Evaluation: Types of Responses to Student Writing

Types of Responses
Once we've diagnosed a student's writing problems, we are ready to craft our responses.

Teachers tend to make four different kinds of responses on their students' papers: *facilitative, directive, corrective, and evaluative*. Most teachers believe that students learn best when teachers craft responses that possess all these qualities. When teachers simply direct or correct their students' writing, students don't learn how to think critically about their writing. Rather, they simply learn how to "fix" their papers so that they meet the expectations of that particular teacher. We therefore encourage teachers to give priority to the facilitative approach to responding to student writing because this approach, above all the others, brings students to think critically about their own work, and places the responsibility for writing and thinking squarely on the students' shoulders.

Facilitative Responses
Facilitative remarks are most often phrased as questions. These questions are carefully crafted so that they encourage a student to consider her ideas and their expression more fully. These questions might be general - for example, "Where is your thesis sentence?" More often, however, they are specific, addressing a weakness in very particular terms -- for example, "You attempt to discredit Nietzsche's brand of nihilism in *The Antichrist* by arguing that this nihilism is at odds with Christianity. Wouldn't Nietzsche argue that this is its strength?"

The idea behind the facilitative response is that students learn to write well when they are made responsible for their own writing and re-writing decisions. The facilitative question or comment permits students to retain this important responsibility by locating authority and authorship with the student. Teachers who respond in a facilitative way do not give their students easy answers, nor do they provide them with explicit directions for revision. Rather, these teachers raise questions that encourage students to sift through and weigh the teacher's remarks, to develop revision strategies on their own, and to retain responsibility for their own writing processes.

If you are interested in responding in a more facilitative manner to student writing, examine your response style. If you find that you are too often directing your students in the writing process -- or, indeed, that you are rewriting sentences for them -- try to determine ways that you might transform your remarks into facilitative questions. For example, instead of simply asking a student to omit a paragraph, raise the question of the paragraph's purpose or relevance. Instead of noting that a paragraph lacks coherence, ask a student what the main idea of the paragraph is and if she thinks that each sentence in the paragraph contributes to that idea. And so on.

Directive Responses

Sometimes, facilitative responses are not desirable -- not for the teacher, who deems that the student needs explicit writing advice, and not for the student, who wants to know precisely where he went wrong and why. In this case, teachers often make more directive remarks. Teachers might, indeed tell students to move a paragraph, to omit a sentence, or to change a word.

However, directive responses -- such as "omit" -- are most instructive when they are accompanied by some explanation: Should the student omit a sentence because it is redundant? Because it is irrelevant? Because it doesn't make sense? The directive response is also effective when combined with facilitative remarks -- for example, "This sentence doesn't work here. It disrupts the paragraph's continuity by introducing a new idea. Still, the idea is an interesting one. Do you want to consider it more fully? Where might it be most useful to the argument?"

Corrective Responses

The third category of remarks that teachers make on student papers might be classified as corrective remarks -- typically copy-editing remarks that point out errors in syntax and grammar. Teachers have various approaches to dealing with grammatical errors and stylistic clumsiness in student writing.

These approaches include:

- Labeling all errors using specific grammatical terms (agreement problem, comma splice, etc.). Circling all errors (with the aim of bringing students to labeling errors on their own)
- Marking all errors according to a particular code, which corresponds with the course's grammar handbook
- Correcting or rewriting a phrase or sentence (with the aim of modeling a correct and/or eloquent style)
- Labeling an error the first or second time that it occurs, and then instructing the student to find subsequent errors of that kind in their papers
- Looking for patterns of error, and noting the two or three most common patterns in the summary comments (a method that works well for ESL or other troubled students who are making many different kinds of grammatical errors in their papers)
- Referring students to a Writing/Remedial Center, where they will work with a tutor on grammar and style.
- Referring students to the Writing/Remedial Center's Web site pages on Grammar and Style. Referring students to the online grammar handbook, available on the OWL Purdue site.

Which of the above methods works best? Different methods work best in different situations. For example, labeling errors helps to initiate students into the vocabulary of grammar. Circling errors encourages students to puzzle out what mistake they made. Noting an error the first or second time it occurs and then instructing students to find subsequent examples encourages them to be closer, better readers of their own texts. Isolating patterns of errors helps ESL and other students to understand the general principles of our language.

Evaluative Responses (The Grade)

The last category of response to consider is the evaluative response - a response that usually includes (or maybe is summed up in) the grade.

The grade is a slippery beast - especially when one is asked to grade student writing. Most teachers seem to grade student papers based primarily on content: Does the student explore his topic fully? Does the student grasp the nuances of the intellectual position he is taking? Is the position presented in the paper adequately supported? If the student has done a good job of dealing with the content end of the paper, he can typically expect high marks from his teacher.

For some teachers, however, a grade on a paper also reflects the students writing. By "writing," we don't mean simply that all the commas are in the right place and that no modifiers are misplaced or dangling. Rather, we mean that a student has written clearly and eloquently. In order to achieve clarity and eloquence, a student must have a sound and coherent structure, focused and cohesive paragraphs, a solid sense of the sentence, and good grammar. If any of these elements are lacking, one might argue, the content of the paper also suffers. It is therefore important when evaluating a student's paper to consider both his ideas and their presentation. In short, writing counts.

Some teachers handle this matter by giving two grades: one for the content of a paper, a second for its writing or style. This method is effective in that it allows teachers to reward good thinking or writing without inflating the entire grade. It also allows teachers to motivate a student to address her writing issues: for example, if a student fails to do well in a course because her writing has consistently received a C, that student might feel that she should take her writing problems more seriously.

Still, there is a drawback in this method of grading, in that it foster in students the (mis)understanding that form is separate from content. Student writing tends to be stronger when students are convinced that their ideas cannot be good if their expression is poor. Teachers can nurture this understanding by giving a single grade that incorporates both an evaluation of content and an evaluation of form/style.

In any case, if the matter of giving a grade is difficult, the matter of receiving a grade is equally hard. The grade, after all, has buried in it a great deal of information about a student's writing. (Think of all the considerations that have gone into your giving of a grade.) However, usually the student has no way of accessing this information. Why is this paper a "C+"? What does it need in order to become a "B+"? It's important that you give your students a sense of what your grades actually mean.

Sometimes teachers provide students with sheets on their syllabi explaining what their teachers' standards for grading are. Other times, teachers will tell students that the argument (or structure, or language) of a paper will be most influential in affecting their grade. Most often, though, teachers will devote some of their final commentary to explaining or justifying the student's grade. The student (one hopes) will be motivated by these comments to really think about her writing, and will keep these comments in mind the next time she sits down to write.

As to the matter of grading drafts of papers: Some teachers grade first drafts of papers more harshly than they grade final drafts because they hope that the student will be moved to do a revision that is substantive. Other teachers don't grade first drafts at all, arguing that grades distract students from the "real" process of exploring an idea because it's interesting, and not simply because it's required. One teacher has the unusual habit of grading a first draft, but not the revised final draft. Because he comments thoroughly on student drafts, this teacher believes that students should not be rewarded for work he has done himself.

Margin Comments vs. Summary Comments

Teachers often think of their responses as falling into two categories: the remarks they make in the margins of a paper, and the summary remarks they make at the end. It's interesting to note that teachers make different kinds of comments in different places in the essay. Corrective remarks, facilitative questions that challenge very particular points (or sentences, or vocabulary), and praise for an idea or turn of phrase are likely to be found in the margins. Larger, more global problems might also be addressed in the margins, but typically teachers prefer to deal with global matters in their closing comments.

Closing comments tend to follow a somewhat predictable pattern. Teachers often begin their closing comments with praise for something well done: an interesting "take" on a topic, a particularly strong moment in the argument, or a readable prose style. Teachers then turn their attention to the essay's themes and ideas, often asking students to consider certain points more deeply and thoroughly. Next, they comment on the argument's structure: Is the organization of ideas clear and efficient? Is the idea presented in a manner that is logical? Are there gaps in the logic that must be attended to? Finally, teachers will address their fourth and final concern: matters of grammar and style.

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