

Writing Matters



Joining in the Conversation

If I think back to college and graduate school papers I wrote, my professors' comments on my graded papers stand out in my memory sometimes just as strongly as their lectures or class activities. There are several papers I remember clearly simply because of the comments my professors wrote on them or about them. I think it's important for us to realize that our words carry great power for our students. It is far too easy to think that any comments we make on student writing are simply a place to point out errors or a way to justify the grade we gave the writing. Instead, think about comments as a place to enter into conversation with our students about their writing. When we write in response to student writing, we join in the writing process as a reader/responder. Our comments are an opportunity for us to respond with our own ideas and reactions, a way to "let students in" on the way an instructor reads and thinks.

Using Comments to Respond to Student Writing

Writing comments in the margins or at the end of student writing is one of the most frequently used forms of feedback employed by instructors. However, do we have an understanding as to why we use comments and how they may or may not influence student writing?

Why use comments

Perhaps the greatest strength of commenting on student writing is that it allows you to give specific feedback for THIS student on THIS assignment. Good comments avoid the trap of the "rubber stamp" - those comments that could be interchangeable with

comments from any other paper. Your comments should show evidence of a human audience, that you have read and reacted to the writing as any human reader would. Your comments can help flesh out other assessment tools (rubrics, grids, etc.), giving the student an "inside look" at how his writing does or doesn't match up with the stated criteria.

When to use comments

When we write comments on student writing, we are, in effect, entering into a dialogue, a conversation with students about their writing. We write in hopes that students will read the

comments and use them. Therefore, the best time to use comments is within a writing process, on a draft that students are then required to revise according to feedback. This use of comments within the process helps students know where they stand, and where to go from here. It allows them to think about their writing as they write, which will ultimately make them better writers.

How to use comments

As we comment on student writing, the most important decision we make is what to write, what words to use to convey our responses to the student

writer. It is crucial that we remember that we don't have to comment on every little thing that went wrong. Also remember the audience of your comments: a student, who may or may not be fluent in the language of your discipline or of writing theory. Re-read your comments from your students' point of view, making sure that you are clear and precise. Our students are evolving writers—our comments should be aimed at helping them grow. With papers, we comment on a "fixed" piece of writing, but overall, each student's writing is growing and changing; our comments should be geared

(continued on page 2)

Written comments need to be viewed not as an end in themselves, but rather as a means for helping students become more effective writers. —Nancy Sommers

Writing Matters



Using Comments (cont'd)

towards facilitating that growth.

In practical terms, there are many ways to comment on student writing beyond the pen and ink comments on the students' papers. For example, consider using typed comments. Read the paper once or twice, then open a word processing document and type your comments as though you were having a conversation with the student. Many instructors find this method much faster, giving them the

chance to offer constructive, thorough feedback. You could also consider using an electronic feedback software such as Blue Beam. After converting student papers to .pdf format, this software allows you to insert comments and editing marks with a few simple clicks.

After the fact

Finally, one of the most common frustrations for instructors who spend time commenting on student papers is that the students don't even seem to read the

comments at all. To avoid this frustration, remember what comments are—a conversation with the student about his/her writing. Therefore, it is beneficial to have students join the conversation.

English instructor and LAC Coordinator, Toni Knott, has developed a technique that requires students to respond to her comments in a journal entry. She asks students to write about her comments—did they help? How? If they didn't help, why not? Were

the comments positive? This journal response allows students to process the comments and to think critically about how the comments helped or didn't. This technique also assures that students read the comments and think about them. Knott has reported great insight from this conversational technique. Student responses have helped her continually mold the way she comments on their writing. And that is the conversation we want to be having with our students.

WISHING YOU PEACE AND LOVE
THROUGHOUT THIS SEASON AND INTO
THE NEW YEAR—
HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO YOU AND
YOUR FAMILY!

However great a man's natural talent may be, the act of writing cannot be learned all at once. — Jean Jacques Rousseau