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all, when sitting alone with a stack of student papers, we are sitting with our
students’ writing, not with the students who wrote these words.

If we write comments directed to the person who wrote the words, rather than to the words themselves, what would these comments look
and sound like? To start this new practice, I began by asking: If a student
were sitting beside me, how would I approach the process of commenting?
Would I begin, as I sometimes do with my written comments, by delivering
a lengthy monologue to tell her what is deficient and missing in her paper,
as if there were an ideal paper and hers has come up short? And would I tell
her not to worry about her paper’s shortcomings because they will be fixed
and corrected by her teacher’s directives? I hope not.

Everything shifts when we transfer the focus of our comments from
the paper to the student, from monologue to dialogue, and from teacher-
centered commands to teacher-student partnerships. As with any partner-
nship, each partner has a role in this exchange: Our role as teachers is
to engage with students by treating them as apprentices, offering honest
critique paired with instruction; and for students, it is to be open to the
teacher’s comments, reading and hearing these responses not as personal
attacks or as isolated moments but as instructive and portable lessons to take
with them to the next draft or assignment. This partnership has as much to
do with students’ willingness to hear and accept honest and constructive
assessment of their work as it does with teachers’ willingness to offer such
an assessment. Everything shifts, as well, when we realize that the language
of our comments derives from the relationship forged with our students in
the classroom and forms part of that classroom conversation, rather than
a separate language for response, with separate customs, conventions, and
hieroglyphics. Since we sit alone with our students’ papers, engrossed in our
own rituals of response, we may forget that responding begins in the class-
room, on the very first day of class, not at the moment when we assume
joint ownership of our students’ drafts by taking up residence in the mar-
gins at the foot of their papers.

Most writing teachers don’t choose their profession to become comma
cops or grammar guardians. Most find their calling in the back-and-forth
of the classroom, the call-and-response between student and teacher, and
in the deep pleasures of nurturing students as thinkers, readers, and writ-
ers. Sometimes, though, when teachers separate responding from classroom
work, they forget that comments are an extension of the many voices in our
classroom, not just their own. And sometimes teachers may forget that their
responses need not be monumental; they need only answer students’ basic
question: How do I write a good college paper?

Setting the scene for responding

Responding to student writers is a conversation that begins in the class-
room. We would never think, for instance, of hurrying into the classroom
to bark a series of commands—Be specific! Avoid generalizations! Develop
more!; to speak in codes—Awk, Frag, Punct; or even to perform a series of
dramatic gestures—The exclamation point! The question mark! The squiggly
line —. Yet the margins of students’ papers are often crammed with these
monologues—shorthand commands, codes, and gestures that contain mes-
gages about student-teacher relationships, whether respectful, paternalistic,
or lopsided. Nor would we enter our classrooms attempting to teach every
compositional lesson in a single day. And yet we often overwhelm students
when we spatter our responses across their pages, employing our comments
to identify their drafts’ shortcomings and sending mixed messages about
the processes of revising, editing, and proofreading.

When sitting alone with our students’ drafts, feeling the weighty
responsibility of responding, we often forget that all writing, including
our comments, is written to someone for a specific purpose. In the case of
responding, though, everything becomes complicated because teachers
play so many different roles—reader, diagnostician, coach, gatekeeper,
judge—and we use our comments for multiple purposes of teaching and
learning. This chapter looks at the implicit and explicit messages of written
comments, especially through the eyes and experiences of student writers,
and suggests that responding becomes less overwhelming, for both students
and teachers, when we focus our purpose on student learning and ask: What
will students learn from our written comments? And how will our comments teach
these lessons?

Offering one lesson at a time

Let’s start with a story that is a touchstone for me, an example of almost
Zen-like advice, written in a respectful tone that provided a student with a
single durable, transportable lesson. As part of the longitudinal study, my
colleagues and I asked seniors to look through their portfolios of college
writing to identify examples of effective comments. Looking at her bulging portfolio, Mary pointed to the influential words written on her first college paper and explained:

This paper was my best guess of what a college paper should look like, a typical five-paragraph theme about Macbeth. My teacher wrote comments in the margins and at the end of the essay, but one piece of advice stayed with me: Try to do something a little less safe next time; ask a question you don’t have an answer to. I didn’t quite understand what he meant, but I realized that I was being asked to try something different from my five-paragraph high school routine. So I approached my second college paper by asking a question I didn’t have an answer to: Why does Cymbeline, a tragedy, have a happy ending? This approach was somewhat scary at first, but as I began to see how much more interesting it is to start a paper by puzzling out what I don’t know, rather than starting with what I know, I found an approach to use for most of my college papers.

If we understand responding as a form of give-and-take, we might consider that the conversation begins with Mary asking: “How do I write a good college paper?” This isn’t an easy question for any teacher, novice or veteran, to answer in a few words. And it demands a specific answer, not a generic one, addressed to each student’s particular set of skills and disciplinary interests. I would like to imagine that Mary’s teacher didn’t rubber-stamp these simple words—Try to do something a little less safe next time; ask a question you don’t have an answer to—on every student’s paper, but rather wrote them to Mary to show his confidence in her, as well as his understanding of her readiness to move away from a safe high school method. His words encouraged Mary to be brave, to take a risk, to tolerate uncertainty, and to try something new. That these words guided her long after she left an introductory literature course might stem from her instructor’s modest goal of teaching one doable and practical lesson at a time, as well as his belief that other lessons would follow from this one. As a first-year student, Mary wasn’t asked, in the words of David Bartholomae, “to invent the university,” or even to invent the field of literary criticism or composition. Instead, she was invited to learn one new and specific lesson—ask a question you don’t have an answer to—and to take an apprentice’s first step as an academic writer.

Understanding the purpose of comments

Commenting on student drafts serves multiple purposes, but the overarching purpose is to show students how to write a good paper. Too often, though, comments aren’t written with a clear lesson in mind, or even a clear sense of how a student might use these comments. Let’s look, for example, at some of the comments one student, Roy, received on the first draft of his first college paper:

James Baldwin, an American novelist, once said: “I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” Baldwin speaks about America the way a parent speaks about a small child. Baldwin criticizes, as any concerned and involved parent would, to nurture the country he loves so deeply and to help it mature. This ability to criticize and to voice your opinion, whether you are for or against America is one of the options unique to Americans. We, like Baldwin, can say whatever we like about America and our government without fear of repercussions. We are children with a very unusual privilege to voice any number of negative, dissenting views about our parent country without ever being punished. Americans have a unique and complex relationship with our country. As a result of our unusual rights and privileges, we can act as both critical parents and difficult children. Confusing analogy. Is the relationship between a country and its citizens the same as a parent-child relationship?

Much of Roy’s debut as a college writer is commendable, especially his brave attempt to use an analogy, but he probably wouldn’t know it from the paternalistic tone of his teacher’s comments, which cast him as a wayward student writer. The teacher seems to have approached Roy’s draft with a deficit model, looking for what is wrong and inadequate, and concluding that what is absent from this paragraph is more important than what it might contain. It wouldn’t matter if these comments were written in red or blue ink, scribbled in pen or typed via Word’s comment function; they send Roy a message that he needs to fix, patch, and correct what his teacher marked and also to rethink the substance of the paragraph’s central analogy. When I asked Roy about his reaction to his instructor’s comments, he replied: “I guess my teacher didn’t like what I wrote.” And when asked why he thought teachers comment on drafts, he surmised that “the main reason is to tell students what they’ve done wrong.”

We have all heard the perplexed student say to us: “I don’t understand how you want me to change this” or “Tell me what you want me to do.” When students receive comments such as Roy’s, they quickly forget their own purpose in writing and shift their attention from “This is what I want to say” to “This is what you, the teacher, are asking me to do.” If we look at these comments from Roy’s point of view, we can see how confusing this process must seem: Should he patch first and then develop? Or develop and
then patch? The remarkable contradiction of asking Roy to edit sentences that probably won’t be in a subsequent draft, especially if he develops a new analogy, suggests a confusion of purposes that only reinforces Roy’s belief that teachers comment primarily to show students what they have done wrong.

The dangers of overcommenting

Research on responding confirms that overcommenting does more harm than good. Students become overwhelmed and discouraged; teachers get exhausted. Moreover, offering too many comments, especially negative ones, often gives students an inaccurate view of who they are as writers and who they might become. I imagine Roy’s teacher as a dedicated and conscientious instructor with the best intentions to help students become successful college writers, but her comments are exhausting to read and most likely were exhausting to write, especially if she wrote such copious comments on each student’s draft. In responding to a single paragraph, she willingly plays multiple roles—comma cop, gatekeeper, critic, and judge. She has shown Roy his mistakes and communicated that he has much to learn, but she hasn’t shown him how her questions, commands, and pleadings will help him write a good college paper. What’s more, she hasn’t pointed out anything positive, anything for him to build on as he revises. It is important for Roy to see what he has accomplished in his first draft and how he might gain traction with the ideas present in this draft.

One of the major challenges of responding is that there are an infinite number of lessons we might want our comments to teach, but a finite number of lessons students can learn in writing and revising a single paper. We can understand why Roy’s teacher wanted to point out the paragraphs’ multiple problems with commas, citations, diction, and syntax, as well as its lapses in specificity, accuracy, and clarity, but it is impossible to imagine Roy learning all of these lessons while revising his first college paper.

It is healthy to remind ourselves how daunting and complex the conventions of academic writing must look to first-year college students, even to most undergraduates, as they grasp and practice what seems, at first, a set of esoteric codes. We also need to be empathetic about our students’ capacities as apprentices to absorb and learn from comments, and we need to be humble about the limited influence of any one comment. No comment, no matter how brilliant, insightful, or articulate, will be sufficient to shape a fully formed writer. Although we labor to write comments, they aren’t really for us or about us. The purpose of responding is not to show students how smart or clever their teachers are, or to reinforce the hierarchy between student and teacher by correcting students’ errors. Rather, the purpose of responding is to promote students’ authority and authorship by giving them feedback about their strengths and limitations as writers. And the feedback loop provides a double perspective for students to see what they have learned and accomplished, as well as what they still need to learn.

Responding to rough versus final drafts

The purpose of responding to rough or early drafts differs from the purpose of responding to final drafts, and comments should be matched to the draft at hand. An early draft is a work in progress (like its student writer); its ideas are in flux and are still being formed and tested. The writers of early drafts need nurturing encouragement and honest assessment to see where they stumble and where they succeed. By contrast, comments on a final draft have a different purpose because they need both to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the current paper and to provide transportable lessons for future assignments.

For example, in commenting on an early draft, a teacher might suggest a common revision strategy: that something the student has written at the end of a draft may be more appropriate for the opening:

Sample comment on an early draft

The thesis, as stated in your first paragraph, is more a statement of fact than a debatable proposition, but your final paragraph hints at an interesting argument and possible thesis. Consider the possibility of revising your conclusion to become your introduction.

But such a comment, if written on a final draft, would confuse process with product, given that the paper is finished and that the student will be moving on to the next assignment. Comments on final drafts need to provide transportable lessons that students can take with them across drafts and assignments, and they often contain phrases such as For your next paper, you might want to try . . . or Before writing your next draft, ask yourself . . . For instance, in responding to a final draft, a teacher might offer the following lesson on how to arrive at a thesis and engage a reader with an arguable claim.

Sample comment on a final draft

When you approach your next paper, try to begin with an intriguing detail, especially one you find difficult to explain. Beginning in this manner not only draws in your reader but also forces you as a writer to grapple with a troubling aspect of the text, which can often be a key aspect that you had previously set aside. This, in turn, can focus your thesis and argument.

Such a comment on a final draft treats the student as an apprentice, an evolving writer, and provides the student with a bridge to cross to future writing assignments—those details that you have dismissed might be more important than you first imagined; start with details because they engage readers.

Finding the right tone

Our comments are written for specific purposes—to inspire, to encourage, to nurture, to evaluate—and are written to our students, who need respect and honesty, not harshness or mean-spiritedness. Reading many hundreds
of pages of student writing collected for the longitudinal study, I was surprised by the variety of teacher commentary, some of which was written with a disrespectful edge. Tone is the essence of a comment; how we phrase a response is as important as what we say. The same comment can be phrased in different tones and often makes the difference between students feeling dismissed and insulted and students feeling respected and taken seriously. Consider, for instance, what it must feel like to receive comments such as *What you say, you say nicely, but you don’t really say very much; or You’ve written a rant that makes you sound like a radio talk show host, not like a thoughtful student. Curb your opinions because nobody wants to hear them.* Ouch!

Harsh insults at the student writer who sounds like a “radio talk show host” won’t turn his opinions into reasoned arguments. Our “host” needs to learn how to be open to opposing points of view and how to become a thoughtful and reasonable writer. And the student who doesn’t “really say very much” needs to be shown how to read her own words to detect the differences between empty sentences that don’t “say very much” and those sentences that communicate an idea with some depth and complexity. To develop authority as writers, students need guidance and specific advice, always phrased in an encouraging tone.

While writing this book, I had the wonderful opportunity to interview fifty students from Bunker Hill Community College about their teachers’ written comments. What struck me in all my interviews was the vital role that tone plays in encouraging students to become stronger writers and, by extension, stronger students. Bunker Hill students used two words—encouraging and discouraging—to describe the tone of their teachers’ comments. Encouraging comments are described by students as “gifts,” given by “someone who walks with you,” who says that “you’re on the right path,” and who is “on the same page as you.”

By contrast, discouraging comments leave students feeling as if something has been taken away from them, with nothing being given in return. Students describe the discouraging comments with metaphors such as “having the rug pulled from under [them],” “being shot down,” or “being nailed.” As one student remarked, “If you take something away from a student who isn’t a strong writer, you don’t leave him very much.”

What I learned from seeing comments through the eyes of both Bunker Hill and Harvard students is something quite simple and comforting. Tone is the essence of a comment because it speaks of the powerful relationships created in the acts of giving and receiving responses. To college students, teachers’ comments are often their most personal contact with their institution and carry messages larger than the words themselves.

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Developing a common language

Responding begins on the first day of class, not at the moment we establish residency in the margins of our students’ drafts. Just as we stride into our classrooms with assumptions about who our students seem to be, so, too, our students pick up messages, implicitly or explicitly, about their teachers’ expectations, values, and dispositions. Students are confused if the persona we project in our comments is different from the person who shows up every Tuesday and Thursday to teach. They are equally confused if we use a separate language for responding, one they see for the first time in comments on their papers, a vocabulary that is unrelated to their classroom discussions and exercises. Responding is more effective when the language of our comments comes from the classroom, rather than using a separate language with separate customs and conventions. Creating a common language with students, especially one that comes from the class rather than one that is imposed on them, connects and unifies various elements—discussions, exercises, assignments, and peer and teacher comments.

Here’s an example of how I connect the common language of my classroom with my comments. I define thesis as an essay’s main point or central idea that is often formulated as (1) an answer to a question posed, (2) the resolution of a problem identified, or (3) a statement that takes a position on a debatable topic. That’s a great starting point, but students can’t grasp how to develop an engaging thesis until they repeatedly practice putting their theses to a reader’s test: *So what? Who cares? Why would someone want to read an essay that explores this thesis? Would anyone disagree with this thesis? If so, what would this person say?* Throughout the semester, these are the questions my students ask themselves and their peers whenever we workshop a draft, discuss tentative theses for a given assignment, or analyze the rhetorical effectiveness of writers’ theses and arguments. Commenting on their drafts, I often use some part of the familiar “So what?” language to show students how to transform their descriptive theses to argumentative theses and how to find a motive for their arguments. When students say I don’t think my thesis has a “So what?” or when they tell their peers *There’s no So what?” to your thesis, I know that we’re all speaking the same language and that they have begun to grasp the dynamic process of crafting a thesis.

Creating a link between classroom and comments

Students often tell me that the comments they most understand and use are those that have a background or context because such responses employ the familiar language of classroom instruction—the terms and phrasings already in play between students and teachers. One of my favorite examples of a comment with a background comes from Francesco, a student I interviewed at Bunker Hill Community College. Francesco explained that his teacher used the term spice in class to illustrate how good academic writing...
always reveals a writer’s personal take on a subject. As the teacher illustrated, one writer might choose oregano, another cinnamon; spice gives writing its personal seasoning, flavoring analyses and syntheses that would otherwise be bland. When Francesco’s teacher wrote Good spice or More spice in the margins of his drafts, such comments functioned almost like a class within a class, taking the student back to classroom lessons about how and why writers add spice to increase their rhetorical authority.

Developing a common language with students not only brings a class together and increases opportunities for learning but also makes responding fun. In one of my writing courses, for instance, students began using the term facing the dragon to describe the challenge of going beyond clichés to uncover the complexity and tensions within a topic. The dragon is the difficult part of writing, often what is not on the page, what is lurking in the margins or at the edges of drafts and must be confronted—the more difficult or significant the topic, the more fearsome the dragon. This particular class also used terms such as naysayer and worthy adversary to acknowledge opposing points of view and the phrase earning an ending to describe satisfying conclusions, as opposed to forced or artificial endings. Such terms, whimsical and creative, were reinforced in classroom discussions and assignments and provided a familiar common language for comments—words to identify places in their drafts where dragons or naysayers lurked, or where conclusions remain unearned.

Establishing a common language with students provides an important method for connecting what otherwise might be disparate pedagogical components of a writing course. It doesn’t really matter how the vocabulary is devised—it might be the standard language of the handbook, or phraseology created by students and teachers in the classroom. What matters most is that the words and phrases evoke a network of associations, suggest specific strategies to guide student writers, and connect the lessons of the classroom with the purpose of comments. Writing lessons don’t end when students turn papers in for a grade; nor do comments begin when our words appear on students’ drafts. Students are more likely to transfer their learning across the curriculum if they carry with them a common language to use when reading and responding to their own drafts.

Even the most thoughtful and articulate comments will have no influence on students if they don’t understand how to use them. If students believe that the purpose of comments is to justify a grade or to correct their mistakes, they won’t read their teachers’ comments with any sense of agency or engagement. And if students encounter comments written in an unfamiliar language, they’ll simply be baffled and unable to grasp the meaning. We owe it to ourselves and to our students to make sure our comments become texts worthy of reflection, interpretation, and discussion, just like every other text in the class. If papers are returned to students with no accompanying discussion about the purpose of comments, or if comments are isolated from classroom lessons, students will most likely not be able to make use of their teachers’ responses. In short, students won’t learn from them. To become confident and capable writers, students need to participate in a dialogue about their writing.

Establishing a role for students in the dialogue

Take the case of Jackson, one of the students in the longitudinal study, who, when asked as a first-year student how he might use his teacher’s comments in future assignments, responded: “I don’t think I can use these comments since each paper is a different assignment and a different kind of paper to work through.” Jackson intuited the great challenge of college writing: to move from his first-year writing course to his courses across the disciplines—writing about Confucius in a philosophy course one semester, about a government document in a political science course the next. But on another level, Jackson’s observation makes clear that it will be difficult for him to transfer comments to future writing assignments because he believes that each essay assignment is a discrete unit defined by its topic.
In Jackson's view of writing, comments are tailored to each essay but also isolated from all other essays, and their purpose is, simply, to show students how to correct their mistakes.

Part of becoming a good writer involves learning to receive and use constructive comments, both for the assignment at hand and for other assignments. Jackson is correct that an essay on Confucius is a text unto itself, but if he is to develop as a writer, he needs to understand that there is continuity from one assignment to another. Since he sees no way to transport lessons from one paper to the next, he reads his teachers' comments as isolated moments, not as bridges between assignments. Even the most insightful comments will not move students forward as writers if they believe there are no transportable lessons to be learned from their teachers' comments.

It is neither simple nor easy for students to learn how to receive and accept critique, especially how to read comments as something other than judgment on their limitations as students or on their failings as writers. While one student will respond, "My greatest reaction to all that red ink is gratitude," another first-year student will shrug and say, "I guess all these comments mean that he didn't really like my paper." Or if a student believes that the purpose of her composition course is to teach her how to "write quickly, adequately, and painlessly," we understand why such an attitude might prevent her from being open to comments that ask her to slow down, read texts closely, and, in a word, change her approach to writing. One of the conclusions from the longitudinal study is that a student's willingness to accept and benefit from comments, to see them as instruction and not merely as judgment, is an important predictor of college writing development.

At its best, responding extends and deepens the exchange that begins in the classroom, and it offers opportunities for students and teachers to engage in dialogue. The role of the student in this exchange is to be open to a teacher's comments, reading and hearing comments not as personal attacks or as the teacher's idiosyncrasies but rather as instructive words to carry to the next draft or assignment. And the role of the teacher in this exchange is to welcome students into the process by engaging with their ideas, respectfully and thoughtfully, treating students as apprentices, with much to gain and much to give.

If students such as Jackson believe the purpose of comments is to show them what they've done wrong, they will have great difficulty using these comments to re-see or re-envision (in a word, revise) their drafts. If students think of revising in terms of correcting, proofreading, polishing, fixing, and patching, they will not understand the structural demolition and renovation that are often needed between drafts. A truth not often acknowledged about teaching writing is that revised drafts aren't always better drafts. Many revised drafts are actually weaker than the original rough drafts or so similar in style and content that it isn't clear that anything has changed. Revising may (or may not) guarantee change, but it doesn't guarantee improvement. It is impossible to engage students in a dialogue about their writing if they don't grasp the purpose of comments or if they don't understand how to use these responses when revising.

Revising with comments

Over the years, I've found it useful to assume that (1) first-year students haven't had much experience with deep, global revising; and (2) I am wasting my time and theirs if I don't treat comments—both my own and those from peers—as texts to be studied and discussed. It is difficult to engage students in a dialogue about their writing if they don't understand how to read and respond to their teachers' or peers' comments. Thus, when we discuss revising, I use former students' drafts, complete with marginal and end comments, and in class we consider ways in which the writers of these drafts chose to use or ignore various comments. Such an exercise provides opportunities to discuss global revising—thesis, evidence, or structure—and is an easy way to talk about the purpose and style of the comments they'll receive.

Two other exercises are extremely useful for showing students how to revise with comments:

- Ask students to read through your comments or those they've received from their peers and then to write a one-page revision plan in which they explain what they learned from these comments, as well as how they plan to use the comments when revising. This interlude of reflection encourages students to think globally about their drafts, clarify any responses they might not understand, seek help from the writing center, use their handbook, and not confuse revising with copyediting.

- At various points in the term, ask students to reread and analyze your comments and to give you feedback about them. Ask students to tell you which comments are useful and why, which are not and why, and what they've learned from your comments. I've found that this exercise engages students in surprising ways—suddenly, they are the teachers—and they relish the opportunity to show instructors how their comments missed the mark. It is enormously humbling to hear students say, "You write way too many questions. What do you think I will do with all those questions in the margins?" or "You show me what I've done wrong, but you don't show me how to get better as a writer." And it is equally rewarding to hear a student discover that he or she has "started to understand how to wrestle with the evidence of a text and not to assume that evidence speaks for itself."
The Dear Reader letter

One of the most effective methods for engaging students in a dialogue about their writing is to ask them to compose a Dear Reader letter or a writer's memo to accompany their drafts. For me, this practice, more than any other, has made responding more interesting and effective. Students are reminded that they are writing to live readers, and they are given the opportunity to ask for feedback. Teachers are given an easy method for shaping their responses to the student writer, not to the student's draft, and for focusing their comments as specific answers to students' questions and concerns.

Although the specific instructions for the Dear Reader letter vary from assignment to assignment, I usually ask students to begin letters by identifying the strengths of their drafts. Even if I disagree with the student's evaluation, I'm given a useful way to begin my comments:

Yes, your draft's great strength is the passion you feel for the subject, which a reader easily recognizes. One of the challenges, though, of writing about a subject such as stem cell research is that you need to remember that those who disagree with you are equally passionate about their views. As you revise, you'll want to consider these opposing viewpoints and incorporate them into your argument.

In writing such a comment, I'm trying to use a writer's strength—her passion for the subject—as a lens through which she might view what is missing from her argument—in this case, anticipating and acknowledging opposing arguments.

The prompts for the Dear Reader letter change depending on where students are in the writing process. When students are writing rough drafts, they need to ask questions about their work in progress. When they submit final drafts, they need to reflect on the differences between rough drafts and final drafts, and assess the strengths of their revision. A Dear Reader letter, like a portfolio cover letter, provides an opportunity for students to reflect on what they've learned about writing and how they plan to transfer their learning from the paper at hand to the next assignment.

A sample Dear Reader letter appears on page 13. The student was asked to respond to these prompts in his letter:

- What are the strengths of your rough draft? What are the problems of the draft?
- What were the challenges you encountered writing your draft?
- What is your thesis?
- If you had two more days to write this draft, where would you focus your attention?
- What questions are you asking about your draft that you want to make sure your readers answer?

Making the most of comments

If students are to engage in a dialogue about their writing, they need opportunities to be full participants. And if teachers want students to read and use their comments, they need to show students how to make the most of them. When visiting colleges and universities to offer workshops on responding, I often ask faculty: “What do you want students to know about why and how you respond?” And when meeting with students and writing center tutors,
I ask: "If you could give any advice to faculty about the kind of comments you and your peers want to receive, what would you tell them?" These questions always provoke spirited and passionate conversations, as if a veil had been lifted or a long-held dark secret had been released about teachers' comments. Both students and faculty have much to say to one another; they just need an opening and an invitation to explain their perspectives.

A statement—or manifesto, as the students called it—from writing center tutors at Columbus State University to their faculty appears below.

Sample student statement about feedback
A Manifesto on Written Feedback
From the Columbus State University Writing Center Tutors

1. We would like your comments to be written to us—students. We would like you to engage us through dialogue, not through commands. We ask that you not use your comments to reinforce the hierarchy between professors and students. Instead, use comments to create a relationship with us, reader to writer, and show us that you have read our papers and care about our development as writers and thinkers.

2. We would like your comments to be specific and not generic. Point out what we've accomplished and provide specific strategies for how we can improve as writers. We ask that you assume that we want to become stronger writers and to learn from your comments.

3. We would like your comments to bolster our agency as writers and to deepen our thinking. We feel censored when you cross out our sentences or shut down our arguments by writing "wrong" in the margin.

4. We would like your comments to help us notice themes and patterns in our writing, rather than point out random or arbitrary mistakes.

5. We would like you to distribute rubrics with the assignment rather than at the end of the writing process. You help us improve as writers when you discuss the rubric in class, for then the rubric informs our writing process, and we can learn from it. If your rubric is formulaic and covers too many elements, it does not help us as much, for it seems to exist for you to justify your grades.

Inspired by the Columbus State writing center tutors' document, the faculty and teaching assistants in the University of Arizona Writing Program chose to craft a statement to help their students understand how to make the most of comments. The Arizona manifesto appears on page 15.

Sample instructor statement about feedback
A Manifesto on Written Feedback
From the University of Arizona Writing Faculty to Our Students

1. We would like you to understand that our comments are part of the teaching and learning process. We write comments not just to evaluate your essay, but to help you see how the writing lessons from class emerge in your writing. One way to better understand the purpose of our comments is to actively participate in class and carefully read the rubric and assignment sheet. These are the ways we communicate with you ahead of time about what we are looking for in your writing.

2. We would like you to know that we intend our comments to be constructive. We value your ideas and want to learn from you. We hope that you will use our comments to learn from us as well.

3. We would like you to approach each essay not as an independent unit, but as a brief moment in your overall development as a writer. Our comments are meant to be useful to you in this assignment and your future writing.

4. We would like you to accept responsibility for using our comments in the revision process. We also expect you to share your strengths as a writer in commenting on your peers' papers.

5. We would like you to understand that comments are both descriptive and evaluative. Writing a letter grade is perhaps the least interesting thing we do as writing instructors. Take the time to re-read the entire essay alongside our comments to understand the grade in context. We invite you to use our comments as an opportunity to talk further about your writing.

These manifestos begin conversations between students and teachers about the important role responding plays in writing development. They allow teachers—even an entire writing program—to make these ideas public, either by including them on syllabi or by posting them on a writing program Web site, and to say to students, Here's how we comment, and why. And such documents provide an opportunity for students to participate in a conversation about their writing, one in which they have much to gain and much to give.
Writing marginal comments

“I never thought I would take another music course,” a student told me, “but the comments my professor wrote in the margins of my paper about Miles Davis made me believe I had something interesting to say about jazz.” Although written in the margins, such comments are hardly marginal; rather, they are central to the process of learning to write. Some teachers prefer the conventional method of using pen or pencil to write in the margins of student drafts, while others prefer to type comments via Word’s comment function. The method, handwriting or typing, matters less than the specific lessons conveyed to show students the strengths and limitations of their drafts.

When my colleagues and I asked students in the longitudinal study, “What advice would you give the Dean to strengthen writing instruction across the college?” we were surprised by the consistency of students’ responses: Almost 87 percent of the students wanted the dean to “encourage faculty to give more detailed feedback.” (By contrast, only 13 percent felt that “more writing assignments” would improve writing instruction.) Students told us, “If you don’t get feedback in the margins or ends of papers, you just assume that the professor didn’t read the paper or thought it was terrible.” And students spoke passionately about the ways in which their teachers’ comments showed them that “real readers were really reading” their words and paying attention to them.

Marginalia

Marginal comments present a record of a reader paying attention—highlighting a draft’s attributes while conversing with its writer. Students don’t take this convention lightly; marginal comments are the evidence that their drafts have been read closely. Without such responses, students conclude that their readers merely glanced at their words. A paper returned with no marginalia, or with nothing more than check marks and question marks scattered along the edges, suggests a breezy or distant reader. But what kind of reader do we become when we take up residence in the margins of our students’ papers?

Asking myself this question, I often smile and remember a phrase used when my daughters were in elementary school: “pleasure read” — a one-hour block of time devoted each week for children, along with their teachers and the principal, to sit on the floor and read for pleasure. When I disappear to read the weekly stack of student papers, I want to say to my family: “It is pleasure read time!” But I don’t, even though much of the experience is pleasurable, especially reading revised drafts. If we were reading students’ papers only for the pleasure of seeing what they’ve done with our assignments, we would sit comfortably on the floor, savor their words, and take delight in their accomplishments and successes. But our work as responders involves reading as teachers who are ready to collaborate, to show students how to write good papers. And it is the how—how to animate a moribund thesis or how to find sufficient evidence to persuade readers—that takes time, thought, imagination, and skill.

Less is sometimes more

We need to be careful that our zeal—suggesting, commanding, or pleading how to do something differently—doesn’t leave too heavy a footprint in the margins. It is easy to appropriate our students’ drafts by crossing boundaries between teacher and student, between reader and writer. Here I recall a phrase from Henry James: “the brutality of good intentions.” As collaborators—and I use the word with caution—our intentions are good, but our influence, unfortunately, is often crude: We intend to show students how to animate a moribund thesis but end up suggesting a clever one that we find compelling; or, intending to show students how to find persuasive evidence, we explain why the evidence we find persuasive is the evidence they should find persuasive. In such cases, students lose their agency and passion to animate their theses or to seek evidence to persuade their readers, and the collaboration between reader and writer, between teacher and student, easily becomes lopsided, especially when students are writing about texts we’ve read multiple times or about topics that we, too, are passionate about. It is much more difficult to stand back and restrain our collaborative enthusiasm or knowledge about a topic, to remember that comments are written for and about students who need comments to develop their writerly authority.

Developing a scale of concerns

Imagine a draft’s margins as the place allotted for conversational turning—your turn; my turn—rather than wide-open territory that is ours to dominate. If we see the margins as territory to which we’ve been invited, we’re less likely to be critical and ungracious, taking notice of every flaw, less likely to be the unfocused reader who offers a scattershot of random responses. And as guests, we are less likely to impose our own sensibility on a student’s draft.
Before commenting in the margins, it is helpful to read the entire draft, quickly, to grasp a sense of the whole piece. Sometimes this is impossible, especially when a quick turnaround is required for a tall stack of papers. But reading an entire draft before responding often saves time; it allows us to see the arc of the paper, rather than losing our way in a draft’s detours or rough patches.

In the interlude between quickly reading a draft and writing in the margins, it is important to ask: What single lesson do I want to convey to students? And how will my comments teach this lesson? Our marginal comments will most likely teach two or three lessons, but it is best to start with a single lesson to give students a consistent and focused response. Asking such questions helps us develop a scale of concerns appropriate for the paper we are reading and helps us avoid overcommenting. For instance, in reading a rough draft, we may confuse process and product and give students mixed messages if our marginal comments suggest that correcting spelling and punctuation errors is more important at this point in the process than identifying a clear thesis and an organizational structure to support that thesis.

Suggestions for writing marginal comments

Identify patterns — representative strengths and limitations — to help students gain control over their writing. By noticing rhetorical and grammatical patterns, we save ourselves time because we don’t need to comment on every instance of the problem, especially problems that might be resolved when students focus their attention on higher-order concerns or when they proofread their papers.

A pattern may be positive: Great job providing sufficient evidence to persuade readers. And a pattern may highlight recurring problems: Look closely at the ways in which you introduce each quotation to make sure you vary the language and placement of signal phrases. By highlighting patterns, we model for students how to assess their own strengths and limitations.

Anchor marginal comments in the specifics of a text to avoid vague directives. Most teachers have a series of commands — Be specific! Develop more! — that they place in the margins of student drafts. Although we need some form of shorthand, these commands don’t show a student why a paragraph would be strengthened with specific evidence or how to analyze evidence to develop claims. Text-specific comments demonstrate that we’re reading drafts carefully, rather than rubber-stamping a set of generic comments. If, for instance, a student has asserted that “cultural differences make it difficult for Italian students to study in the United States” but has not provided support for this assertion, a teacher might comment: What details and examples show these cultural differences? Why do these specific differences create difficulties for Italian students? Since the purpose of comments is to teach a lesson — in this case, specificity — comments should be anchored in the specifics of students’ drafts to guide their revisions.

Use the common language of the classroom to engage students in a dialogue about their writing. If we employ language that students don’t understand, our comments will go unread and unused, and we have wasted our time and theirs. Students are more likely to be engaged if comments are phrased in familiar language and as questions, rather than as directives. For instance, instead of writing Revise your vague thesis, I might write: How does your thesis answer the “So what?” question? This is a shorthand way of saying: Remember Tuesday’s class when we revised thesis statements by responding to your classmates’ “So what?” questions? Now it is your turn to revise your thesis by asking this question. If such a comment engages a student, it does so by creating a coherent link between classroom lessons and their specific draft, placing the responsibility for revising and learning with the student.

Link marginal comments to specific handbook lessons. In deciding what lessons our comments will teach, we are guided by the patterns we observe in students’ drafts. For instance, if we notice a pattern of sentence fragments or comma errors and we correct each error, we’ve become our students’ copy editors. By contrast, if we identify for students one or two instances of such errors and refer students to the sections of their handbook for a fuller explanation, we respect and encourage students’ abilities to self-correct and revise.

Handbooks become more useful companions for student writers when they are also a teacher’s companion for responding, not only for identifying grammar errors but also for reinforcing rhetorical lessons. For instance, if a student’s argument would be strengthened by including a counterargument, we might want to write: How will someone who disagrees with your position respond? Refer to page X in your handbook on anticipating and countering objections to see how to incorporate opposing arguments.

It is easy for teachers to feel overwhelmed by the process of writing marginal comments, especially when we try to fix compositional errors and believe it is our job to respond to every problem in each draft. I often remind myself not to comment on a problem just because I notice it; to do so is to respond to the writing, not to the writer. After all, it is not the quantity of our marginal notes, or the mistakes we catch, or even the insights
we’ve achieved about students’ drafts that matter most in students’ writing development; rather, it is the capacity of our words to engage students in an exchange about their writing. Questions alone may not engage students, but questions anchored in the specifics of a student text and phrased in the common language of the classroom are more likely to create a role for students in the exchange. Our dialogue is much more likely to resonate with students if we continue to ask: What lesson am I trying to teach?

One of my favorite stories about responding comes from a Seinfeld routine: As Jerry Seinfeld tells it, his teacher returned a paper with one marginal comment: Vague. Seinfeld drew an arrow to the comment, wrote Unclear, and gave it back to the teacher. The teacher then handed it back to Seinfeld with another single comment: Ambiguous. According to Seinfeld, “We’re still corresponding to this day.” Although most likely apocryphal, Seinfeld’s story provides a cautionary tale about the kind of exchange, easily parodied, that we don’t want to foster: teachers’ holding the license for vagueness while commanding students to be specific.

Like marginal comments, end comments (also called final or summary comments) are an occasion for engaging students in a conversation about their work and are best phrased in the familiar language of the classroom. Both marginal and end comments dramatize the presence of a reader and say to students: I have read your draft, and here is how it looks from my perspective. Though different in format—marginal comments are often written in shorthand, whereas end comments are often written as letters—and different in purpose—marginal comments ask students to pay attention locally, whereas end comments ask students to pay attention globally—they work together to provide a consistent message about a draft’s strengths and limitations.

End comments on early drafts

End comments on early drafts need to focus on specific lessons for revising. If students have been asked to identify their drafts’ strengths and weaknesses in a Dear Reader letter, their reflections will guide the conversation. Students might not be the best judges of their own work, but they become better judges when they are asked to reflect and participate in the back-and-forth of responding. As teachers, our work is to help students see their words from the perspective of interested readers and to guide their re-seeing, as they separate the processes of drafting from revising, crafting from editing. Since revising requires writers to delete—what one of my students called “slash and burn”—what they’ve worked so hard to create, our end comments ought to acknowledge the strengths of what they’ve accomplished before we proceed to identify their drafts’ global problems.

A sample Dear Reader letter and a teacher’s end comment intended to motivate revision appear on page 22. The student, Jamal Hammond, was asked to respond to these prompts in his Dear Reader letter:

- What are the strengths of your draft?
- What is your thesis? Your argument?
How does your thesis answer a reader’s “So what?” question?

What opposing arguments do you acknowledge?

What was the hardest part about writing this draft?

What questions are you asking about your draft that you want to make sure your readers answer?

Sample Dear Reader letter

Dear Reader:

The strongest part of my draft is my argument. Here’s my thesis: Athletes who use any type of biotechnology give themselves an unfair advantage. My argument is that drugs should not be used under any circumstances even if they are available. The “So what?” of my thesis is something I’m still trying to figure out. I didn’t have trouble thinking of an opposing argument because I know most people my age believe that athletes should be able to use performance-enhancing drugs since these drugs make it possible for athletes to perform better and break world records.

The hardest part of writing this draft was figuring out which sources to use and how to quote them. I still don’t understand MLA citation.

I have two questions: Do you like my draft? Do you find it convincing?

Jamal Hammond

An instructor’s end comment on an early draft

Comment [Cheryl/Yee7]: Dear Jamal:
You’ve written a promising draft about an important ethical issue: the role of performance-enhancing drugs in sports. You are right about the strength of your draft. A reader has no doubt about your position.
Your argument would be more convincing, though, if you didn’t dismiss your opponents’ arguments so quickly. (See marginal comment #5.) Try to help readers understand what distinguishes a “fair” from an “unfair” advantage and why “fairness” is more important than breaking world records.
Please see marginal comments #1–4 to help you think about how to strengthen your use of quotations. We’ll be reviewing MLA in class this week.
I look forward to reading your next draft.

Sincerely,
Professor Yee

Professor Yee’s response to Jamal is written in a conversational tone, allowing the writer’s concerns to set the agenda, and she focuses her comments to teach key lessons about academic writing. She begins the exchange by affirming their common ground: “You are right about the strength of your draft: A reader has no doubt about your position.” She shows confidence in Jamal’s ability to find the missing piece of his argument and never appropriates his draft by suggesting a right answer. Likewise, she doesn’t impose her view about how to make his argument more convincing, but she does offer a method: “Your argument would be more convincing, though, if you didn’t dismiss your opponents’ arguments so quickly.”

When I asked Professor Yee why she chose to defer comments about MLA citation until a future class session, she explained: “It was early in the term, and almost all of the students were confused by MLA citation and documentation conventions. It is much more efficient to ask students to bring their handbook to class, teach the lessons again, and ask students to return to their drafts to apply what they’ve learned.” And when I asked why she chose not to respond to his question “Do you like my draft?” she observed: “First-year students are vulnerable and just want to know if they are meeting college expectations. Jamal’s question, like the questions from all students, offers a snapshot of who he is as a writer at this point in the semester. I chose to answer the second question—‘Do you find it convincing?’—because that seems more important than whether I ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ his draft.”

End comments on final drafts

In the example below, a history professor uses an end comment on a student’s final draft to teach a single lesson.

Sample end comment on a final draft

Comment [Brian/Henry]: Dear Sonia:
A major strength of your paper is its originality. You bring in excellent evidence to support your argument, but at times you give the reader the impression that you expect the evidence to be self-evident. (See marginal comment #4.) Selecting good evidence is one side of the coin, but analyzing it for your reader is just as important, and on that front, you can go much deeper. (Marginal comments #1–3 highlight the ratio between quotation and analysis in a single paragraph.) For your next paper, focus on a deeper analysis of the evidence. Remember that your readers want to see how you interpret evidence.
I look forward to reading your next paper.

Sincerely,
Professor Henry

Professor Henry uses his end comment to teach his student, Sonia, that evidence doesn’t speak for itself. The marginal and end comments work together to provide a consistent message of specific instances (illustrated in numbered marginal comments) where deeper analyses would strengthen Sonia’s
argument. Professor Henry uses Sonia’s strength — selecting evidence — as a lens through which she can understand her paper’s weakness — expecting evidence to be self-evident — and while respecting the difficulty of the task, he expresses confidence in Sonia and guides her to work from her strengths. What might otherwise sting as a critique is softened by guidance and continuity — a teacher looking forward to reading a student’s future work.

Although there are no formulas for end comments on final drafts, Professor Henry organizes his comments in a productive sequence:

- **Opens with a salutation:** “Dear Sonia”
- **Highlights the paper’s strengths:** “You bring in excellent evidence to support your argument”
- **Highlights the paper’s weakness:** “You expect the evidence to be self-evident”
- **Links marginal comments with the end comment:** “Marginal comments #1–3 highlight the ratio between quotation and analysis in a single paragraph”
- **Provides guidance across the drafts:** “For your next paper, focus on a deeper analysis of the evidence”
- **Reinforces the writer-reader relationship:** “I look forward to reading your next paper”
- **Closes with a signature:** “Sincerely, Professor Henry”

**Taking students seriously**

In offering end comments from two teachers, I’m not suggesting that these responses are templates to copy. They are instructional, of course, but like all comments they are not meant to be showcased in a gallery of beautifully crafted comments, even if there were such a museum. The exact wording of any comment is less important than what it evokes in a student and the relationship it fosters. If a teacher’s comment takes a student seriously — resonating with something the student has noticed, guiding without appropriating the student’s way of *seeing* and *re-seeing* — the comment will transcend the draft at hand and will travel with the student across the drafts.

When interviewing students for the longitudinal study, I heard students’ observations about teachers who commented too much and those who commented too little. It was rare to hear a student say that a teacher wrote just the right amount. I’m sympathetic to students’ complaints because I tend to be in the overcommenting group. Getting it “just right” is a challenge, especially in an end comment, and I constantly remind myself to focus on one or two lessons in my end comments, not an entire semester’s worth of lessons for one paper. My tendency to overcomment may explain my enthusiasm for the Dear Reader letter because it offers teachers an opportunity to get it “just right.” With a conversational back-and-forth of letters, we are less likely to be verbose or high-handed, less likely to spew a long list of points that need to be fixed, and more likely to remember that end comments ought to be specific, not generic, and written from one writer to another.