

Responding to Student Writing

Some Myths...

Myth 1: *Conscientious teaching requires marking all grammar and language errors.*

Students can catch up to 60% of their own errors if they are taught to proofread. Try instead to:

- ✓ Mark errors on the first paragraph or page only (and let the student know this)
- ✓ Place checks in the margins where errors occur (provide a key to the student)
- ✓ Look over a set of papers quickly and return error-laden essays for proofreading and correction.
- ✓ Create peer editing groups in your class

Myth 2: *Requiring two drafts of a paper doubles your work.*

Students usually pay attention to comments only when they are given a chance to revise. It makes more sense for you to invest your time and energy responding to the first draft and to make these comments truly facilitative. Respond to the final draft only briefly, and let these be evaluative.

Myth 3: *More is better in terms of how much you respond to the problems in the paper*

Students are often overwhelmed and paralyzed when they receive essays on which the instructor's comments trail into every margin and leave a depressing map of error and negative response. Even when response is positive, saying too much is often confusing. *The quality of your comments is much more important than the quantity.*

- ✓ Choose two or three elements of the essay to focus on, giving highly specific constructive commentary, rather than trying to cover all possible areas of concern.
- ✓ Comment on strengths as well as weaknesses.
- ✓ Make the majority of your comments at the end of the paper rather than in the margins (students pay more attention to these).
- ✓ Suggest how the student can do better next time, rather than merely identify what they have done well or poorly on this assignment/ draft.

Examples:

Weak Comment You raise important issues but your organization is weak. I never knew what to expect next. The paper was lacking enough support. Where is the development of the ideas?	Better You raise 3 important points on your second page. But they get lost in the remainder of the paper. On your next draft, focus on just those 3 and support them w/ evidence and/or logical argument gained from the course material or outside sources.
Weak Comment I had trouble following your argument. It is not coherent. There are not any transitions between your ideas. I didn't know what your point was until I read the last paragraph.	Better I was a little lost until I read your last paragraph. It is a good summary of your argument and it needs to be moved to the beginning of your paper. Use it as a neat outline of what will happen next, and then make sure the rest of the paper supports your thesis.
Weak Comment There is no thesis statement here. You are merely summarizing the ideas of the two theorists, rather than providing us with anything new. Where are you in all this?	Better Most political science papers require you to make an argument, rather than just summarize the course material. You demonstrate a good understanding of Hobbes and Locke, but you need to make a claim that responds to the assignment question. Be bold and direct about your thesis--don't be afraid to take a stand!

Of course, the nature of your comments will vary depending on what you want the students to do with them.

Tips

- If the students will be *revising* their writing, respond with questions and suggestions that will prompt revision. Margin comments are useful on first drafts.
- If you are commenting on the *final* version of a writing assignment, consider responding with remarks that allow students to see strengths and weaknesses for future application. If you include a lot of questions on the final draft, students are likely to get frustrated because they can not to respond to the questions.

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