

A Basic Method for Responding to Student Writing

From “Assigning and Responding to Student Writing,” a presentation by Jenny Koster, Assistant Professor of English/Writing Center Coordinator at PVCC, in the Center for Excellence in Instruction, November 2007.

- a. Read through each paper as a reader. What is the writer trying to say? How well are they presenting their ideas? Try not to write anything on the paper this first time through—sit on your hands. Just read the paper as a reader.
 - b. Compose a reply to the writer at the end of the paper or on a separate sheet of paper. This reply should be written as a letter to the writer, written in “your own voice as the intended reader.”
 - c. A general pattern:
 - i. Summarize what the paper is saying, what its intent appears to be.
 - ii. Point to the paper’s overall strengths, and perhaps to particularly strong sentences or ideas in the paper.
 - iii. Choose one or two major areas to work on. For example, you might suggest the research is thin and that the research present needs to be more clearly organized.
 - iv. Save grammar for last. Choose one or two repeated problems you see in the paper, such as a problem with comma splices or with verb tense. Point students to resources to help him/her address the problems.
 - v. Then, return to the paper and insert specific comments or questions, or note particularly pervasive grammatical errors.
 - vi. Lastly, assign a grade if you must.
- Time Savers.
 - Read the whole stack of papers as a reader rather than a grader first.
 - If you read all the papers quickly before commenting at all, you’ll get an overview of problems you’ll need to address to the whole, and won’t write the same comments over and over.
 - Avoid line editing and random reactive comments in the margins.
 - Students cannot fix all of their problems at once. Mark just those that you feel the student can reasonably deal with in one assignment.
 - What students value:
 - According to the Harvard Writing Program Study of Undergraduate Writing, the comments most useful to students were:
 - Questions that stimulated further thought
 - Brief summaries of what the reader got out of the paper
 - Descriptions of difficulties the reader encountered
 - Even highly critical feedback that was constructive and respectful. (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 53).
 - Tips for growing better writing:
 - Write often in class. Begin class with a brief writing prompt that prepares the mind for what’s ahead.
 - Ask students to write a response at the end of class—what aspect of the lesson was most interesting, questions they have, write short response.
 - Construct assignments from simple to more complex—start with very close to the self, asking them to do gradually more sophisticated steps culminating in a more complex paper.
 - Ask students to reflect upon, to evaluate their own writing. This helps them to build awareness about their own writing strengths and weaknesses. When they turn in the paper, have them write

some reflective comments, perhaps on another piece of paper or on the back of the paper. Here are some sample questions:

- Something I'm really proud of in this paper is . . .
- Something I couldn't get right
- I really struggled with . . .
- A risk I took is
- If I had time for one more draft, I would . . .
- I really hope you will see

Resources:

Gottschalk, Katherine and Keith Hjortshoj. The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.