Options for Responding to Student Writing

Peter Elbow

The main point of this memo is to give some simple, concrete, practical guidelines for commenting on student papers. But these will make most sense if I start off with a few larger observations.

It's clear that students learn from doing extensive writing. It's not clear that they learn from our comments on their writing. Extensive research has shown that when students read our comments, they frequently misunderstand what we have written.

The reasons are easy to see. First there are the unhelpful conditions under which we write our comments. Writing was not meant to be read in stacks of twenty or forty papers on the same topic—often a single topic specified by us. These conditions tempt us to read not as most readers do (to find out what the writer has to say that might be useful or entertaining), but rather to hold up papers against an ideal text in our heads. Besides, we often write our comments late at night, perhaps tired, even grumpy, sometimes using incomplete sentences, and we almost never do the main thing we ask our students to do, namely to revise.

Then there are the conditions in which students read. They come to our comments with idiosyncratic assumptions and expectations from their past experiences with comments from teachers. When they read what we write they are liable to be defensive or annoyed or insecure or fragile and ready to stop trying. Students often interpret any comment as a criticism.

If this weren't enough, there is also a larger problem. To grade or comment on a student paper is to interpret a text. We know that good scholars tend to disagree not only in their estimates of value but even in their interpretations of what a text means—texts they've read carefully and countless times. And we know that nothing in literary or philosophical theory gives us any agreed-upon rules for settling these disputes. To reflect on this is to realize how little we can trust what we or any teacher writes on a student paper.

We have reason then to be humble in our commenting—and also to try to be as strategic as we can: to try to figure out how to spend our efforts in ways most likely to be of use—and least likely to be a waste of time. To put it differently, we should 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 at this point in the semester—given her character and experience. My best chance of figuring out what is right for this student at any given point depends on knowing about what was going on for her as she was writing. (Did she think she was supposed to sound detached and uninvolved or is this timidity? Was she struggling hard on this paper or getting confused or just being lazy?) If I am responding to the paper in a face-to-face conference with the student, I can probably learn some of these things. Responding in conference is very helpful. I try to do it frequently. But often I am commenting in solitude with only the text before me. I find the following guidelines helpful:

In order to know more about what was going on for the student, I always ask for a piece of “process writing” with every main assignment. This can be in the form of a “writer’s log” or a “cover letter” to the reader. I usually invite something informal—even handwritten. I ask them to tell me things like: what they see as their main points; the story of how they went about writing and what it was like for them as they were writing; how did they get their ideas; what were some of the choices they made; which parts went well or badly for them; were there any surprises; and above all what questions they have for readers. If it is a revision it’s particularly helpful to ask what changes they made and why. Reading the cover letter usually helps me decide what to say in my comment. Often I can agree with much of what the student has said—sometimes even being more encouraging about the essay than the student was. With process writing, my comment is not the initiation of discourse but an answer to discourse that the student started. Process writing is not so easy for lots of students. But this self-reflective sort of writing is worth working on. It helps them learn to see their own thinking and writing more clearly and to be more aware of their writing process. In the beginning I often do practice sessions in class on the day that a paper is due.

Similarly, it’s helpful if I can glance through some peer responses before commenting. I can often second what was said by others and help the student take peer response more seriously—and feel less dependent on my responses.

I find commenting much easier if I read the whole piece before making any comments—except sometimes putting straight and wiggly lines where I am pleased or somehow bothered. I save lots of time by reminding myself that students can seldom benefit from criticism of more than two or three problems. The most crucial decision in commenting is which problems to focus on, and I can’t make that decision till I read the whole paper through. Most of my bad commenting comes from jumping in with marginal comments as I am reading. I am more likely to waste my time on something that turns out to be a minor issue; or make some passing remark that the student misunderstands; or say something that’s actually wrong (“you obviously don’t understand X”—when later on it’s clear that he does understand X); or get caught up in a little spasm of unhelpful irritation. If I settle for just making straight and wiggly lines during my first reading, these serve as reminders when I am trying to decide at the end what are the few main things I need to say. Even when I want to give movies of my mind—to tell the story of my reactions as I was in the process of reading—I can usually do this more clearly and helpfully by waiting till I’ve read the whole piece.

I try not to mess up students’ papers (especially final drafts) by writing on them. When I put anything on them I write only in light pencil, never ink—usually making just straight and wiggly lines and at most a couple of phrases (e.g., “I stumbled here”). I prefer commenting on a separate sheet not only because I can write more quickly and neatly on my computer, but also because this method makes me comment as a reader about the effects rather than as an editor trying to fix the text. Not putting ink on their papers sends an important message about them owning and being in charge of their own text, them being writers—and most of all a message about me not trampling on their texts.

When I return papers to students with comments, I find it very helpful sometimes to take five minutes right then and ask them to write me a short note telling what they heard me saying and how they are reacting to it. This helps me learn 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.

One of the most useful kinds of response is often overlooked because it seems too simple: to describe the paper as well as I can: what are its main points, its subsidiary points, how is it structured?

When I comment on a draft, I can make my comments positive suggestions for revising rather than negative points in a way. Even when I am commenting on a final version, I can frame my comments in a positive, forward looking way—“Here’s what to work on in your next paper”—instead of just saying, “Here’s what didn’t work.”

A Down-to-Earth Note on Epistemology

When students don’t read or heed our comments very well, I don’t think we should necessarily assume carelessness or inattention. I think students understand—sometimes consciously, sometimes not—how untrustworthy our comments can be. They may not talk about epistemology, but they see different teachers asking for very different things but calling it “good writing.”
our time or cause harm: to get students to want to write; to read what they write with good attention and respect; to show them that we understand what they have written—even the parts where they had trouble getting their meaning across; and respecting them and the dialogue to tell them some of our thoughts on what they are writing about. Surely what writers need most is the experience of being heard and a chance for dialogue.

More Options For Responding to Student Writing

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 cannot use on all papers. But if you practice it now and then, your mind will fill with more options when you are 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—first quick version—just for yourself, not for the student. Quick notes will do. 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.

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
Read 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 from 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 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 X.

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

Back to movies—this time for the student. Even though you might need to leave out some of your actual reactions, 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 trying out these options, write the actual comment you guess might be most appropriate for this student on this occasion.

Using Scoring Guides to Assess Writing

Edward M. White

It is hard to say who dislikes grading more, teachers or students. Yet assessment is a necessary part of learning. In sports, the assessment occurs when the tennis ball hits the net or the basketball misses the basket. We make correction in our swing or our shot until a new assessment (the ball went in) tells us we have done it right. Then we try to keep doing it right. With writing, the assessment usually comes from a trained writing teacher and even then there is no single "right" way to do it. We still need assessment if we are to improve, but we need to have confidence that the assessment is professional, fair, and honest, that is, in sports terms, that the height of the net stays the same, or in assessment terms, that the measurement is valid and reliable. If we are doing the assessing, we need to know a great deal about the teaching and learning of writing so that our assessments are appropriate and helpful as well.

We do not need to assess every piece of writing that students give us. Sometimes an encouraging word or a simple check mark indicating satisfactory work is more appropriate than a grade. But encouragement and praise are only part of teaching; it is a self-deceiving illusion to imagine that we can avoid judgment as part of our work. We are required to inscribe grades for students at the end of the term and those symbols are a powerful response to students about the quality of what they have done. And most students are concerned enough about how they are doing to keep asking if we try to put them off. We should not condemn them for this; it is a perfectly professional and sound question for any diligent learner to ask. If we are wise teachers, we do not allow concern for the grade to replace the drive to improve; the assessments are means to an end, not ends in themselves. Judgment is tough to do and tough to take, but unless we do it we are not professional; it comes with the territory. The reading of papers always awaits us. The problem is to find ways of assessing student work that are fair, consistent, public, clear, and responsible—grades that support teaching and learning rather than substitute for them.

Using Scoring Guides to Improve Assignments and Teacher Grading

Scoring guides, developed originally for large-scale assessment of writing, have unexpectedly become a powerful teaching tool as classroom