RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING
Faculty Resource Series

Responding to student writing is hard. It's usually easy enough to read a draft and realize "huh, this is not good." But moving from there into effective feedback that actually helps the student to a) revise that particular piece of writing well, and b) take away critical writing lessons they can use in the future, is incredibly hard. This guide is designed to help you do that well.

Why is responding well to student writing so hard?

There are two key factors that make responding to student writing difficult: identifying the problem(s), and crafting useful feedback. Let's take both in turn.

Identifying the problem(s). There are a large variety of things that might be off in a piece of writing: it may feel addressed to the wrong audience, misuse commas, fundamentally miss the purpose, feel "choppy" as you move from sentence to sentence, fail to back up its claims with sound reasons and evidence, have simple spelling errors, be incoherent in structure. Often times, these problems are related, making it difficult to pinpoint the root issue. Furthermore, it can simply be difficult to figure out exactly what is wrong: while it's easy to notice low-level errors like a spelling mistake (Greaseley & Cassidy (2010) found that comments on grammar appear in over half of instructor feedback and account for a lot of instructor frustration!), higher-order errors are often more amorphous and hard to mark, but usually impact the effectiveness of a writing even more.
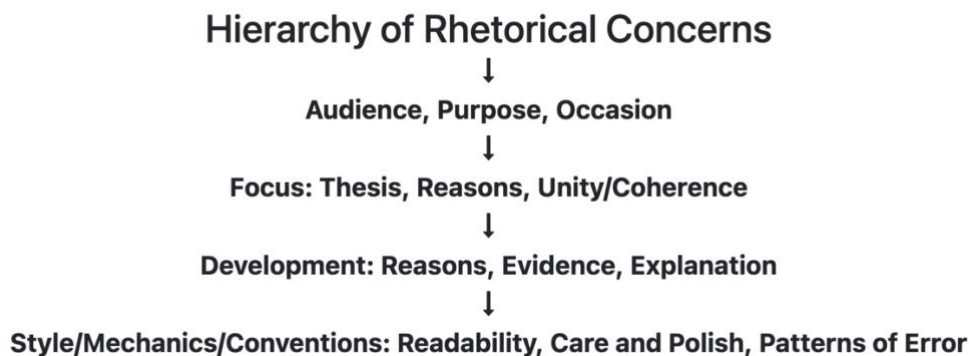
Crafting useful feedback. There are many strategies for giving writing feedback: leaning on rubrics, jotting notes in the margins, discussing face-to-face with students, or leaving a long paragraph of formative feedback. Less important than the form, though, is what goes in the feedback. Research has shown two things consistently: students benefit from praise, though we tend to praise relatively infrequently (e.g., Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Straub & Lunsford, 1995); and, students are easily overwhelmed and confused by lots of feedback (e.g., Sommers, 1982). It often feels easier for us as instructors to mark up everything we see wrong in student writing. Based on this research though, it should be no surprise that this doesn't lead to the revisions we are looking for!

How can I give effective writing feedback?

Based on these difficulties, here are a few key strategies you can use to give writing feedback that will help your students to learn, get them to produce better writing, and save you time:

Strategy 1: Focus your feedback on higher-level concerns.

Experienced writers know that there are a lot of pieces to good writing, and that they differ in importance: many readers are willing to forgive a comma mishap in the middle of a compelling argument, but even the most law-abiding comma usage cannot save a text that fundamentally misses the purpose. Unfortunately, many inexperienced writers struggle to understand this (sometimes due to an overzealous grammar teacher in grade school!). When reading student writing, evaluate it in terms of this hierarchy of rhetorical concerns from the WAC Clearinghouse:

Hierarchy of Rhetorical Concerns
↓
Audience, Purpose, Occasion
↓
Focus: Thesis, Reasons, Unity/Coherence
↓
Development: Reasons, Evidence, Explanation
↓
Style/Mechanics/Conventions: Readability, Care and Polish, Patterns of Error

Feedback that focuses on elements higher in the hierarchy (e.g., *audience* or *purpose*) are likely to have the biggest impact on revision, as well as on the long-term writing skills of your student (Sorcinelli & Elbow, 1997).

Strategy 2: Respond to only 2-3 writing concerns at a time.

Rather than trying to mark everything wrong with a draft (from comma errors to larger-level issues in structure), focus a round of feedback on only 2-3 concerns at a time. In particular, focus on the 2-3 highest concerns on the hierarchy of rhetorical concerns above. While it may seem helpful to give all of your feedback at once, marking a lot of errors in student texts can actually be counterproductive: research has found that when feedback touches on a large range of concerns, students have trouble understanding the relative importance of each comment (Sommers, 1982). By focusing in on just a few issues, students learn to identify what the most impactful problems in their writing are, and can put all of their energy into those problems without getting sidetracked or wrapped up in less crucial elements.

Strategy 3: Frame your feedback as a reader reaction.

Try framing your feedback as a reader reaction to a student's text, rather than a specific recommendation. That is, rather than telling a student, "You should move this paragraph up earlier", try "I am confused about how this paragraph connects to the previous one because the vocabulary is quite different." This strategy is advantageous because it makes the student aware of their reader, and lets them maintain agency over their own writing—with this feedback, the student is now in a position of problem-solving. This strategy also helps ensures your feedback is

useful: it can be frustrating as a writer to receive feedback that we do not feel fits with our larger goals for the piece. Framing your feedback in this way not only reduces the burden on you as an instructor to fix the student's text, but also ensures the student is able to develop their argument as effectively as they can.

Strategy 4: Praise, praise, praise!

As you craft feedback for your students, lean in to genuine praise on what the student did well. For a variety of reasons—perhaps because writing can feel personal and vulnerable, or because lots of red marks on a page feels overwhelming—research shows that students benefit drastically from receiving genuine praise on their writing. From a pedagogical standpoint, remember this: just like learning to cook, skateboard, or any other skill, young writers benefit from feedback not only on what they messed up, but also what they did well. Pull out a piece or two from the hierarchy above if you feel like you're grasping for straws.

Strategy 5: Resist the urge to copy edit.

Once you've worked your way through the hierarchy of rhetorical concerns and the student's main remaining problems are low-level issues in style, mechanics, or grammar, resist the urge to start line editing for them (certainly if they still have higher-level problems, don't bother—there's no need polishing a broken window!). Many students simply accept line edits without trying to understand why an edit helps the text, and instructors feel very burdened by editing a whole paper. Instead, use this 3-part formula: 1) identify a recurring problem, 2) note the effect it has on you as a reader, then 3) instruct the student to fix this throughout (example: "There are some errors in comma usage here which make the relationships between ideas hard to understand. Go through and correct for these."). Leave it as a learning exercise for the student to find all the instances and discover how to fix them.

Strategy 6: Use campus resources.

If **your student** is still feeling lost, or seems to need or want more help than you feel equipped or willing to give, direct them to Illinois Tech's writing center. Tutors can work individually with students at any phase of writing.

If **you** are feeling lost in assigning and grading writing, or you just cannot get the quality of writing you want from your students, reach out to the CAC. We can help you fine tune assignments, rubrics, and feedback strategies to help your students excel.