

Students learn from extensive writing. They don't necessarily learn from our comments on their writing. Research has shown that students frequently misunderstand our comments (which we often write in a hurry). We would do well to use our limited time strategically—and also follow the dictum of our better paid fellow professionals: “At least do no harm.”

The fact is, there is no right or best way to respond to student writing. The right or best comment is the one that will help *this* student on *this* topic on *this* draft at *this* point in the semester—given her character and experience. Our best chance of figuring out the best comment at any moment depends on knowing what was going on for the student as she was writing. (Was she struggling hard on this paper—or misunderstanding the assignment—or being lazy—or trying too hard to sound “intellectual”?)

Therefore I always ask for a short “cover letter” (or “process writing” or “writer’s log”) with any major assignment. I ask: “*What do you see as your main points? Tell me the story of how you went about writing and what it was like for you in process? How did you get your ideas? What were some of the choices you made? Which parts went well or badly? Were there any surprises?*” And above all: “*What questions do you have for me as reader?*” And if it's a revision I always ask: “*What changes did you make and why?*” Reading the cover letter helps me decide what to say in my comment. Often I can agree with much of what the students wrote—sometimes even being more encouraging about the essay than they were. With the cover letter, my comment is not the *start* of a conversation about the writing; it's the *continuation of a dialogue* that the student began.

For a good many students, this process writing is not easy. They need practice. In the beginning I often coach them through process writing in class on the day the paper or draft is due.

#### Other suggestions for responding:

1. Be clear about the criteria central to this assignment—rather than just asking for “good writing” in general. Grids are one way to articulate criteria clearly. (See the handout on grids.)
2. Read the whole piece **before** making any comments. Students can seldom benefit from criticism of more than two or three problems, and until we read through the paper, we cannot make a good decision about which problems to focus on. If we embark on a comment before we've read the whole paper, we are more likely to make the classic mistakes: wasting time on something that turns out to be a minor issue; making a brief comment that the student misunderstands; saying something that's actually wrong (“*you don't understand x*”) when it becomes clear later on that the student **does** understand *x*; getting caught up in a little spasm of unhelpful irritation.

During my first reading, I permit myself only infrequent and tiny comments (e.g., “I stumbled here”). I also sometimes make straight and wiggly lines in the margin to indicate where the writing seems strong or problematic to me. These marks serve as reminders to me later when I am getting ready to write my response. Even if I want to tell the student the story of my ongoing reactions as I was reading (giving “movies of my mind”), I can usually do this more clearly and helpfully by waiting till after I've read the whole piece.

3. I write my comments on a separate sheet not only because I'm quicker and neater on my computer, but also because this method makes me comment *as a reader about how the writing is affecting me* rather than as an *editor trying to fix the text*.

4. When I return papers to students I sometimes take five minutes right then and ask them to write a short note telling me what they heard me saying in my comment and how they are reacting to it. This tells me when my comments are unclear or when students misinterpret my words or react in ways I don't expect. These are often fascinating short pieces of writing.

5. One of the most useful kinds of response is often overlooked because it seems too simple: to **describe** the paper as I see it: “*Here's what I see as your main point: . . . . Here's what I see as your subsidiary points: . . . . Here's what I see as your structure . . . .*”

6. We can do more good with our limited time for commenting on their writing, if we can spend it on drafts instead of on final versions. When we get final versions, we can read quickly and respond only with a grid (see handout). Comments on drafts are positive suggestions for revising and actually help them learn to write better—rather than just negative points in an autopsy.\*

### **A final down-to-earth note on epistemology**

When students don't read or heed our comments very well, we shouldn't necessarily assume carelessness or ineptness. It's often skepticism if not downright scorn. They often understand—consciously or not—how untrustworthy our comments tend to be. They may not talk about epistemology, but they know that the alleged authorities to whom they write often contradict each other about what “good writing” looks like.

In the face of their skepticism, there is an important source of trustworthiness or epistemological validity we can call on. If we tell our actual reactions and frankly acknowledge their subjectivity, we can write comments that are in fact *true*. They may be true about only one reader, but they are true. Here are some examples: *“I started out sympathetic to what you were saying but in the third paragraph I began fighting you. I got irritated and started to disagree with the very point I accepted in the beginning.”* *“For the whole first page I was wondering what your opinion was about this volatile issue, and I couldn't tell. But it wasn't bothering me; it somehow drew me in. But now in this section, I'm frustrated by not quite understanding your point.”*

If we write comments that purport to be true in general or true for other readers, we play God and often commit falsehoods. Here are some examples: *“You have too many asides and anecdotes.”* *“You should move this third paragraph to the beginning.”* Such statements will seldom hold true for all good readers. Excellent readers often disagree—and students have seen this. Even when we write “unclear” we are pointing to what some other good readers will find clear. Students often fight these impersonal “verdicts”—in part because they sense how questionable they are. If we win such disputes by resorting to institutional authority, this further undermines their shaky faith in our judgments. By telling them what actually happened to us in reading, we are paying them the intellectual respect of trying to avoid what's dubious.

If we are willing to say, “Unconvincing for me,” instead of “Unconvincing,” students are more likely to pause, listen, and think—instead of just resisting, or thoughtlessly giving in to authority. Besides, magisterial shorthand words like “Awkward” or “Unclear” are themselves often extremely unclear. It's interesting to try for more accurate formulations: *“I stumbled here,”* or *“I'm lost,”* or *“This felt roundabout”* or *“I couldn't understand you.”* It costs a few more words, but there's a pedagogical leverage that comes from avoiding comments that mimic God.

Besides, when we give students our frankly acknowledged subjective reactions, we are treating them as writers: *“Here are my reactions: you decide what to do about them.”* In this way we help them learn to treat us as actual readers instead of sources of impersonal verdicts. And interestingly enough, our subjective reactions are often surprisingly universal.

To sum up. Writing comments is a dubious and difficult enterprise. We are least likely to waste our time or cause harm if we limit ourselves to the following essential activities: get students to write a great deal; read what they write with good attention and respect; show them that we understand what they have written—even the parts where they had trouble getting their meaning across; respect them by telling how we are actually reacting (minus the irritation and anger that probably come more from our difficult working conditions than from their actual writing). What helps writers most is the experience of being heard and a chance for dialogue.

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\*If your class is huge and it's truly impossible to comment on drafts, you can nevertheless require students to hand in drafts 3-5 days before final drafts are due. You can frankly acknowledge that you cannot look at them (except to see that they are genuine drafts), but insist that this is your way to give them at least a *chance* to revise. But they don't have to.