

RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

Perhaps no aspect of teaching with writing provokes as much instructor anxiety as providing written or oral responses to student texts. Here are two typical comments from professors:

I know I could give my students better feedback on their writing. How, though, should I be looking at their writing? I never get enough response to my comments to know what works or what doesn't.

I spend a lot of time writing comments. But I wonder, is all the work I do worth anything?

Students look for instructor comments. In fact, in our assessment work at the Manoa Writing Program, we find that no other topic generates more student comment than what professors say about their writing. Here are a couple of typical comments from students:

I thought all the check marks in the margins meant I was doing OK and the plus signs meant the writing was "really good." If my essay was really good, how come she made me rewrite it again?

The professor corrected all my grammar errors on my first draft. But he also wrote, "You miss the epistemological value of the text." I didn't know what he meant and I didn't know how to revise my paper! I was really confused.

COMMENTS AS SOURCES OF CONFUSION

Professors' comments, like other forms of communication, are fraught with possibilities for misunderstanding. Our assessments show that misunderstandings of professors' responses to student writing usually stem from one or more of three possibilities:

- students aren't clear on what the professor is looking for, and why;
- students don't understand what the comments mean; and
- students, although they may understand comments, don't know how to do what a comment suggests.

HELPING STUDENTS BY ANTICIPATING STUDENT QUESTIONS

In the last issue of *Writing Matters*, we listed several questions students want to ask their professors about writing assignments. Here we list two questions students tell us they want to ask their professors about comments on their writing.

1. What Are You Going to Be Looking for?

Students want some sense of what instructors will be looking for as they respond to the writing. What you tell them will in part be determined by the purpose of the writing assignment. It will also be determined by what you expect students to do next—something we will see in students' second question below. The best time to answer this question is *while you are designing the assignment*.

Here are ways in which some professors deal with this question.

- ! With certain assignments—for example, journals or personal responses to readings—you may be looking simply to see whether or not a student has done the writing. You can tell your students to anticipate a "✓" or "-" based on quantity; since the writing will not be revised, no extensive comments are necessary. Some professors give bonus points for particularly full responses. Others underscore special insights with a highlighter and put wavy lines under content that is unclear.
- ! Students value assignments that help them learn a genre they will use in their work or in advanced courses—for example, a prospectus, a report of findings, or a site analysis. Since students need repeated practice to master specialized forms of writing, you frequently will be making comments to guide their revising. You can help them even with their first draft by listing on the assignment sheet two or three specific features (such as attention to reader's familiarity with the topic or appropriate selection of quotations and references) you will be looking for.

- ! Sometimes it is useful to turn this question back to your students. Have them write a brief self-assessment and attach it to the draft they are giving you. Ask them to describe two or three things they have done well and two or three things that they plan to revise. Ask what kind of feedback they want. Their own assessments and requests can then guide your responses.

2. What Do You Want Me to Do with Your Comments?

Students report that they sometimes read over a professor's comments but don't know what next to do.

You can save yourself a lot of time and energy by doing two things *before you even write your first comment*.

- ! Read quickly over the whole draft before you comment. Writing comments from the beginning can often set you off on tangents. With a sense of the whole, you are more likely to focus your comments on what is most useful.
- ! Figure out what you want the student to do with your comments. This works best when you've structured your assignments so that students have both the knowledge and the time they need to do what your comments intend.

Students find suggestions on how to do better next time more helpful than comments that merely identify what they have done well or poorly.

Here are some illustrative comments from professors:

Weak

You raise many important issues but your organization is weak. I never knew what to expect next. The paper was lacking enough support. Where is the development of the ideas?

Look at the sample again. You haven't written a summary. It's not only incoherent but you included your opinions as well.

Your lit review is comprehensive. You brought in all the right studies (including a few I wasn't aware of—thank you!). But the review is too long. You used too many quotations.

I had trouble following your argument as I read your paper. It's not coherent. There aren't any transitions between your ideas or clues about what you are trying to say. I didn't know what your point was until I read the last paragraph.

Better

You raise three important points on your second page. But they get lost amid all the other points you are making. On your next draft, why not focus on just those three?

In your second paragraph you did a good job sticking to the main point plus key evidence—something I hope to see more of in your next summary. In the other paragraphs you mixed in your personal opinions (I underlined opinions).

In psychology we usually summarize research findings rather than quote from research reports. In your revision, try to summarize what you quoted. Your lit review will only be half as long.

A lot of this is pretty fuzzy and your logic gets tangled. But then I get to your final paragraph and it's a good summary, and I think, **YOU DO KNOW HOW TO WRITE CLEARLY!** Would you want to try that paragraph as your first paragraph? It could provide your reader with a neat outline of what will come next (and provide you with an organizational plan).

While your comments on student writing will vary from student to student, very often you will find that several students need help with the same process. Rather than write the same thing on several papers, you can use five minutes of class time to review a process. Or if you prefer to type responses on a word processor, you can write up the general comments in a macro and personalize your specific comments to several students.

We will return to this topic of responses to student writing in future issues of *Writing Matters*. The examples we have offered here show that responding is complex work. It is part of a discussion and often a negotiation. Effective comments guide and motivate students to more effective writing and learning about the course topics. Careful planning about what you want your responses to accomplish can help your students think more carefully as well as write more proficiently.