

Ten Pointers on Responding to Student Writing

1. The more explanation you give about the assignment prior to the due date, the less work you will have to do when it's time to comment.
2. By involving students in the evaluation process, you make them less fearful of evaluation, and operate in a way that is characteristic of the real world. Through practice in evaluation, you give students opportunity to use the language of your discipline's discourse. You also help them learn what makes writing good.

With your students, generate a rubric or "criteria grid" for evaluating writing. Or, alternatively, provide them with one by which you will judge the writing. Students tend to think of professor responses to their writing as idiosyncratic and inconsistent. When they become involved in evaluation, they see "standards" as a product of a community.

3. Comments on writing should first of all be to the message in the writing.
4. Let your students do as much preliminary work for you as possible by setting up peer group response activities. A collaborative approach to your class material will make it easy to involve students in response activities.
5. After peer group revisions, you might want to hold short teacher/student conferences or write comments on the drafts.
6. Refer to your responses as responses or comments. Don't say, "I've corrected your papers." You are engaged in an interaction with students to encourage them to become proficient in your field. Students are most likely to feel encouraged if they feel they can enter into dialogue with you. The word "correcting" suggests a one-way street and lessens the opportunity for discovery that the act of writing inspires.

7. In responding to writing, remember who owns the text. In making your responses to it, don't move in and take ownership, treating it as your own.

Writing your responses in pencil, especially your marginalia, seems less obtrusive, more deferent. Furthermore, if you make mistakes as you write, you can erase them. Remember, your response is a form of discourse that the student will evaluate too.

8. Responses to form are helpful when made in reference to a discipline's needs and customary practices. Students who are novices do not necessarily understand the discipline's protocols regarding writing. Their awkwardness is often a result of trying to invent the protocol. By framing your explanations of form within the needs of the discipline, you help the novice understand how discourse forms vary across the disciplines.
9. Require that students proofread before submitting their final draft. For editing, consider assigning student teams as grammar/mechanics experts—fragment team, comma team, quotation team, etc.
10. If you are reading all the writing your students are doing, they aren't writing enough. Teach them to value writing as writing, and to shape their judgments of its worth. Find ways to acknowledge their writing, or to use it to further their learning, without you responding to it personally.