"Responding to student writing is challenging for teachers, because it is difficult to write helpful, perceptive comments on student papers. Recent theory and research suggest that teachers can learn much about response, and that there are options available to writing teachers searching for better ways to respond to student papers. An important reason why written response is difficult is that teachers must decide what role or roles to play in their comments, such as coach, judge, or doctor. Research has shown, however, that teacher comment has little effect on the quality of student writing other than negative attitudes fostered by negative criticism. Also, **longer comments are less effective than shorter ones**, marginal notes and comments often give conflicting signals, and paternalistic **attitudes that measure writing against some Ideal Text cause students to lose interest**. Improved responses may be possible when teachers view **comments as rhetorical acts**, think about their **purpose for writing them**, and teach students to **become their own best readers.** To achieve this goal, teachers should respond to student drafts in the way they respond to their colleagues' drafts--**few judgments and directives, more questions and suggestions**. They should also comment **during the writing process**, before final grades are assigned, on **what is said** not how it is said. Another successful technique is the workshop method, utilizing peer editing and revision."

~Keith Grant-Davie & Nancy Shapiro
Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1987
(emphasis added)
In general, resist over-marking; less is more.

Table of Contents

Content specific

Content specific comments should be used for assignments where the real purpose of writing is to assess knowledge, learning, or growth rather than asking students to practice a particular type of writing style or skill. Content specific comments address issues of the assignments purpose: whether the student has truly learned the content, demonstrated knowledge, or utilized critical application. These types of comments are not focused on the style of writing, the formatting, or sentence level constructions.

To get the most out of content specific questions, do not use them in conjunction with other types of comments. This may mean asking students to see a rough draft of a term paper just after midterms. Such a draft would receive content specific comments only. If you've assigned an essay exam and students will likely not have enough time to revise their writing, content specific comments are a good way to focus your feedback. Essentially, use these comments when the only thing you *need* to focus on is the content of the essay. Try limiting yourself to *only* using content specific comments.

Best for: first drafts; peer review; blue book exam; in class writing assignment; midterm/final exams

Structure specific

Structure specific comments should be used for assignments where the organization of the written content is of the most importance. These comments focus on the organization and coherence of the writing. Because they focus on the mechanics of building a case (proving a hypothesis, explaining a thesis, arguing a point), these types of comments are most useful for mid-draft, pre-final papers and should be used to guide students toward a more soundly constructed text. Use these comments when the only thing you *need* to address is how the paper is developed. Try limiting yourself to *only* using structure specific comments.

Best for: mid-drafts; peer review; assignments where students are learning to write for the discipline; papers whose content is strong but the case is not well-made

Style specific

As with content and structure specific comments, style specific comments focus on one particular component of a paper or a student's writing; they focus on the sentence-level constructions and stylistic choices a student makes. These comments should seek to help students enhance their writing style, and such comments avoid addressing the content of the paper or purpose of the assignment.

Style specific comments might reference writing styles discussed in class by using particular codes or by referencing textbooks/handbooks. By telling students what the problem is and then directing them to reference material on the error, students are more likely to review the issue and attempt to change it. Some teachers tie class discussions of discipline-specific styles to this type of comment. For example, someone teaching chemistry might point students to the proper way an experiment result is discussed.

Modeling is often useful for style specific comments. Address one error that the student frequently makes. Show the student why it is a problem and how to change revise or edit for such a problem. Then, notify the student that the problem occurs in other areas of the paper as well, but you have not marked it. Such a model encourages students to identify the problem in their own writing.

Best for: late-draft/pre-final paper; writing assignments that teach technique

Less is more
As Grant-Davie and Shapiro (1987) noted, shorter comments are always more effective than longer comments. More than this, though, is the idea that students cannot process prolific comments on their papers. The fewer comments we give students, the more they can take in and apply to their writing.

In order to use the "less is more" idea for commenting, limit your comments. This may mean a certain number of comments (I will only make 3 content specific comments, one structural, and one style specific comment on each paper). When you try to tell students everything that might be improved in the paper, they are often overwhelmed. Using the content, structural, and style specific comments on drafts before the final draft will also typically help you to curb your commenting enthusiasm. If you limit yourself to a specific type of comment or a specific number of comments, your students will be less overwhelmed by your feedback.

Additionally, keeping comments short is helpful. A comment that is more than two sentences long is a less efficient comment because students lose interest/comprehension by the end of the comment and you've spent too much of your time on one small area of the paper.

Overarching comments only
Another technique geared at keeping our comments more reigned in is the idea of only using overarching comments. Overarching comments typically come either as a cover page/letter to students or in one chunk at the end of their assignment. It's often best to write these as a brief letter (about half a page) that addresses large scale concerns for students to think about on their next draft or next assignment. Occasionally, overarching comments also address issues of style (especially when a student as consistent patterns of error), but more frequently they address content and structural concerns. Because we aren't focused on analyzing every sentence of the paper, this technique helps us see the text in a broader sense, and thus address it more holistically.

Best for: final drafts; in-class writing assignments; essay exams; midterm/final essay exams

Marginal comments only

The opposite of overarching comments are marginal comments, which are left in the margins of the paper, right next to the students' text. We can use this technique to limit our commenting as well. While they do not, perhaps, encourage holistic response, marginal comments allow us to point out interesting points, inconsistencies, and specific areas where an example or further explanation would improve the student's writing.

When using marginal comments, it's important not to tread on the student's writing. Try not to cover her writing with your own or cross out sections of her prose. These types of comments are often interpreted as negative, and students often feel these moves are erasures of their own voices and responsibilities in the paper. In order to encourage improvement, our students need to know that they can improve without being erased from their own writing.

In order to save time with marginal comments--and to avoid overwhelming ourselves and our students--it's a good idea to limit the amount of marginal comments you'll make on a paper. Marginal comments can be content, structure, or style specific--even a mix of all three--but keeping marginal comments to a minimum (perhaps three or four per page) will help avoid wasting our time and overwhelming students.

Best for: early, mid, and late drafts; types projects (where there is less of a chance of writing over a student's work)

Minimalist marking

Minimalist marking is a style specific marking technique that takes various forms, but the most common is to leave all surface level errors unmarked in the sentences themselves. Every line of text with an error gets a check mark (or some other mark) next to it. The more errors in the line of text, the more checks. For example, if a student has a line with three errors (one spelling, one verb tense, another improper use of apostrophes), then the line gets three checks next to it. Students will review the returned papers and be expected to find and correct the errors in their writing. Often, instructors have students return their papers with the errors circled and corrected.

Multiple studies have shown that this method of marking actually improves students' style over time if it is used consistently throughout the whole semester. One researcher shows that his use of the minimalist marking method (and immediate required revisions from his students) improved students' style and sentence-level work. He states, "Overall, the drop was from 4.6 errors per 100 words to 2.2 (52%)" (Haswell, 1993, p. 603). As with style specific comments, the key here is to help students when they cannot catch the errors themselves and to point them to helpful resources and reference tools.

Minimalist Marking Teaching-Return Percentages (Haswell, 1993, p. 602)

Category of Error	# of Errors Checked in Margins	# of Errors Correctly Emended by Students	% Corrected by Students
Semantic Signaling (capitalization, underlining, quotation marks, apostrophes)	97	74	76.3%
Syntactic Punctuation	142	81	57.0%
Spelling (including hyphenation)	132	74	56.1%
Grammar (including tense change, omission of word, pronoun disagreement)	30	16	53.3%
All Errors	**401**	**245**	**61.1%**

As a Coach/Reader

Students respond better to the tone of our comments when they come across as an interested reader or in a coaching voice. We want to act like coaches, and one way to do that is to ask questions which will prompt students to think more about what they've said. For example, if a student writes about her struggles analyzing a piece of art, a teacher might ask her for more background or more details. She might ask a question how the student's struggle reflects an aspect of the paper or the artwork itself. These types of questions coach students to develop critical thinking skills.

As a Judge

Responding as a judge is one of the least recommended response strategies. When we read as judges, we are often less aware of our students as people than is beneficial. Comments such as "you didn't think this through," or "this is not specific," we apply harsh judgment and students often feel the grade is a "punishment." They become angry, resentful, or--worse--disconnected from the class and their education. Teachers can respond as judges effectively, but effective judging usually coincides with clear grading parameters and rubrics (stay tuned for future workshops on rubrics).

As a Doctor

As with responding as a judge, responding as a doctor is often detrimental to students' improvement. When we respond as doctors, we try to diagnose and fix all of our students' problems. We are tempting to overwhelm them with discussions of what they didn't do well just as a doctor might overwhelm a patient with a diagnosis and the causes (especially if the patient feels she has brought it on herself). Reading as a doctor works most effectively when we *remove* blame from our feedback and focus on modeling. When we model for students, we give them the opportunity to see, think, and apply. By taking on a doctor role, we can help students become better writers, but only if we are kindly doctors who take the time to explain issues with their patients.

Timer Method
This method of responding to student work has less to do with the style in which we respond and more to do with the time we take to respond. Many texts for new faculty and teaching assistants suggest setting a timer when responding to student work. It may take some time to work out how much is enough, but generally, for a five-page, double spaced essay, teachers should allow about 30 minutes. For shorter papers, set the timer for 15 minutes. For longer papers, give yourself more time (maybe 45 minutes to an hour, depending on the paper topic, length, and purpose). Sometimes, setting a warning timer (for example, there are many free apps that will allow a smartphone user to manage multiple timers) and an end timer may help you stay on track toward responding to a paper within a given length of time.

This technique is often difficult for new faculty, but the more a teacher understands about her responding habits (does she prefer overarching comments? is the paper a draft that a few marginal, content-specific comments will be useful on?), the easier it will be to stick with a general time. Many teachers find that the more they work on developing a personal responding process, the more consistent they are with time. This doesn't mean it will only ever take you 30 minutes to read and respond to that five-page paper, though. Often, when students need a little more help with their writing (especially in the case of ineffective content or Second Language Learners), it's best to give the paper more attention and time.

Setting a Paper Goal
Along with using a timer method, many teachers find it useful to set a "paper goal." Having a grading and responding marathon all day on Sunday is no teacher's idea of a good Sunday. In order to avoid this, set a goal for yourself every day that you have a stack of papers. Some teachers divide them evenly (I have 20 students, so if I grade four per day, then I'll be done in five days and can hand them back early) while other teachers devote lengths of time (I have an hour and a half before my next meeting, and I can devote that time to grading a few papers). The more you stick to your grading goals, the easier it will be to manage the pile of papers while keeping your eyes and mind fresh for your students. Remember, at the end of a 70-paper pile, your grading and responding standards may be different from where you began. Tackling the pile of papers over several days' time will keep your standards and your responses stronger, making your feedback more effective for students.

Strategies Encouraging Student Response to Feedback

Incorporate Praise

The best thing we can do for our students to encourage them to read and incorporate our feedback into their revisions or their next paper is to give students praise. This is also the best thing we can do for their writing. When we tell students *specifically* what they've done well and why it "works," they are more likely to read the rest of our feedback. They are also more likely to use the "works well" techniques in other essay and texts (for all of their classes).

Try to incorporate at least one element of praise for every student. This praise should not be a backhanded compliment or something that contradicts revision feedback. For example, if you think a student's organization is strong, you should tell her that, but then don't tell her some particular element of organization is wrong. For example, this teacher's comment would confuse and possibly depress a student: "Great job organizing your paper, Jenny, but your fifth body paragraph would make more sense earlier in the paper." This comment is disingenuous praise. It sends one of two messages: "Your organization is great! You don't have to do anything else with that aspect of your paper!" OR "I'm only saying this to be nice--you still have to work on that aspect of your paper, too."

The best praise specifically addresses what is working. For example, "Jenny, you've done a great job organizing this paper. As I read, I could remember the organization you described and your introduction, and the body of the paper really lines up with that first discussion of organization. This really helped me follow your point."

Encourage revision

Students will usually review and actually pay attention to your feedback if you implement a revision policy. There are many ways to do this. For example, you might give students up to one week to revise a paper, and they only get one chance to revise based on your feedback, feedback from peers, and feedback from the CWR. You might allow revisions all the way up until the last week of class. You might suggest that students must read your feedback and then meet with you before they are allowed to revise. You might precede the idea of a "revision policy" by offering to read students' early drafts and offer them feedback for improvement. The more revision you encourage in your classroom, the more students will want to review your feedback, and the more they will pay attention to it.

Assign reflections

When we ask our students specifically to respond to our feedback, we get the chance to see our feedback as they interpreted it. This also opens doors for conferences to clear up miscommunications. If you truly want your students to read your feedback, process it, understand it, and consider implementing it, ask them to respond directly to your feedback. Have them summarize it in their own words (maybe even giving them a requirement: "Summarize my comments in under 250 words!") and respond to it. Be careful--you want their response to be critical, so just asking students "to respond" might give you returns of "I don't agree with the professor's comments" or "I tried really hard, but you still didn't like my paper." Instead, you want your students to critically reflect. You might ask them to suggest where they can incorporate your feedback, to give an example of some areas they might

change, or to ask you specific questions about the feedback that they didn't understand. These reflections don't have to take up too much more of your time, either. These can be what we can call "low stakes writing." Students might get credit simply for doing this assignment, or it might count toward class participation. You don't have to respond to all of them, but if you see some reflections where concerns are present (questions about your feedback), you can respond to those reflections specifically.

References and Resources

Bardine, B. A, et al. (2000). Beyond the red pen: Clarifying our role in the response process. *English Journal, 72*(4): 94-101.

Brooks, J. (1991). Minimalist tutoring: Making the student do all the work. *The Writing Lab Newsletter, 15*(6): 1-4.

Cogie, J., Strain, K., & Lorinskas, S. (1999). Avoiding the proofreading trap: The value of the error correction process. *The Writing Center Journal, 19*(2): 7-32.

Haswell, R. (1993). Minimal marking. *College English, 45*: 600-604.

Reesor, M. (2002). Issues in written teacher feedback: A critical review. *The English Teacher, 5*(3): 242-255.

Roen, D., et al. (2002). *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. Urbana: NCTE.

Spandel, & Stiggins, . (1997). *Creating Writers*. New York: Longman.

Stiggins, R. J. (1988). Revitalizing classroom assessment: The highest instructional priority. *Phi Delta Kappan, 69*: 363-368.

Underwood, J. S. & Tregidgo, A. P. (2005). Improving student writing through effective feedback: Best practices and recommendations. *Journal of Teaching Writing, 22*(2): 73-97.

White, E. (2007). *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher's Guide, 4th Ed.* Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Wilholt, S. (2003). *The Allyn & Bacon Teaching Assistant's Handbook: A Guide for Graduate Instructors of Writing and Literature.* New York: Longman.

Helpful Websites

http://www.tlpd.ttu.edu/teach/TLTC%20Teaching%20Resources/StudentWriting.asp
https://snlwriting.pbworks.com/w/page/13277296/Responding%20to%20Student%20Writing
http://www.rebeccamoorehoward.com/bibliographies/graduate-students-teacher-training-teaching-assistants
http://www.rebeccamoorehoward.com/bibliographies/grading-and-response