
Responding to Student Writing



Writing Resources Center (WRC)

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<http://rich65.com/uncc/>



Research on Effective Response Strategies



Design Meaningful Assignments

- ❑ Students go through the motions “doing school” with writing assignments that lack genuine purpose and real-world audiences.
 - ❑ They pretend to do the “writing process.”
 - ❑ Students become engaged and write (and revise) more effectively when writing has an obvious social purpose and value.
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Make Expectations Clear in Advance

- ❑ Extensive research has shown that when students read our comments, they frequently misunderstand what we have written.
 - ❑ For each assignment, *show* students in advance what you expect and how you will evaluate their writing.
 - ❑ What's most important to you, and in what order? Create a grading hierarchy that values meaning-making first.
 - ❑ Do not waste time on careless work.
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Focus on Learning

- ❑ Grade the learning.
 - ❑ Students are not professional writers.
 - ❑ Requiring perfect, error-free prose in a teaching and learning setting is unrealistic.
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Value Writing Process & Product

- ❑ Real writers revise, multiple times.
 - ❑ If you want students to improve, then include revision as a requirement of the assignment.
 - ❑ Even if you don't intervene in the process, students who revise tend to improve.
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Lighten the Load with Peer Response

- ❑ Without creating more work for yourself, ask students to exchange feedback with classmates during the writing process.
 - ❑ Use Blackboard Vista or Moodle as a venue for sharing peer responses outside of class.
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Teach Students to Self-Assess

- ❑ “Describe what you would do to improve your writing, if you had one more day to work on this assignment.”
 - ❑ “What do you think you most need help with in order to revise?”
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Make Response a Dialogue

- ❑ Avoid the impersonal God/Truth voice.

“Unclear.”

- ❑ Talk to students in your comments.

“This was confusing to me because . . .”

- ❑ When you return papers to students with comments, ask them to take 5 minutes right then to write you a short note telling how they understand your feedback, how they are reacting to it, and what they intend to do next in revision.
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Summative or Formative Feedback?

- ❑ Summative Responses: Assume that the writing is finished. Feedback “sums up” assessment of the final product.

“Here’s what didn’t work.”

- ❑ Formative Responses: Assume that the writing remains “in process.” Feedback focuses on *global* concerns (idea development, organization, meaning-making) before *local* concerns (sentence-level errors).

“Here’s what to work on in your next draft.”

Directive or Facilitative?

- ❑ Facilitative feedback helps students rethink their writing analytically.
 - ❑ Directive commentary—the commentary of the critic and judge—includes suggestions made in an authoritative manner.
 - ❑ Both have legitimate uses.
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Define Your Purpose in Responding

- ❑ In a pedagogical setting, the primary purpose of responding to students' writing is to help students improve the quality of their writing.
 - ❑ The best comment is the one that prompts the writer's development.
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Focus Feedback on Revision

Students benefit most from 3 types of feedback:

1. Comments that respond to the development of ideas
 2. Comments that suggest specific ways to make improvements in revision
 3. Comments that *explain* why something is good or bad in their writing
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Put Ideas Before Errors

- ❑ Research shows that most teacher feedback focuses on editing matters.
 - ❑ When we limit our focus to editing, students limit their revisions to sentence structure and mechanics.
 - ❑ To foster more substantive revisions, respond to the development of students' ideas.
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Focus on Global Before Local

- ❑ When reading a draft that will be revised, sit on your hands.
 - ❑ Afterwards, respond only to matters of *content development, organization, and meaning making*.
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Be a Reader, Not an Editor

- ❑ Tell the writer what you learned, what more you'd like to know, what you wonder about, where you need more information, what confused you.
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Be Specific

- ❑ Offer text-specific comments.
 - ❑ Avoid those that are cryptic or that could be rubber-stamped from paper to paper: “elaborate,” “be specific,” “awk,” “frag,” “be more precise.”
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Use Technology for Efficiency

- ❑ Type comments. Use the “Insert Comment” tool to write feedback in the margins.
 - ❑ Use a highlighter to point to specific ideas and to draw attention to a few sentence-level errors.
 - ❑ Copy and paste similar comments.
 - ❑ Give your class a hand-out on common problems.
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When I paused to scan the text that followed, the student said, “actually, this is an example....I-it’s gonna be different.” My cooperative overlaps—“Right...sure”—are delivered in a bored tone with little inflection, which is not reflected in the transcript. Black’s assertion that “cooperative overlaps indicate shared knowledge (if not agreement)” (67) fits well with what occurred in this segment. The responses I chose do indicate shared knowledge, but my tone of voice was dismissive. While it was clear that I agreed with the student, I seemed to be telling him that what he had said was old news. At the time, I assumed that the student’s only reason for this comment was that he thought I could not have determined it for myself.

Comment [C1]: The text that followed what? This trips me up . . .

Comment [C2]: So here you may need a bit of elaboration. On the one hand, you agree with Black, but on the other, you’re saying there’s more to it than the words on the transcript can tell; you’re saying that TONE is also something we should take note of in our analyses. In this way, you seem to be EXTENDING Black’s work. Good, now make this clear.

One word in the student’s utterance that stood out was “actually.” Perhaps that was what I reacted to. Having come from a middle-class background, I have commonly heard this word used to inform someone that his or her information is incorrect—that the person is somehow wrong. Because this is definition is implicit and culture-specific, it could be considered a form of hedging. A classic American middle-class technique of indirect criticism, hedging is more precisely a “polite” way of introducing ideas that may be uncomfortable to discuss. Because I am aware of its implications, I tend to be sensitive to the word. It is therefore possible that I picked up on it, reacting in the way I did based on a single word.

Comment [C3]: An example would help here: “Actually, what Black means by ‘hedging’ is _____.”

Comment [C4]: A VERY insightful reading of this excerpt. I wouldn’t have gotten this without you.

Use End-Comments to Teach Revision

- ❑ Begin with genuine praise; don't undercut with *but*.
 - ❑ Identify only 2-3 problems and explain *why* they are significant.
 - ❑ Set 1-2 *specific goals* for the writer to work toward in the next draft.
 - ❑ Offer *specific strategies* for reaching those goals.
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Make Grading Rubrics

Assignment-Specific

- ❑ Rubrics that include only general criteria are ineffective.
 - ❑ Rather than importing generic criteria that may have little relevance to a unique writing situation, teachers should design criteria with specific assignment contexts and criteria in mind.
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Respond to Grammar, Usage & Mechanics

- ❑ Correcting errors for students prompts little or no improvement.
 - ❑ Students improve by having a small number of repeated errors—patterns—pointed out at one time, then self-correcting and collaborating with peers to revise.
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Use Minimal Marking to Teach Students to Self-Correct

- Minimal marking (merely pointing out) is effective, while excessive marking is overwhelming, even confusing.
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Mark Only a Few Repeated Errors

- ❑ Don't overwhelm yourself or students by marking every error.
 - ❑ Point out only 2-3 repeated patterns of error, focusing first on those that most impede meaning.
 - ❑ Help students work toward a limited number of goals at one time.
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Remember That Error is a Social Construct

- ❑ Research shows that teachers vary widely in what they perceive to be errors. Their perceptions largely reflect their individual judgments.
 - ❑ That is not to say that there is no such thing as error, but that errors are determined by specific social contexts.
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Distinguish Language-Acquisition From “Errors”

- ❑ Be patient with English language learners. Language acquisition is life-long process, not a semester one.
 - ❑ Point out patterns of repeated errors, but don't unfairly penalize language learners for writing with an accent.
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Be Patient

- ❑ Not all evidence of learning shows up in a single semester.
- ❑ Writing development occurs slowly over extended time.



Distinguish “Responding” From “Grading”

- ❑ The purpose of responding is to prompt development.
 - ❑ The purpose of grading is to judge and to justify.
 - ❑ Grading tends to undermine teaching and learning.
 - ❑ To improve, students need frequent feedback, not grades.
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Grading Decisions Are Not Trustworthy

- ❑ Good teachers and evaluators routinely disagree about grades.
 - ❑ There is no “right” or “true” grade for a piece of writing.
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Minimal Grading

- ❑ A scale with 2 levels:
Pass / Fail
 - ❑ A scale with 3 levels:
Strong / Satisfactory / Weak
Excellent / O.K. / Revise and resubmit
 - ❑ A scale with 4 levels:
Excellent / Good / Fair / Poor
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Use Criteria Specific to the Assignment

- ❑ “Entries identify and explain keywords or passages.”
- ❑ “Entries explain how the writer will use the source to address his or her inquiry question.”
- ❑ “Quotations and paraphrases are introduced and smoothly integrated into the writer’s own sentences using MLA format for in-text citations. The writer avoids misusing sources.”

Unacceptable

Needs work

Effective

Comments:

Help Students Make Best Use of the Writing Resources Center

- ❑ “As you work on this further in revision, go to the Writing Resources Center and ask for help learning to identify and correct sentence fragments and run-ons.”
 - ❑ “Before you hand in a draft of your next paper, take it to the Writing Resources Center and ask a tutor to help you practice documenting sources according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.”
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