Responding to Student Writing

A Short Guide for Responding to Student Papers and Reports ...........111
Some General Guides to Diagnosing Term Papers..............................112
A Checklist for Marking and Revising Term Papers and Reports ..........113
A Short Guide for Responding to Student Papers and Reports

Some General Considerations

It is more important for students to spend time writing papers than for their teachers to spend time marking papers.

Many students and not a few teachers hold a principle of proportionality in the matter of marking and responding to papers: students spend time struggling to produce good papers, so teachers should spend time struggling to read and mark up those papers. Even if it were reasonable to hold such a principle, it is economically impossible in a writing-across-the-curriculum program which seeks to give students as much writing experience as possible. When assignments are well-designed, students can learn from writing without significant intervention by the teacher.

Students can learn about writing from each other.

You are not your students’ only resource for helpful responses to their writing. Students can work together to combine their drafts into a common final product, they can summarize or outline each others’ work, they can list possible objections to another’s argument, or they can perform any number of the diagnostic tests listed below.

Often, the best way to respond to students’ texts is to make the students revise.

Many of the problems teachers find in students’ papers result because students do not manage the writing process very well. You can do a lot to improve their writing and to make grading more pleasant merely by returning papers (unmarked, perhaps even unread) to be revised and rewritten. It helps if students can get help from each other, but that is not always necessary. Like the rest of us, students write better when they are forced to give their papers the time it takes to revise and rethink.

It is important for students to learn an explicit means for analyzing and editing texts, both their colleagues’ and their own.

While students can learn from writing assignments even when they receive only a minimal response from their teachers, students do need some classes in which they learn how to analyze their own texts and those of their colleagues. It is not enough for students to know only how to say what they do and don’t like, what is and is not effective; they must also be taught how to explain to themselves and to each other why a text is or is not effective, which features account for their response, and how those features can be changed to make a text more effective.

Term-papers are not the only or even the best way to teach students to write.

Term-papers are a tried and true teaching tool. They are the default writing assignment for teachers and students alike. Among the reasons for their popularity is that they tax students on many different levels at once. But they can also overtax students who are learning to write. You have many kinds of writing assignments available to you, many of which allow you to target the assignment to the skills you want students to develop. Remember: when you target assignments to test and develop specific aspects of the writing process, you should mark and evaluate them almost exclusively with respect to the aspects you targeted.
Some General Guides to Diagnosing Term Papers

Students who write term papers need both readers (who will follow their turns of thought, who will consider the force and implications of their arguments, who will pause over an especially apt bit of evidence, and so on) and editors (who will ask hard questions about how well the paper is designed to communicate to its readers). In general, you can do both jobs better and faster by doing them separately. Here are some tips for the diagnosing part of the job.

• *Begin with an overview.* Read the paper quickly to ascertain the main points and the flow of the argument. Pay special attention to the introduction and conclusion.

• *Decide as soon as possible the basic message you want the student to take away from your comments.* Do not mark the page until you know what you want that message to be. Save the red pencil for last.

• *Once you have an overview, analyze the paper in terms of your agenda in giving the assignment.* If you wanted students to work on a particular aspect of the writing process, check and comment on that aspect first. Otherwise, analyze the paper “top down,” beginning with organization, argument, coherence, etc.

• *Your response should be improvement-based, not error-based.* Restrict your comments to those matters you want the student to work on, even if she has done it correctly this time and even if she has other problems. Don’t go on an error hunt.

• *Don’t use your comments to justify your grade.* Try to separate the commenting process from the grading process as much as possible.

• *Make your comments “top down.”* If you do focus your comments on the problems in a paper, you should generally direct each student’s attention to the highest level in the text structure at which that student has significant problems. A student who has failed to achieve any measure of organization in a paper will not be helped by learning that he has also written some unintelligible sentences.

• *Make your criticism of the paper at hand as specific as possible.* Not: “This argument is confused.” But: “The two points I have bracketed do not fit in with the rest of this argument because ....”

• *Make your advice as general as possible.* Not: “Remove the two bracketed points that don’t fit in with the rest.” But: “Do not include sub-points unless they contribute to your main point, even if they are interesting and related to the general topic.”

• *Whenever possible, give students a chance to practice in response to your comments.* A student who had trouble organizing can be assigned to outline her paper and then to reorganize the outline. A student who failed to support a point can be assigned to turn in a list of items that might count as evidence for that point. A student whose paper does not end where it began can be assigned to write a new introduction.
A Checklist for Marking and Revising Term Papers and Reports

1. **A paper must make a worthy point**

   1.1 **A paper must have a single main point.**

      1.1.1 Is that main point of the paper explicitly stated at the end of the introduction or opening segment?
       
      *(Note: Different disciplines make different kinds of points. If the paper is an argument, then the point will be a claim, thesis, or position. If the paper is a business or legal memo, then the point will focus on some action or outcome. If the paper is a scientific lab report, then the point is likely to be a result, often a numerical result.)*
      
      **YES:** go to 1.2
      
      **NO:** go to 1.1.2

      1.1.2 Is the main point explicitly stated at the very end of the paper or report?

      **YES:** go to 1.1.3

      **NO:** The paper is either pointless or has buried its point in the middle. In either case, it needs a main point explicitly stated in the proper location.

      1.1.3 If the main point is explicitly stated at the end of the paper, does it also have at the end of the introduction or opening statement a preliminary point that launches the reader forward into the rest of the paper?

      **YES:** go to 1.2

      **NO:** The end of the Introduction needs to be rewritten so that it makes a preliminary point that asks a question, states a goal or problem, makes a key observation, or otherwise sets the reader up for what is to come.

   1.2 **The point must be a point worth making.**

      1.2.1 Is the main point the right kind of point for the class?

      *(Note: Each discipline has its own standards for what counts as a point worth making, and those standards often change as students become more advanced and so more socialized into the discipline.)*

      **YES:** go to 2

      **NO:** The paper is effectively pointless and needs a richer, more appropriate point.

2. **The introduction must announce the topics and key concepts around which the reader is expected to construct the coherence of the paper.**

   2.1 Do the last few sentences of the introduction mention the concepts that will be keys to the discussion that follows?

      **YES:** go to 2.2

      **NO:** If the discussion that follows has a few central concepts, they need to be added to the end of the introduction. If not, the discussion needs to be rewritten.
2.2 Do the first few sentence in the Introduction say what needs saying and avoid what goes without saying?
YES: go to 3
NO: If the first sentences say too much, they need to be cut. If they say too little, they need to be expanded.

3. The discussion must develop the topic and concepts announced at the end of the Introduction.

3.1 Do the key words mentioned in the last few sentences of the Introduction show up regularly throughout the discussion--generally at the rate of two or three occurrences per page?
YES: go to 4
NO: Drop in one of the key words (or words closely related to them) about two or three times per page.

4. Each major section of the paper or report should have the same global structure as the whole text--points worth making, points located at the end of the opening or at the end of the section, openings that announce key concepts which then appear regularly throughout the section. To test each section, use # 1-3.

5. The information in the paper should flow easily from sentence to sentence and should have a clear and consistent focus.

5.1 Flow comes from the ways that sentences pick up information from previous sentences.

5.1.1 Does the first or second noun phrase in each sentence refer to an idea or character either explicitly mentioned or obviously implicated in what was already discussed?
YES: go to 5.2
NO: If there is such a familiar idea/character in some other part of the sentence, the sentence needs to be rewritten so that the familiar idea comes first. If there is no such familiar idea, one has to be found and inserted.

5.2 Focus comes from having a consistent set of ideas/characters at the beginnings of sentences.

5.2.1 Do the familiar ideas/characters at the beginning of sentences form a relatively coherent group?
YES: go to 5.2.2
NO: Find some idea or set of related ideas that might serve as a focus for each sequence of related sentences, and put those ideas at the beginning of as many sentences as possible.
5.2.2 Does each sequence of related sentences focus on the right idea or character for this text and its point?  
(Note: This too is a disciplinary judgment. Humanistic texts normally focus on people. Scientific texts often avoid focusing on people--by using agentless passives--for some, though not all, sections of the text.)

YES: go to 6

NO: Change the focus by putting a different set of ideas/characters at the beginning of most of the sentences.

6. A paper should tell a clear story. Most sentences should begin with characters and actions.

6.1 Do most of the sentences include actions?

YES: go to 6.2

NO: If most of the sentences in a paper have no action or an action that goes without saying, then the paper probably has little to say.

6.2 Are most of the actions expressed as verbs?

YES: go to 6.3

NO: Rewrite the sentences so that actions are verbs.

6.3 Do most of the subjects of the verbs name main characters/ideas?

YES: end the exercise

NO: Put main characters/ideas in the subject position.