

## Responding to Student Writing



Before grading final student papers, keep in mind that there is little-to-no transfer of learning from the comments you make on the students’ papers. So do not waste time making any editing comments. This does not mean that you should not require editorial excellence; it simply means that “like nagging your children,” it is not effective to waste time marking the papers for students. Also, comments on a final paper should be fewer than those on a draft. Rely on rubrics, then make specific global comments at the end of the paper. If you choose to add comments on each page, limit the comments to a maximum of 3 per page.

“Responding to student writing is more than a matter of pointing out errors, doling out praise, or making improvements. Is more than ranking a student’s performance or giving grades. It is, first and last, a way of talking with students about their writing” (Straub, 2000, p. 72).

“We’re all familiar with the pattern of students receiving the feedback we carefully wrote up and focusing only on the grade. Who hasn’t had the experience of spending hours and hours marking up student work, only to discover later that they never really did anything with it? How many teachers end the term with a pile of uncollected final papers each heavy with commentary that will never be read?” (Germano & Nicholls, 2020, p. 132)

Require the final paper to be due sooner than the last day or at the final exam; many instructors find that requiring papers to be submitted before Thanksgiving or by the end of March gives them the ability to grade and return the papers by the last day of class.

Issues that you see frequently can be combined into an attached document or posted on Learning Suite for all students, rather than repeating them over and over individually. If there are problems that appear in the majority of students’ papers, it may be an instructor failure rather than student failure.

How we respond to student writing depends on our purpose.

<b>Problems That May Arise in Grading Student Papers</b>	
Teachers control so much of the writing that students are left passively “obeying orders”	“Delete this section” “Change the conclusion” “Restructure the paper”
Teachers fail to provide enough feedback or direction	“Good topic” “Develop and tighten the ideas” “Proofread papers”
Teachers provide only editing comments	“Put a comma between the elements of the list” “Replace the hyphen with a dash” “Capitalize proper nouns”

Teachers comment only on errors (no praise for things that are well done)	“You spelled the author’s name incorrectly” “This paragraph lacks scholarly evidence” “Use more synthesis and fewer quotations”
Teachers point out every error and every time it appears.	“Use an active verb here.” “Use an active verb here, too.” “Use an active verb here, too . . .”

(Adapted from Straub, 2000, pp. 72, 235, 248)

<b>Effective Responses to Student Papers</b>
“Instead of being comprehensive, try to cover less ground and be more effective with what you do [address]” (p. 248)
“Deal exclusively with matters of content. There is no sense in getting into shaping and refining a paper that has nothing yet to say” (p. 248)
“Shape your comments according to the needs of the individual student. It’s not the paper in front of us, after all, that we’re teaching” (p. 250)
Use praise to “recognize a job well done, to teach a principle, to underscore successful strategies, and to encourage students to continue working on their writing” (p. 250)
Return student papers by the last day of class. Take time to talk about your responses. Indicate patterns that appeared, note your key concern, and inform students of the purposes behind your comments (p. 250)

(Adapted from Straub, 2000, pp. 248, 250)

#### References

- Germano, W. & Nicholls, K. (2020). *Syllabus: The remarkable, unremarkable document that changes everything*. Princeton
- Straub, R. (2000). *The practice of response: Strategies for commenting on student writing*. Hampton Press.

“I don’t believe students’ written products can improve dramatically in 15 weeks. As a teacher I’ve come to expect more modest gains in my students’ writing, looking for it to improve in certain restricted ways, along certain lines, while not necessarily expecting a demonstrable improvement in overall writing quality” (Straub, 2000, p. 239).

I love this quote that describes our efforts to respond to student writing:

“The rule of thumb [for making comments on student papers]: if you are going to make a comment, make it well. Rather than spray the paper with various notes and abbreviations, take your time, select which areas of writing are most important for this student at this time, and write out more fully each of the comments you do make” (Straub, 2000, p. 274)

### FHSS Writing Lab

1175 JFSB

<https://fhsswriting.byu.edu/Pages/Home.aspx>

[fhss-writinglab@byu.edu](mailto:fhss-writinglab@byu.edu)

**Faculty Supervisor:** Joyce Adams (422-8168)

**Student Lab Managers:** Brynn & Matthew (422-4454)