Responding to Student Writing

Comments and grades on student writing arguably constitute the most serious, sustained teaching intervention you can make in a student's writing career. Responding to a student's paper involves (1) reading it carefully while making marginal comments, (2) writing a final comment in which you sum up the paper's strengths and weaknesses, then (3) deciding on a grade. Below are suggestions for accomplishing each of these tasks.

1. Before Reading the Papers. This is perhaps the most crucial step in responding to student writing: before even looking at the stack, you need to think about your criteria for evaluating the papers before you. By making your grading criteria explicit, you'll be better able to assess each paper's strengths and weaknesses efficiently and fairly.

So—re-read the assignment. What do you expect will be the characteristics of the best responses? (For example, if the assignment asks students to take a side on an issue, you would expect papers with clearly stated positions.) Also think about the qualities you value most in student writing. Below is a list of qualities that most faculty and AIs would agree on:

- <u>Thesis</u>: 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?

- <u>Structure</u>: 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?

- <u>Evidence</u> and <u>Analysis</u>: 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?

- <u>Sources</u>: 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?

- <u>Style</u>: 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?

In establishing your grading criteria, you should resist making a distinction between "content" and "writing"—and certainly don't assign separate "content" and "writing" grades. This is a tough one, but, when you think about it, there is no content in a paper without the writing to convey it, and writing is meaningless without any content to inform it. When you identify a paper as having "good ideas" but "poor writing," it's likely that you're just guessing at the ideas the paper has and imagining what the writer meant. Don't give the writer so much credit! Likewise, a "well-written paper" without "substance" is probably well written only in terms of sentence-level mechanics. In terms of every other element of academic argument—thesis, structure, use of evidence, and so on—the paper is likely *not* to

be "well written." Content and writing are so intertwined as not to be easily distinguishable, so don't even bother.

2. Reading the Papers and Making Marginal Comments. You may want to skim through four or five papers to get a sense of the pile before reading and grading any single paper. Having selected a paper to respond to, you might read it through quickly to grasp the overall argument before making any marks.

While reading a paper more carefully, you should 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.

- 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. Resist the temptation to copy-edit!

- 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 preceptor 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 paper is being corrected rather than responded to.

3. 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:

- Open with a salutation. By addressing the student directly ("Dear Pat"), you make a personal connection and indicate that you have a stake in the his or her intellectual welfare.

- Reflect back the paper's main point. By reflecting back your understanding of the paper's main point, you let the student see that you took him or her seriously. A restatement in your own words will also help you ground your comment.

- Discuss the paper'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 your grading criteria. Give specific examples to show the student what you're seeing. If possible, suggest practical solutions so that the student writer can address 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.

4. Grading the Paper. If you wait to decide on the grade until after you've written your final comment, the grade you assign is likely to be more accurate and fair than would otherwise be true, and the decision-making process will be less agonizing. To determine the grade, try these three steps:

- Re-read your final comment. As you do this, think about the extent to which the paper has met your grading criteria. You might even compose, in your notes or in your mind, a brief description of the paper in terms of these criteria—for example, "Good research question, obvious enthusiasm for the topic, and clear writing, but driven by an observation, not a thesis; use of a listing structure; lack of evidence to ground generalizations; over-reliance on the opinions of secondary sources."

- Determine whether a paper falls above or below "the line." It's useful to think of papers as falling above or below an imaginary line in the grading scale—for example, B-/C+. A line set higher on the grading scale (say, at A-/B+) will result in higher grades. Whether a paper falls above or below the line most often depends on how effective the paper's thesis and structure are: a readable paper with a clear argument will usually receive an above-the-line grade; a paper that's difficult to read and doesn't have a clear argument will usually receive a below-the-line grade. The paper described above would most certainly fall below the line, no matter where the line is set.

- Make fine distinctions. Having determined whether a paper is above or below the line, consider why it should receive a particular grade, not something slightly higher or slightly lower. If the line is set at B-/C+, then the paper described above would probably earn a C, because its weaknesses make a C+ too generous, and its strengths make a C- or lower too harsh. If the line is set at A-/B+, the paper would probably get a B. As you can infer, disagreements over grades are often actually disagreements over where the line is set.

Sample Final Comments

Dear Pat—You argue with conviction that Murray's argument is wrong. The paper's impassioned tone is what I like best about it. I also think you have moments of analytical insight—for example, when you uncover Murray's assumptions about welfare on p. 2. But the paper has some problems that detract from its persuasiveness. I've outlined these below:

(1) The paper is full of arguments against Murray, but instead of just listing complaints, you need to come up with a focused argument. On p. 1 alone, you refer to Murray's reactionary misogyny, his indifference to children, his simplistic assumptions and misrepresentations, the primary burden of childrearing falling to women, and the underfunding of the AFDC. The focus you suggest in your title—Murray's misogyny—would work well if you gave a coherent summary of Murray's article early on and then attacked what you see as his misogyny. Don't get sidetracked.

(2) The paragraph on orphanages (p. 3) gives the best analysis in the paper. Elsewhere—for example, the shotgun marriages paragraph on the same page—your evidence is way under-analyzed. You need to analyze Murray's arguments more using some of the tools and concepts we've discussed in class.

(3) You obviously have the ability to write clear prose, but mechanical errors obscure your meaning and reduce your credibility. Proofread more carefully next time.

Let's talk about your next paper before you write it. Once you learn how to sustain a single focus and make sound economic arguments, you'll be able to write much stronger papers. —D.J.

Dear Celeste: You're at your best in this essay on cultural convergence when you analyze the various historical documents, as on p. 3 where you intelligently discuss the *Declaration*. I was also impressed by this essay's "flow": as a reader, I moved easily from one idea to the next.

• **Thesis**. Despite your confident use of sources, smooth style, and improved transitions, the essay still suffers from a lack of focus. You ask five questions in the opening section, each one of which, as a reader, I took to be the central focus. You could have solved this confusion by asking only the one or two questions you wanted to explore. You might also have re-read the assignment, which asks you to concentrate on Greene.

• **Keyterms**. I found one of your keyterms—"the common man"—to be confusing, since the Common Man is the "average" man, the man on the streets, Anybody, a meaning that conflicts with your use of the term. Do you mean to be discussing common *ideals* rather than the common *man*? In the future, think about how many keyterms you have and whether they're precisely defined. If you have either no keyterms or several, and they're not well-defined, you should revisit your argument.

• **Orienting Your Reader**. Throughout, you need to give your reader more bits of context so he or she can follow your argument more easily. For example, at the bottom of p. 1, you need to add phrases such as "according to Greene" or "in Greene's view" to indicate who owns the ideas you use in your characterization of the American economy.

I hope these comments will be useful as you think about the next essay. —Francis