

GRADING STRATEGIES

Grading Strategies: Responding to and Evaluating Student Writing

For many of us, thinking about student writing means grading. As trained professionals, we have literally spent years learning how to grade and be graded. For so many of us, grades meant whether we would get into a specific field, choose a particular profession or, in some cases, how we defined ourselves. Grades also have been the marks of our success. As we move into another role, however, we carry our personal and institutional experiences of grading with us. Whether we've taught writing for years, or are just starting out, we all have a tendency to grade as we were graded. Yet, our job as teachers should be an enabling one. If our grades don't enable our students to learn, we may need to re-think the whole evaluative process.

It's easy to get caught up in "grading," even though we know it should be only part of our larger job of responding to student writing. Thus, we will distinguish between response and evaluation. Response simply means the kind of feedback that we give to our students' written texts; evaluation in terms of a number or letter grade is only one of the many types of response. Because we have been trained to think in terms of evaluation only, this resource begins with and stresses other types of responses. It shows ways to read, respond, and evaluate that can help teachers further their own pedagogical goals. Please review the following links on how to respond and evaluate student writing.

Preparing to Respond

Being professors at a leading engineering university, each of us is already an expert in writing and reading. If we, as teachers and researchers, take time to understand our own competence, it will be easier to help our students develop their writing skills. We all have expectations about student writing, based on our own professional reading practices and writing histories, and we should try to articulate these expectations to ourselves before we impose them on our students.

We usually have many different purposes in mind when we respond to and grade student writing, some we may not even realize. Each person should consider his or her own reasons before formulating a coherent responding and grading strategy.

- To clarify, affirm, or support the goals of the course and assignment.
- To encourage and provoke a student's thinking and interaction with the course content
- To support students' successes and struggles
- To provide a student with a realistic audience reaction
- To engage the student learner in an intellectual dialogue
- To measure growth of a student writer over a specific time period
- To guide and focus feedback to a student writer as she or he progresses through the course
- To make an initial and/or ongoing diagnosis of a student's writing problems
- To assign a public letter or a number grade to satisfy institutional demands

Principals of Responding

No matter what responding technique we choose, two chief principles should guide all of our responding strategies: the purpose of the assignment, and a hierarchy of response.

Establishing a Hierarchy for Responding:

Before responding to student writing, establish a hierarchy of the elements to respond because we cannot respond to everything at once. When we try to do this, we often pepper the student's paper with such a large number of marks that the student is overwhelmed upon receiving it and learns nothing from all our labor. Composition research on students' reaction to teacher responses has shown that they prefer and learn more from comments, which are short and to the point than lengthy comments from which they can't determine the most important points.

To develop a responding hierarchy, we need to create a schematic which divides the elements of writing into discernible elements. Thinking about the rhetorical elements of a piece of writing gives us a way to explain our reactions to ourselves and determine a hierarchy for responding, even though we would probably not use these exact terms with our students.

Below are some terms that are frequently used to describe the rhetorical aspects of a piece of discourse.

Rhetorical Aspects of Discourse

Purpose:

The term purpose refers to the reason why the writer is writing, or what the overall message of the piece of writing is directed at communicating. It is also the unifying principle of any written discourse, not only what the writer is attempting, but what the composition is attempting. Sometimes purpose is referred to as the thesis or thesis statement, although we should note that in most mature prose it is difficult to ever pinpoint one sentence as the thesis statement. Basically, purpose answers the following questions:

- Why does this piece of writing exist?
- What is the writing trying to say or accomplish?

Audience Awareness:

Audience awareness refers to how sensitive to the needs of the reader the student is. This idea can be tricky, particularly in an evaluative context. Since the writing is part of a class assignment, the teacher is almost always the "primary audience." Yet research shows that the opportunity to write for a "real" audience, one who is wider in scope, is tremendously beneficial to students. Not surprisingly, students often invest more energy into the writing and revision than when writing only for the teacher. Additionally, journal assignments or other writing-to-learn assignments may have the writer as their only audience. Or, if no particular audience seems appropriate, the class itself may be audience enough. The questions that follow need to be adapted to the particular concerns of the assignment and field:

- Does the student assume too much or too little about what the audience knows?
- Does the student make decisions that pay attention to a reader's needs?
- Does the student's concept of the audience reflect the concept of audience you had in mind?
- Why or why not?

Organization:

Organization is closely linked to purpose. The term in its most simple sense refers to the way the student has ordered and put information together. Yet this arrangement should also reflect a desire to build upon and toward an ultimate purpose or to support a purpose already apparent in a way that best addresses the paper's audience. The arrangement's relation to a paper's purpose deals with organization at the "macro" level. Organization on the "micro" level refers to arrangement within sub-topics and points, paragraphs, or even the order of information within a paragraph. In many cases, the assignment you give might encourage or require a particular organization, especially on the macro-level. Some questions that might be useful when considering organizational concerns are as follows:

- What points are made in the paper? Does this order reinforce the purpose and address the audience?
- How many points about the topic does the paper make?
- How are they related? Is there much overlap?
- How does the writer move from one paragraph to another?
- Does the topic change too quickly to follow?
- Do there appear to be any unexplained jumps?

Style:

Style can mean anything from how the sentences flow among each other or within a certain sentence to the appropriateness of individual word choices. For example, lack of sentence variety might be classed as a style problem (e.g. every sentence begins with "we," or follows a subject-object structure). Similarly, limited vocabulary choices might fall under style, or failure to connect one sentence to another. It is difficult to make up individual questions about style, but whenever you sense a problem with a sentence that is not grammatical, it might fall under a style issue.

Voice:

Voice refers to the writer's attitude toward the subject. The writer's voice may be more or less formal in response to choices about purpose and audience. This also includes the persona presented by the writer? e.g. whether the writer seems to present him or herself as an expert about the topic, and whether the writer aligns him or herself with a certain side of the topic. Tone is a place where students might be stretching their wings. If a writer's voice sounds pretentious, perhaps he or she is

attempting to expand his or her capacities and ranges of writing style. Some preliminary questions about tone might include the following:

- Does the student's writing reflect appropriate word choice?
- Does the student's use of language exhibit an awareness of audience?
- Does the student's tone seem excessive--either too formal or informal--for the assignment?

Grammar:

Grammar involves the punctuation and usage rules of Edited American English. This includes rules about subject-verb agreement, rules for using commas and semi-colons, etc.

Non-Rhetorical Aspects

Although the following are important aspects in establishing hierarchies, neither issue is specifically related to a general rhetorical situation but is particular to the context of a single piece of writing.

Constraints of the Assignment:

When considering a response to an assigned piece of writing, sometimes how well the student followed the assignment itself will become an issue. For example, a paper may be well written with regard to all the rhetorical aspects above but may still not satisfy the assignment. Some teachers consider this a moot point and do not penalize the student for straying from the assignment; other teachers feel the assignment was designed to encourage and/or test certain skills and therefore consider this deviation a major problem.

Content and Specificity:

This aspect refers to errors of omission. In other words, a student may write a well constructed paper but have missed important sources or aspects of the topic that you feel are integral. Although this aspect is technically rhetorical in that a well written argument will not make errors of omission, we have classed it separately because issues of content are frequently essential depending on the goals of the assignment (e.g., research papers).

Contextualizing and Constructing a Hierarchy

Although every piece of writing includes the rhetorical aspects discussed above, the emphasis and concern of the writer and responder will usually focus more on one aspect than another because of the goals for writing (either the assignment and/or the purpose) or because of the point at which the writer is in reaching a final product. Thus, we cannot construct a single hierarchy for grading and responding, but must think in terms of hierarchies that are appropriate to the context of the writing task. This context includes, but may not be limited to, the pedagogical goals of the assignment and the point at which the student is in the drafting process.

Pedagogical Goals of the Writing Assignment:

We assign writing for varying reasons, sometimes to encourage a student's thinking or questioning process, other times to have a student demonstrate mastery of a certain topic, and so on. Because our reasons for assigning writing can differ so radically, our responses to these pieces of writing must also reflect the nature of the assignment. For example, if a journal entry was assigned as a response to a reading assignment in order for the student to explore his or her reaction and questions about the reading, a teacher response that included any sort of evaluative comment would obviously only shut down the student's ability to react honestly and destroy the purposes of the assignment. Instead, a more appropriate response would be encouraging and/or questioning in order to probe the student's thinking further. Overall, before we judge the relative effectiveness of the techniques and suggestions listed in the following section, we should consider the purposes of the assignment and the stage of the drafting before deciding on an appropriate responding technique. If we do not, we risk sending mixed messages to a student about our goals for using writing in different ways in the course, or of stymieing certain types of thinking and analysis we wish to encourage because the student will fear he or she does not have the freedom to engage with the content of the course in idiosyncratic or risky ways.

Progress in the Drafting Sequence:

The stage of the writing process at which you are responding will influence the response as well. Students often find it useful to get feedback as an assignment progresses; getting your response at an early or middle stage can let them know whether they are on track or not. If you are reading a preliminary draft of a paper, the student is

typically more concerned with the topic and his or her own ideas about that topic; thus, comments about grammar would probably be inappropriate at this idea-generating stage. On the other hand, if we read a draft that should be almost completed, our comments might, quite justifiably, be concerned with grammar and organization as well as the ideas represented in the writing.

Techniques of Responding

There is no formula for the most successful types of comments, thus each teacher needs to articulate a conscious rationale and philosophy for commenting in the way he or she does. In other words, many different types of comments can work as long as you understand why you comment in the way you do and how you believe these comments will help students in the future. Below are responses to some of the most frequently asked questions about responding to student writing. We should note, however, that all of these techniques can also be effective, in fact, often more effective in peer responding contexts. For more information on how to use peer responding in your class, see "Student Workshops that Work."

Are Comments Supposed to Justify the Grade?

Yes and no. Comments on final drafts often serve to justify the grade; even if we do not intend our comments for this purpose, students will frequently read them with this purpose in mind. Although students will be looking for a clear justification of their grade, resist the temptation to see our comments as only serving this function. Good comments must also aim at helping the writer not only to understand his/her problems with the specific text in question but also to develop strategies and a critical approach that can be used in future writing situations. Obviously, comments on drafts and/or ungraded writing assignments only aim at future improvement; it would be inappropriate to totally change our purposes and tones merely because it is time to move on to another assignment.

Should I Comment on Everything I See?

No. There should be a reflective and clear rationale for the amount, order, and content of comments. Commenting on every problem you see in a paper usually only overwhelms the student and does not help him or her to focus upon the sections of a text or to develop a sense of what is important in the text or rhetorical situation.

How Do I Decide What to Focus On?

The relative attention you give to certain parts or aspects of the student text should match with your personal hierarchy of rhetorical aspects of discourse, and your pedagogical goals for the assignment.

For example, if a student turns in a final draft of a lab report that is meant to demonstrate his or her ability to interpret data and reach a conclusion and it doesn't tell you what the results of the experiment were, that would probably be what you chose to focus most on. If you focused on the student's explanation of the methodology, that might send the student the message that a lab report need only have a good methods section, and if he or she were to rewrite the report, only that section would deserve attention. (It might be perfectly appropriate to focus on methods, even if the report did not discuss results, if the purpose of the assignment was to assess a student's familiarity with a certain research procedure.)

Similarly, focusing on organizational problems in a position paper that does not make a stance is jumping the gun. It would be impossible for the student to consider the efficacy of his or her organization without first deciding what it was she or he wanted to convince the reader of in the first place. In fact, the organizational problems will most likely resolve themselves if the student revises for purpose.

Should I Only Comment on What's Wrong in the Text?

No. The most successful comments involve a positive orientation; that is, a balance between advice and positive feedback. When revising, a student who has received no positive comments is unlikely to know what is worth keeping in the draft. He or she may actually spend time revising sections of the text that were just fine, especially if the text needed major revisions in other areas. Positive comments also function to support the student in his or her learning, sending the message that all is not a total loss.

Should I Maintain an Objective Distance in My Comments?

Yes and no. While you certainly need to self-censor any personally derogatory comments or purely negative reactions, it is very valuable to let a student see the reactions of a real reader (i.e., you).

Because you experience reading a student text as a reader first and a teacher (or evaluator) second, let the student see these reactions as

well. Below are some comments where we can tell the teacher is primarily as an honest reader:

- Wow! I really like this part. I can almost see it.
- I get a little lost right now. How does this relate to what you just said about the texture in this painting?
- Here you seem to think it's better for the firm to invest in expansion and remodeling instead of securities. Why?

Should I Try to Guess What the Writer Really Means?

Yes and no. A good reader will try to intuit or interpolate meaning based on what is stated; however, it is dangerous to assume you know what is going on in the writer's head only from what is said (or not said).

Therefore, in commenting, try to be aware of when you are making such assumptions about the writer's intentions and state your assumptions explicitly in the comment (e.g., the third comment above). Even if you perceive two or more options about intention, it is useful to state them. For example:

I'm not sure where you're going here. You could make a conclusion about the effect of the inversion layer from your data that has serious consequences, or you could call this same data into question. I can't tell from what's here which message you want me, as a reader, to get, but I get the impression that you do but have not stated it explicitly.

Should I Rewrite Problematic Sections of the Text?

No. As experienced writers, it is difficult for us to resist the temptation to rewrite certain sentences of a text; often we can think of better ways to make a point. But it is more effective for the student to work on rewriting parts of the text that are problematic, even if it takes him or her several tries. The most successful comments to help students revise and develop their own critical sense are comments worded as questions. Questions can refer to content, organization, or even grammar and word choice. For example:

- The paper talks about texture on the last page and brings it up again here. Is there a reason for organizing it this way? If so, it might be better to make it more explicit for the reader. Why?

- How do you think this youth development program should be implemented? Who would oversee it?
- What specifically do you mean by "this is a problem"?

Should I Mark Every Grammatical and Mechanical Error I See?

No. Although it seems like editing a student's paper is the only way he or she will find all the errors, composition studies have shown that students do not learn from this approach. They are, rather, more likely to not even try and figure out the reason behind each error. That is especially frustrating since our editing requires so much time and effort. So what does work? It is more helpful to note patterns in organization, grammar, or punctuation. It is usually best to explain an error the first time it occurs and merely to note its recurrence throughout the paper. Obviously, you can't do this for every error. Note the one(s) that seem to most intrude on your ability to read the paper smoothly, or those that appear most frequently. For example:

- Here "were," not "was," is the correct form because your subject, "paintings," is plural. Look for other times where I've underlined your verbs.
- Here there are two sentences joined by "however." When this occurs, you need a semicolon before the however and a comma after it. Look for other instances where you have two sentences joined this way. I didn't mark them all.

Should I Comment Differently Depending on the Type of Assignment?

Yes. The focus of your comments will be influenced by the pedagogical goals of an assignment. If you assign a reading response paper, for example, commenting on grammar and organization would be inappropriate since the pedagogical purpose of the assignment is to encourage the student to actively engage with the reading. This distinction does not reflect a hierarchy but priorities. In other words, organization and grammar would not be concerns with lower priority; instead, they would not even come into consideration in your comments. Similarly, in journals, your main purpose might be to support inquiry and exploration of ideas in a non-evaluative manner; hence, the only appropriate comments would be questioning or positive ones.

Should I Put My Comments At the End or Throughout the Paper?

Both marginal and terminal comments are appropriate at any stage in the drafting process. Marginal comments refer to those you write either in the margins or directly in the text of a student essay, whereas terminal comments refer to the usually more lengthy comment at the end of an essay. The physical positioning of both types of comments allows you to provide different types of feedback.

Marginal comments are more suited to feedback on specific sections of the text, while terminal comments are usually saved for more global concerns affecting the whole essay. Most of the examples given in the questions above are marginal comments; they certainly refer to specific sections of the text. In addition to reflecting a clear hierarchy of concerns, good terminal comments offer suggestions on how the student can address concerns previously mentioned, note additional patterns if necessary, and point out resources the student can refer to (e.g. you, the Writing Center, peers, a grammar handbook, or a content-specific reference). Below is an example of a terminal comment given to an Art Education student writing a critique:

Janis, I can really feel your enthusiasm for the musical piece you've heard and appreciate your honest reactions. However, the paper doesn't seem to analyze the music as an art form: for example, what instruments were used? How does each piece begin? Are there areas of repetition? Was the music loud or soft? Tying the answers to questions like these in order to explain why you as a listener reacted in this way would have created a much stronger paper. For your next paper, you might want to try answering the questions on the assignment sheet as an invention technique before you start drafting. If you need help along the way, please come see me or have one of your classmates read and respond to a draft. Good first effort!

What Can Be Dealt With in A Conference? Do All Comments Have to Be Written?

Any comment that can be written down can just as effectively be incorporated into a conference with a student. In fact, conferences, because of their interactive nature, are frequently a more efficient and personable way to help a student take control over his or her own text. Rather than writing down suggestions, you and the student can collaboratively diagnose the problematic sections of the text and discuss ways to address them. In this way the student is forced to provide

suggestions for change rather than only following your directions. Because of the interactive nature of a conference, however, it is even more essential to focus only on one or two problems. If the conference is meant to help solve problems rather than merely designate them, it is impossible to cover everything that you might notice about a paper.

What Are the Qualities of Ineffective Comments?

Negative responses offer little concrete direction for the writer and may exist simply to justify a grade. They are frequently vague, or focus only on surface-level features of writing (e.g., grammar and syntax). These comments lack advice for improvement, use a sarcastic or demeaning tone, overreact to annoying features (e.g. typos) and use complicated coding schemes (e.g., awk, ww, frag). Overall, the chief characteristic of ineffective comments is a focus on what is "wrong" in the paper rather than on how a paper could be improved. Below are some one-line terminal comments we've seen from actual student papers that would probably only leave the writer frustrated:

- There are way too many spelling mistakes in this paper.
- Very good. A.
- You need more analysis.
- This isn't even English. You need to learn grammar.

NOTE: Practical tips for quicker, more effective responding can be found in the sources ["How to Reduce Grading Time and Stress"](#), ["Holistic Grading"](#), ["The Grading Process"](#), and ["Responding to Student Writing: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly"](#).