

Responding To Students' Writing

The comments that we write on our students' papers may be some of the most difficult writing that many academics do—difficult because we write them under heavy burdens (huge stacks of papers at a time, often late at night, when we're exhausted) and with the knowledge that a large body of research exists arguing that we shouldn't write comments on students' papers at all. However, returning papers with only a grade earns teachers a glare at best. Students want some writing on their papers—otherwise they aren't "graded."

However, they don't need so many comments on their texts that they are overwhelmed. In her book *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, Erika Lindemann presents "Teaching through Comments," which offers some strategies for marking papers in a way that is manageable for teachers and helpful for students. Her suggestions, in an edited version, follow:

1. Read the paper through without marking on it. Appreciate its message. Identify several elements that seem effective.
2. Identify one or two problems. In deciding what to teach this time, view the paper descriptively, not to judge it, but to discover what the text reveals about the decisions the writer made. . . .
3. Formulate tentative hypotheses to explain the problem you want to focus on. You can assume that there's a logic to what appears on the page even if it isn't your logic. Try to define that logic so that your comments can turn it around or modify it. . . .
4. Examine what the student has done well. Can this evidence help the student solve a problem elsewhere in the paper? How can the student's strengths be used to repair weaknesses?
5. Now you are ready to begin commenting on the paper. You have examined the evidence, decided what you want to focus on for this paper, and identified specific examples of the problem (and perhaps its solution) on which to base your lesson.
6. Questions can call attention to troublespots, but avoid questions with simple "yes" and "no" answers. Preface questions with *why*, *how*, or *what* so students must reexamine the paper and become conscious critics of their own prose. . . . Avoid imperatives which identify problems but don't help students learn *how* to solve problems.
7. Avoid labeling problems *unless* you also give students a way of overcoming them. If something is "unclear" or "awkward" let students know the source of your confusion. Refer to other sections of the paper that illustrate a strategy worth repeating. Eschew, when you can, Latinate grammatical terms, abbreviations, and private symbols. They may be clear to you—after all, you've marked hundreds of papers with them—but they might mystify your students.
8. Make praise work toward improvement. Students need to know how a reader responds to their work, but they're rarely fooled by token praise. Avoid "good" or "I like this" unless you add a noun. . . . Remember to commend students for progress they've made
9. Avoid doing the student's work. Rewriting an occasional sentence can give students a model to imitate, *if* you make it clear what principle the model

- illustrates. Circled or underlines words (and most marginal symbols) simply locate and label errors; the student probably didn't "see" the problem and needs practice proofreading and editing. A better strategy for handling errors is to place a check in the margin next to the line in which a misspelled word or punctuation problem occurs. Then ask the student to examine the entire line, locate the problem, and determine how to eliminate it. . . .
10. Write out a careful endnote to summarize your comments and establish a goal for the next draft. Endnotes can follow a simple formula:
 - a. Devote at least one full sentence to commending what you can legitimately praise; avoid undercutting the praise with *but* . . .
 - b. Identify one or two problems and explain why they make understanding the piece difficult
 - c. Set a goal for the student to work toward in the next draft
 - d. Suggest specific strategies for reaching the goal

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Lindemann reminds us that silence tells our students nothing. In our endnotes, we need to give our students praise where it is warranted so they know what they are doing well, set goals for future writings, and give them strategies and offer solutions for overcoming their weaknesses.

Lindemann also suggests that students have a role in the evaluation process through self-evaluation. Students respond to questions about their writing and submit them with their drafts. Although the questions should vary somewhat with the project, Lindemann includes the following as a place to begin:

1. How much time did you spend on this paper?
2. What did you try to improve on, or experiment with, on this paper? How successful were you? If you have questions about what you were trying to do, what are they?
3. What are the strengths of your paper? Place a squiggly line beside those passages you feel are very good.
4. What are the weaknesses, if any, of your paper? Place an X beside any passages you would like your teacher to correct or revise. Place an X over any punctuation, spelling, usage, etc. where you need help or clarification.
5. What one thing will you do to improve your next piece of writing? Or what kind of experimentation in writing would you like to try? If you would like some specific information related to what you want to do, write down your questions.
6. (optional) What grade would you give yourself on this composition? Justify it.

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Allowing students to evaluate their writing gives teachers a window into our students' thinking and their intentions. It also encourages them to become more self-sufficient writers, shifting the burden and responsibility for their product onto their shoulders where it belongs.