Responding to Student Writing

Suggestions from Writing Studies Research

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Bean (2011, Ch. 16) points out that responding to student writing can be one of (if not) the most important aspects of writing instruction; productive commentary will encourage your students to continue developing their writing skills, while less productive feedback can lead to frustration. Spandel and Stiggins (1990) highlight the potential for miscommunication between students and instructors at the feedback stage, which can block further learning and improvement (Zull, 2002).

A study by Smith (2008) shows that mitigated feedback can help students better accept criticism and suggestions; pointing out their successes as well as areas for improvement helps them identify the foundation upon which they can build their skills. Lindeman (2001) suggests that instructors not try to identify and label every mistake made by students. Identifying recurring patterns of error and limiting responses to the most important and manageable areas helps students to prioritize their revisions, and can engage them in dialogue about their work. In contrast, label-type comments ("awk," "frag," "rep," "unclear," etc.) can be confusing and demoralizing; students often perceive a paper in which every error has been marked and labelled as irredeemably bad, and the comments not worth reading (Hedengren, 2004).

Feedback can be either formative (when students are given the opportunity to rewrite and incorporate suggestions) or summative (when provided at the end of the writing process). These two models correspond to the distinction between instructor as coach and instructor as judge: formative feedback is better suited when coaching students to make improvements, while summative provides an opportunity to assess student performance.

Five Key Points When Providing Feedback:

1. Know what you're evaluating. We evaluate student work for many reasons; decide on evaluation criteria before you start providing feedback.

2. Tailor the feedback to the assignment. Not all assignments have the same goals, and the type of feedback should reflect this.

3. Provide focused feedback. You don't need to point out every mistake! Identify major patterns of error, and first address the areas you find most important.

4. Mitigate more critical feedback by pointing out students' successes and strengths. Students are more likely to improve their writing if you help them build on their successes, rather than simply pointing out their failures.

5. Refer back to your rubrics and scoring guides. Students will better understand what your comments mean, and how to improve, when you link your comments back to the assignment requirements.

Six Suggestions For Instructors

1. Respond like an audience, providing comments to students that describe your responses as you read their work. Students want to know that you have engaged with their ideas.
2. Guide substantive thought, rather than focusing solely on mechanical errors.
3. Encourage skills improvement without overloading your students by highlighting every error.
4. Provide a positive and supportive environment.
5. Choose between summative and formative models of feedback.
6. For larger assignments, supplement marginal commentary with substantive endnotes that comment on the piece holistically.

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