

There is no single best way to respond to student papers. The best comment is always *what this particular student needs to hear on this particular occasion*. Therefore we can comment better and more easily when our minds fill quickly with *many* different things, even conflicting things, that we *might* say about a paper. Then we have more options. Most bad commenting comes from relying on only one or two habitual modes of commenting or settling for the first thing that comes to mind.

What follows is an artificial exercise you obviously can't use on all papers. But if you practice it now and then, your mind will fill with more options when you're writing actual comments and you're short of time.

Straight and wavy lines. Put straight lines underneath words and alongside sections that come through strongly or effectively. Put wavy lines where you feel some kind of resistance or dissatisfaction. You can give this feedback nearly as quickly as you can read--and it is surprisingly helpful.

Movies of the reader's mind. Tell the story of what was going on in you as you were reading the paper? It is particularly important to notice what you were *feeling*--as a way to help you prevent your actual comment to the student from being too skewed by unaware feelings. (Be completely honest: this time, it's only to monitor your reactions--not for telling the student.)

Praise the text--first quick version. What worked? What strengths do you see?

Describe the text. What would most observers agree is actually "there"--that they actually see? That is, describe the text as accurately and dispassionately as possible. This is discourse analysis. Examples: describe the genre; the topic; the main point; the main sub-points; the organization (which parts perform which functions?); describe the syntax (e.g., long and short sentences and where); the diction (e.g., kinds of words--and where); the voice; the point of view; and so on. Obviously, pure objectivity is not possible, but if you make an honest effort to disengage yourself as far as you can from judging or interpreting, you are giving a gesture of respect: treating students as writers and taking their writing seriously as "texts." The effort also helps you see the text better and almost invariably leads to new understandings of it and possibilities for good feedback of other sorts.

"Reply" to the text as a human being, not as a teacher. This too is a crucial act of respect: to take the writer's view seriously enough to reply to *what* she says--instead of ignoring or sidestepping the message with a meta-comment about *how* she says it. Many students have never had a *reply* of this sort to anything they have written. To reply makes us human readers, not just evaluators.

Make inferences about process--about what was happening in the writer as he or she was writing this paper. Examples: "I had a feeling you got a little bored with your topic during the last half." Or "I sensed that in the beginning you felt your topic was X, but by the end you were actually more interested in Y." Or "Could it be that as you revised, you started to have doubts about your main point?" Of course these inferences are risky guesswork. But even wrong guesses can be productive if you invite the student to disagree with them. For example, if you guess that he was bored and he tells us he was not, this leads to a useful discussion about how the words and how they worked on at least one reader. And if you are accurate in your inference, this kind of feedback can have a more helpful impact on how the student goes about writing in the future than if you made a perfect diagnosis of faults and advice.

Praise the text--second try. You can almost certainly see more to praise now that you have carefully described it, replied to it, and made inferences about the student's process. In addition to noting actual strengths, you can note *potential* strengths the student might exploit in revising. Well focused praise--even for small successes--produces more learning than criticism of failures: Telling someone to stop doing X doesn't help them learn how to do Y.

Find the fruitful problem. Try to figure out the *one problem* that might be most useful to work on.

Back to movies. This time it's for the student. You might need to leave out *some* of your actual reactions, but an honest process account of what was happening to you as you read can often be surprisingly effective. For example students often ignore me when I tell them clearly about explicit problems in an argument, but they usually perk up their ears and take me more seriously when I say, "I nodded my head in agreement with your main point when you described it at the beginning of your paper, but when you started arguing for it, I found I myself resisting and even fighting you."

So what will your comment be? Now, after working through these options, write the actual comment you guess might be most appropriate for this student on this occasion.