like to have answered. This is the case whether their reader is a classmate or the instructor. I personally like the cover sheet because, as a teacher-reader, it gives me some guidance about how to respond to a particular paper—this is not to say that I couldn’t muster something on my own to say about most papers, but rather that it’s helpful to me to know what questions the writer has and what he or she would find it useful for me to comment on. Let’s take a look at the actual cover sheet I use in my writing classes.

[Examine and discuss cover sheet handout.]

Still another valuable source of response to student writing, especially in FYSP courses, is the Writing Associate or Peer Tutor. On this point, I'd like to turn the floor over to my former student, now colleague, Emily Ascolese, B.A., Oberlin College class of 2007. [Here Emily will discuss what the WA can contribute to the process of responding as a constructive reader.]

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To start the interactive portion of our session, I'd like us to read over a sample paper I've brought for the purpose and then have some discussions about possible ways of responding to it and its absent writer. The paper was written some years ago during the second week of the semester at Oberlin for an introductory course in religion, but it could well be a response paper for a First-Year Seminar. The assignment was to write a short paper analyzing and interpreting the role of Abraham in the book of Genesis. I'd like us first to read the paper aloud and then to pair off with a partner to discuss likely responses to the piece. To facilitate our response process, I've brought a cover sheet that represents the questions this student originally asked his peers in a rhetoric class I taught. In discussing the piece with your partner, try to concentrate on comments that are in the spirit of constructive readership. That is, comments that are both helpful and encouraging to the writer. Another way to think about this type of response would be to ask ourselves, what kind of comments could we put on this paper to encourage the student to undertake a revision of it, not out of compulsion or from the fear of a bad grade, but from a feeling of motivation to improve the piece.

[1. Look at handout and read it aloud. Review the Cover Sheet questions.]

[2. Form into partnerships for discussion.]

[3. Return to plenary session for reports and discussion.]

Conclusion: This approach of constructive readership is predicated on creating the same kind of ongoing dialogue among writers and readers that professional scholars partake of in their various disciplines. As such, it will probably work best if practiced in contexts where a classroom dialogue flourishes in many respects, not just in the area of written work. Along these lines, I'd like us to read and discuss some excerpts from a student essay, a piece in which the student explores the "walling off" of student papers from the general classroom dialogue. [Pass out handout to review.]