

HARVARD WRITING PROJECT BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to Responding to Student Writing

Principles of Responding to Student Writing

Your comments on student writing should clearly reflect the hierarchy of your concerns about the paper. Major issues should be treated more prominently and at greater length; minor issues should be treated briefly or not at all. If you comment extensively on grammatical or mechanical issues, you should expect students to infer that such issues are among your main concerns with the paper. It is after all not unreasonable for students to assume that the amount of ink you spill on an issue bears some relationship to the issue's importance.

It is often more helpful to comment explicitly, substantively, and in detail about two or three important matters than it is to comment superficially about many issues. Many veteran readers find the experience of responding to student writing to be one of constantly deciding *not* to comment on less important issues. Such restraint allows you to focus your energies on just a few important points and also tends to yield a cleaner and more easily intelligible message for students.

Some suggestions for writing comments follow.

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READING THE PAPER

You may want to skim through four or five papers to get a sense of the pile before reading and grading any single paper. Many instructors read each paper once through to grasp the overall argument before making any marks. Whether skimming on a first time through or reading carefully, you might keep the following categories in mind, which will help you assess the paper's strengths and weaknesses:

- **Thesis:** Is there one main argument in the paper? Does it fulfill the assignment? Is the thesis clearly stated near the beginning of the paper? Is it interesting, complex? Is it argued throughout?
- **Structure:** Is the paper clearly organized? Is it easy to understand the main point of each paragraph? Does the order of the overall argument make sense, and is it easy to follow?
- **Evidence and Analysis:** Does the paper offer supporting evidence for each of its points? Does the evidence suggest the writer's knowledge of the subject matter? Has the paper overlooked any obvious or important pieces of evidence? Is there enough analysis of evidence? Is the evidence properly attributed, and is the bibliographical information correct?
- **Sources:** If appropriate or required, are sources used besides the main text(s) under consideration? Are they introduced in an understandable way? Is their purpose in the argument clear? Do they do more than affirm the writer's viewpoint or represent a "straw person" for knocking down? Are responsible inferences drawn from them? Are they properly attributed, and is the bibliographical information correct?
- **Style:** Is the style appropriate for its audience? Is the paper concise and to the point? Are sentences clear and grammatically correct? Are there spelling or proofreading errors?

Writing a Final Comment

Your final comment is your chance not only to critique the paper at hand but also to communicate your expectations about writing and to teach students how to write more effective papers in the future.

The following simple structure will help you present your comments in an organized way:

- **Reflect back the paper's main point.** By reflecting back your understanding of the argument, you let the student see that you took the paper seriously. A restatement in your own words will also help you ground your comment. If the paper lacks a thesis, restate the subject area.
- **Discuss the essay's strengths.** Even very good writers need to know what they're doing well so that they can do it again in the future. Remember to give specific examples.
- **Discuss the paper's weaknesses, focusing on large problems first.** You don't have to comment on every little thing that went wrong in a paper. Instead, choose two or three of the most important areas in which the student needs to improve, and present these in order of descending importance. You may find it useful to key these weaknesses to such essay elements as Thesis, Structure, Evidence, and Style. Give specific examples to show the student what you're seeing. If possible, suggest practical solutions so that the student writer can correct the problems in the next paper.
- **Type your final comments** if possible. If you handwrite them, write in a straight line (not on an angle or up the side of a page), and avoid writing on the reverse side; instead, append extra sheets as needed. The more readable your comments are, the more seriously your students are likely to take them.

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Marginal Comments

While carefully reading a paper, you'll want to make comments in the margins. These comments have two main purposes: to show students that you attentively read the paper and to help students understand the connection between the paper and your final comments. If you tell a student in the final comment that he or she needs more analysis, for example, the student should be able to locate one or more specific sites in the text that you think are lacking.

Some Principles for Making Marginal Comments

- **Make some positive comments.** “Good point” and “great move here” mean a lot to students, as do fuller indications of your engagement with their writing. Students need to know what works in their writing if they're to repeat successful strategies and make them a permanent part of their repertoire as writers. They're also more likely to work hard to improve when given some positive feedback.
- **Comment primarily on patterns**—representative strengths and weaknesses. Noting patterns (and marking these only once or twice) helps instructors strike a balance between making students wonder whether anyone actually read their essay and overwhelming them with ink. The “pattern” principle applies to grammar and other sentence-level problems, too.
- **Write in complete, detailed sentences.** Cryptic comments—e.g. “weak thesis,” “more analysis needed,” and “evidence?”—will be incompletely understood by most students, who will wonder, What makes the thesis weak? What does my teacher mean by “analysis”? What about my evidence? Symbols and abbreviations—e.g. “awk” and “?”—are likewise confusing. The more specific and concrete your comments, the more helpful they'll be to student writers.
- **Ask questions.** Asking questions in the margins promotes a useful analytical technique while helping students anticipate future readers' queries.
- **Use a respectful tone.** Even in the face of fatigue and frustration, it's important to address students respectfully, as the junior colleagues they are.
- **Write legibly (in any ink but red).** If students have to struggle to decipher a comment, they probably won't bother. Red ink will make them feel as if their essay is being corrected rather than responded to.

10 STRATEGIES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING MORE EFFICIENTLY

1. Skim through the pile to discern the range of responses to an assignment.
2. Read each essay through quickly, before making any marks, to identify major strengths and weaknesses.
3. Think about strengths and weaknesses in terms of clear assessment criteria—thesis, structure, analysis, and so on.
4. Comment representatively in the margins by noting patterns.
5. Use a reliable format for structuring final comments—for example, restatement of thesis, discussion of strengths, and discussion of weaknesses.
6. Identify in final comments no more than three or four areas for improvement.
7. Design effective writing assignments.
8. Respond to proposals, outlines, and drafts.
9. Organize students into writing groups.
10. Ask for a cover letter.