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Responding to Student Writing:
Intervene Early and Often

Social Science Division Conversation
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Writing is a process, with a series of discrete though over-lapping stages of thinking and doing. Many writing experts describe these stages, drawn from the reports of practicing writers:

Incentive to write: Something happens in a person's life that creates a need to write. For students, this incentive is usually an assignment with a due date. Many faculty members write in response to other incentives—a need to record and preserve, a desire to communicate, a hunger to follow the lines of one's curiosity, the desire to make something beautiful or artistic, an impulse to enter a professional conversation. Our more pragmatic incentives might be to win a grant or a merit raise, to prove our worthiness for tenure or promotion, or to influence an audience to take a certain action (as I am hoping to do with this little collegial communication). It's worth thinking about how we can create genuine and interesting incentives to write through the assignments we give our students. If we want them to become better writers, we can try to make their incentives to write more attractive and genuine, and the prospects for success more rewarding.

Gathering ideas: Once the desire or the need to write occurs, the writer's mind ranges about, looking for suitable material. The mind does this work in both conscious and unconscious ways. Reading, taking notes, reflecting, talking with others, listening to lectures, searching the internet, brainstorming, and writing informally are all ways that writers gather ideas. Experienced writers report they also discover ideas at unexpected moments when they aren't consciously "writing"—while they are taking a walk or doing a repetitive, routine activity like raking leaves or doing the dishes, suddenly an "ah-ha!" moment happens. Building some time— and perhaps some structured activities— into students' writing process for gathering ideas will lead to better final papers.

Planning: The writer begins to consider how the ideas will fit together—where to begin, how to organize the material, where the paper will lead. Outlines work for some writers, and others may find cognitive maps, clustering, idea maps, tree diagrams or other visual strategies helpful.

Drafting: At some point, the writer sits down and begins to compose. Writers do this work in many different ways, from leisurely musings in the Pine Grove to the final mad dash all-nighter to meet the deadline.

Getting Feedback: Many writers will ask someone to read a draft of their work before they consider it finished. Student writers don't always know how to ask for effective feedback, and

they often say something like, "Will you read this and check my grammar" when they really mean something like "Will you read this, and help me figure out how to make it a clearer, stronger, more interesting piece of writing?"

Revising: In this stage, the writer seeks to "re-see" the paper, to reconsider its ideas and organization, and to try to determine if it offers a convincing argument and adequate evidence. The writer tries to anticipate and improve the reader's experience with the paper. Revising requires a fresh perspective on the **ideas** of the paper.

Editing: Once the writer is satisfied that the right sentences appear in the right places and that the large-scale matters of thesis, reasons, and evidence are as strong as possible, the attention turns to the small-scale matters of surface features of the writing—spelling, punctuation, grammar, mechanics. Copy-editing and proofreading require close attention to the **language** of the paper.

Publishing: After all of this work, it is natural to want readers to enjoy and be influenced by the writing. Passing copies around, posting to a website, reading the paper to classmates, putting it on a bulletin board, mailing it to a family member or friend, or, when the paper merits it, sending it to an editor for consideration for a publication—these are all forms of sharing or publishing. Writers hope for readers to respond to their work—to engage with its ideas, to describe how the work affected them, to say whether they enjoyed it, to disagree or agree with its arguments, to take action in response to new ideas, and so on.   (Individually submitting a paper to a professor for grading and receiving it back marked up in red ink is not the same thing as publishing.)

Traditionally, faculty members have waited until this full process is completed before they respond to students' writing by "marking" or "grading" papers—a labor-intensive process that may or may not lead students to write better in their next attempt, which may come weeks or months or semesters later. But increasingly professors who conceive of their students' writing as a process are looking for multiple opportunities to intervene in this process to offer guidance, encouragement, correction, or redirection. I'd like to encourage colleagues to divide the same amount of time they normally devote to grading or judging final drafts and apply it in a series of brief interventions to work-in-progress. Thus, rather than spending 20 or 30 minutes or more correcting mistakes, making marginal comments, and writing a paragraph or more explaining and justifying the grade, you might spend 10 minutes responding to a paper prospectus, 10 minutes in an individual conference responding to a first draft, and 10 minutes quickly evaluating the final product (with which you are now quite well acquainted), using a rubric to provide a detailed explanation of the grade and writing a brief response to the ideas of the paper. Here are seven ideas for responding to student writing while it is still in process.

1. **Start teaching writing before your students even know you are doing so**. Draw attention often to the qualities of writing you admire and hope your students will imitate. "Look at the way our textbook author uses an abstract before each chapter. That's an important social science writing skill—one you will need to learn how to do if you major in this discipline. See the way she does x, y, and z? Abstracts

for articles are a little different—they do a, b, and c. Later in the semester, when you submit your research paper, you'll have to write an abstract similar to this one." Or "Notice the uses of headings and subheadings in the chapter. Student writers rarely use subheadings, but professional writers almost always do. Maybe you can consider using subheadings in your papers." Or "look at the excellent thesis statement in this article. I admire the way the writer does a couple of things here...." Draw students' attention to the uses of evidence in the writing they are reading for your course, to the ways writers in your field cite sources, and to the ways they write introductions and conclusions. In other words, by teaching students how to read attentively in your field, you will be teaching them the ways writers in your discipline work. Your first writing lessons come before the writing assignment is even made.

2. **Publish the criteria for evaluation along with your assignment**. Let your students know, right from the time you make a writing assignment, the qualities you will be looking for when you grade their papers some days or weeks in the future. These criteria—perhaps elaborated into a grading rubric— should reflect your own, as well as your discipline's, values for excellent writing. (I've included at the end a copy of the criteria and a holistic rubric I use in my English classes, as an example of what I mean.)

3. **Ask students to submit a tentative thesis statement or a brief prospectus for the paper.** A one-sentence thesis on a 3x5 card or a paragraph-length prospectus forces students to begin thinking about the project well before it is due, and it gives you the chance to approve or redirect their thinking early on. You might take three or four representative examples back to class to show your students the qualities of an effective thesis, or to offer suggestions about how to push one's thinking deeper, or to caution against overly broad topics. Quick responses to individual statements can be balanced with 15 or 20 minutes of class time that will benefit all the students in the room.

4. **Offer a model of an effective paper.** Using a professionally published model or a sample of student work from a previous semester (it is important to have the writer's permission for this), show students what an effective response to the assignment looks like. You can teach the whole class how to organize the kind of paper you have assigned, or how to offer adequate evidence to support a thesis, or how to cite sources. If your assignment is sufficiently rich and students have enough leeway to make their own choices (and if they have already indicated their preliminary thesis), they won't be tempted to copy the model, but will use it to guide their own way to successful work.

5. **Schedule some form of first-draft response.** Some professors schedule (in or out of class) a peer review session, in which students read and respond to each other's work in progress, using a reading guide based on the criteria for evaluation. Some professors schedule brief individual conferences, to speak about the draft and to answer questions or make suggestions for improvement. Some professors simply encourage students to seek out a reader—a roommate, a family member, a Writing Corner tutor—and get some feedback. But whatever form works for you, your class size, and the scope of the assignment, you'll be rewarded with better final papers if you require, or at least encourage, students to write a draft and to receive some feedback before they submit a final draft for your reading and grading.

6. **Take a sensible position on grammar and mechanics**. Your job, as a writing teacher in the social science division, is first to teach your students to think and write like social scientists, and second, to

expect your students to use standard written English in the papers they submit to you. Spend most of your response time on the first of these jobs. Devote your best efforts to helping students improve their thinking. When you see errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation, just circle them or put an X in the margin where they occur. You don't have to label these errors or correct them, but I think it is useful to indicate to the student that you noticed them. If the errors are so numerous that they overwhelm communication, stop reading and tell the student to resubmit corrected copy by the next class period. I've found that if students know I care about correct language (I say so in class and on my criteria sheet and on my grading rubric), the great majority of them will do their best to submit clean copy. Some errors may persist, but most students can figure out how to use their *Writer's Reference* handbook or on-line resources or classmates or Writing Corner tutors to help them correct issues they don't yet fully understand. But don't devote more of your time and energy (and annoyance) to surface issues than they deserve.

7. **As part of your grading of final drafts, write a brief response to the ideas of the paper**. If the paper will not be revised, keep your final comments brief. Start by saying what you enjoyed or appreciated about the paper. Comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas, in a way that lets your student know that you take his or her thinking seriously. If a student is a really good writer, be sure to tell him or her that you think so, and encourage the writer to think about this ability in writing as a way to advance learning or career or contribution to others. If you have specific ideas about how the writer can do better next time, say so explicitly. If the writer needs to seek help, offer to give what you can and suggest other places to look for help. Keep the comments brief and focused--students can absorb two or three messages at this point, but not nine or ten. Always there's much more to say than there is space and time, so limit yourself to two or three important points in this final comment. In these ways, your final comment can be a way not simply of explaining or defending the grade (the rubric ought to do most of that) and instead open some space for you to help the student grow as a writer, whether the performance on this particular project was good or bad.

You can't do all of these things all of the time. But I hope the list stimulates your thinking about how the very difficult and labor intensive work of responding to student writing can yield the best results. These ideas don't save time; instead they reallocate the time we are already spending with student papers into more productive activities. I hope these seven ideas suggest some ways to get better results from the time you invest in reading and responding to student writing. Most of them help us turn our attention back from the paper to the student—our real reason for doing this demanding work in the first place.

An excellent source for more useful ideas is John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (Jossey Bass, 1996). There are dozens of copies of this book on campus because it has been given out for several faculty development workshops, and the library has a copy. It's terrific.

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Criteria for Papers

1. **Intellectual Engagement/Quality of Ideas**
    1 Does the paper offer interesting, important, and fresh ideas on its topic?
    2 Does the paper reveal a writer who is curious and involved, a writer who questions, investigates, and reflects?
    3 Does the paper acknowledge and investigate complexities, rather than oversimplifying the subject or glossing over difficulties?
    4 Does the paper reveal a writer who uses language subtly, who sees deeply into ideas, who draws connections fruitfully, and who reasons logically?
    5 Is the writer's style appropriate for the audience and the occasion?

Organization and Development
    1 Can the reader discern a central claim (a thesis, a research finding, an interpretive claim, an argument) which is supported with appropriate evidence?
    2 Does the paper maintain a consistent focus on this central claim?
    3 Does the opening of the paper indicate the question or problem to be considered, and does it establish an appropriate rhetorical mode between the writer and the implied audience?
    4 Does every part of the paper advance the central claim in a discernible and effective way? Do the sentences and paragraphs form an effective sequence, drawing the reader along through a logical and reasonable argument?
    5 Does the paper develop its ideas with effective examples, analysis, comparisons, evidence, or other convincing explanations?
    6 Does the conclusion leave the reader with a sense of why the central claim is important, why it matters? If appropriate, does it suggest ways the central ideas can be applied, or what the implications of the idea might be?

3. **Conventions**
    1 Does the paper conform to the conventions of Standard Written English in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics?
    2 Is the manuscript presented in appropriate form?
    3 If present, do quotations and citations conform to MLA guidelines?

(adapted from resources from the Grinnell College Writing Lab)

Grading Rubric

4   **Quality of Ideas:** The ideas of the paper are interesting and fresh. The writer seems fully engaged and intellectually alive. The paper explores complexities and counterarguments productively. The language of the paper is alive, creative, suitable to the topic and audience.

Organization and Development: The paper states its central idea clearly, makes evident why the idea matters, and investigates it consistently. The paper develops its material with convincing evidence and argument. The introduction and conclusion are rhetorically effective, and the paper flows smoothly and logically between them.

Conventions. Grammar, spelling, mechanics, and manuscript presentation are fully correct.

3   **Quality of Ideas:** The ideas of the paper are strong and convincing, if not wholly fresh. The voice of the writer is responsive to the situation and audience. Some of the complexities of the material are acknowledged and explored. The language of the paper is appropriate for the topic and occasion.

Organization and Development: The paper states a clear central idea and sticks to. The paper is easy to follow from beginning to end. Adequate paragraph and sentence logic.

Conventions: The language conventions of the paper may not be perfect, but they don't distract the reader from the content of the paper.

2   **Quality of Ideas:** The ideas of the paper are predictable—perhaps recycled from class discussion or summarized from readings and lectures. There's little in the paper that is distinctive to the author. The language of the paper may not be fully appropriate for the audience or occasion.

Organization and Development: The paper lacks a clear and convincing thesis or central focus. The organizational structure of the paper is difficult to discern. Ideas are not well explained or supported.

Conventions: Some errors in grammar, spelling, or mechanics are serious enough or frequent enough to distract the reader from the content of the paper.

1   **Quality of Ideas:** The ideas of the paper are jumbled, difficult to follow, or contradictory. The writer's tone and language are not appropriate for the audience and occasion.

Organization and Development: The paper is disorganized and seriously underdeveloped.

Conventions: Significant language or presentation errors hinder communication.

0   The paper does not fulfill the assignment.