

13 Ways of Looking at Responding to Student Writing¹

Doug Hesse, Director of Writing Programs and Professor
The University of Denver / Penrose 202 / 2150 E. Evans Ave. / Denver, CO 80211 dhesse@du.edu

1. No professor is capable of making comments so profoundly wonderful that a student will become a perfect writer on the basis of remarks on a single paper.
2. Unskilled writers are largely unable to assign levels of importance to comments made on their papers. In other words, they are likely to treat equally a comment that the argument of an essay is confusing and a comment that the essay contains several misspellings. Moreover, since comments on surface errors are more easily addressable (though error types themselves are not necessarily easily and permanently resolved), students are likely to attend to them and not to more serious problems in logic, idea development, focus, or order.
3. Teachers have a finite amount of time to spend responding to writing. There is evidence that time spent meticulously annotating every aspect of a student's paper does little good. This is especially true if the comments are rubber stamp ones: "awkward," "be specific" and so on.
4. Students learn to write by writing, and while judicious advice is helpful, there is a gap between knowledge and performance. A steady diet of being closely edited doesn't mean that a student will necessarily internalize what he or she needs to do in future tasks.
5. Set ground rules for yourself, and clearly convey to students what they can and cannot expect in terms of your response. For example, tell them (or include a response sheet that tells them) that your written comments will address only one main strength and one main area for improvement, if that's what you choose to do. Cover other aspects of the paper with a response or grading rubric. 1. "The most effective aspect of this paper is ____ (or, "The best section of this paper is on page) 2. "The one thing that would most improve this paper or ones like it in the future is ____"
6. "Edit" only a fraction of a paper: a selected paragraph or page. Make clear up front that you do not aspire to be exhaustive. See recommendation 3.
7. Make good student papers available to illustrate features of strong work.
8. Develop a response rubric, that is, a list of elements of the paper, with values you can check off. Typical broad criteria include: focus, thesis, argument; organization; clarity of development; quality and quantity of evidence or support; ambition (degree of difficulty); format; correctness; and style. However, each element may look different in different situations. Use general rubrics to develop ones tailored to specific assignments.
9. As you write assignments, consider how you might respond to the kinds of writing those assignments might yield. It doesn't "cheapen" the assignment to reveal criteria to students up front. You might provide more scaffolding to students at the beginning of the semester
10. Require students to tell you the specific aspect of the paper on which they'd most like to get feedback from you, then reserve most of your comments for that aspect. You might want to give them a menu of features to select from or, at least, explain to them why very general requests won't yield them much help (e.g. "Does it flow?")
11. Have students write a cover memo in which they describe their strategies in writing the paper and what they perceive its strengths and problem areas to be.
12. Use brief marginal comments to call attention to "higher order" aspects in the paper, usually content or development. A "good" or a "yes" or a "?" or an "evidence?" go a long way. Use squiggly lines (or what you will) to call attention to sentence errors or hugely rough spots (but remember that your goal should be to teach). Don't feel compelled to mark everything, and certainly don't edit everything.
13. In courses with multiple assignments give students "vouchers" good for one detailed commentary per term. They should reserve that for the time they want you to read a paper as you would a manuscript submitted to a journal.

¹ Sorry Mr. Stevens.