

RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING: GOALS, METHODS, ALTERNATIVES

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Thanks to substantial research about ways teachers respond to student writing and the effect of teachers' commentaries on writing improvement, composition teachers are well informed about evaluation procedures and goals. Below are some of the most important recommendations that have emerged from composition research:

- **Provide "formative" as opposed to "summative" evaluations.** In other words, our purpose is not to justify a grade or do what Mallone and Breihan call "character assassination." Instead, we need to decipher the writer's intentions and propose, when pertinent, several alternatives to realizing these intentions. Ultimately, our concern should be more with teaching a student to ask the critical questions that writers ask when revising than with the quality of any one particular manuscript.
- **Require multiple drafting.** According to over thirty years of research, students benefit from our responses to their writing only when we respond to several drafts. To transform grading papers into a learning process, we must allow students to revise their work in light of our criticism. Otherwise, they tend to ignore our commentaries, no matter how wise our responses may be. (Bamberg; Burton and Arnold; Buxton; Fellows; Marzano; Knoblauch and Brannon; Sommers).
- **Place students in small groups and teach them to evaluate each other's work.** Allowing students to evaluate each other's work in small groups promotes critical thinking and leads to the development of essential editorial skills. Peer reviews also help students to better understand the needs, interests and expectations of audiences other than the teacher. Discussing various topics and treatments helps students better understand assignments and alternatives, and shy students can ask questions that they might not otherwise ask.
- **Avoid "appropriating" students' texts and simplifying students' roles to that of army privates following orders:**

In other words, the teacher's proper role is not to tell the student explicitly what to do but rather to serve as a sounding board enabling the writer to see confusions in the text and encouraging the writer to explore alternatives that he or she may not have considered. The teacher's role is to attract a writer's attention to the relationship between intention and effect, enabling a recognition of discrepancies, but finally leaving decisions about alternative choices to the writer, not the teacher (Brannon and Knoblauch 162).

Most composition scholars (such as Erika Lindemann and David Fuller) argue that we need to provide written commentaries that outline alternative ways to improve student writing.

- **Play the role of the students' intended audience.** By role playing our students' intended audiences, we teach that writers compose for an audience, instead of "performing for a verdict" (Elbow 225).
- **Encourage students to view revision to be an opportunity to clarify and discover one's meaning.** We must encourage students to perceive revision to be an inevitable and important aspect of composing, not punishment for not getting it right the first time. (Murray).
- **Avoid overburdening students with advice by identifying only one or two patterns of error at a time.** We need to teach students that writing well means more than forming grammatically correct sentences. We can teach students that what they say is more important—or at least as important—as how they say it, if we primarily respond to the substance and significance of their topics.
- **Praise positive attributes in each paper.** Like everyone else, students respond to encouragement and positive reinforcement. When papers are smeared with red ink, even the hardest ego can be slow to recover. Sam Dragg and Frances Zak have argued that we should provide solely positive responses, and the work of learning theorists supports the assumption that we are most inclined to learn more when we are rewarded for positive behaviors as opposed to being punished for negative behaviors. Indeed, some preliminary research has suggested that praiseworthy grading improves students' attitudes about writing and results in more writing on the students' part than traditional fault-finding grading (Dragga; Zak).
- **Avoid excessive abstract, formulaic textbook language, such as "edit for efficiency!"; "transition?"; "v/ag"; "p/ag"; etc.** Students are not professional copy editors, and past research indicates that they don't appear to understand or respond to our abbreviations.
- **Omit grades on individual papers.** Grades often transform the effective coaching role of a teacher to that of a judge and gatekeeper. As an alternative to grading individual papers, we can have students keep a portfolio of papers, and select a few papers to grade at the end of each semester (Murray; Burkland and Grimm).

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Although well-intentioned and theoretically convincing, some of the above recommendations are difficult to put into practice. For example, in my experience teaching undergraduate writing courses, I have found that not providing grades can be incredibly stressful for students, and colleagues have reported similar results. As much as we may hope that students truly want to improve their writing, grades are their lives and without them—in the unfamiliar territory of an English classroom—a few students may become fearful, anxious about plunging grade point averages. And even though I wholeheartedly agree with being positive when responding to students' work, I believe we need to show students why some passages are weaker than others.

Although most of us are quick to support many (if not all) of the recommendations outlined above, past research suggests that we still emphasize editorial concerns and simplify the demands of global revision (Gee; Connors; Lindemann). In fact, studies of teachers' commentaries indicate that many of us fail to respond in meaningful ways to student papers. For example, in Nancy Sommers' examination of 35 teachers at the University of Oklahoma and New York University, she discovered that "most teachers' comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text" (152). Arthur Applebee's relatively large scale study of writing in the secondary schools drew similar conclusions. Of the 138 high-school teachers he surveyed, 87.7% routinely "indicate mechanical errors." After examining the response patterns of 454 teachers in the content areas—foreign language, math, science, social science, and business—Applebee concluded:

Techniques that directly engaged the ideas that the student was expressing—posing counterarguments, responding to the teacher's own views, or suggesting related topics the student might explore—were used routinely by no more than a fifth of the teachers; those techniques were also rated as least important among possible reactions (85).

Sommers' and Applebee's findings are obviously a powerful indictment. Despite all of the errors we identify, as Barbara Malone and John Breihan have found in their research, students tend to ignore our error hunts (particularly when revisions are not assigned):

Furthermore, overly-specific faculty action on the text, especially the conscientious red-flagging of every error, did not encourage students in their own problem-solving or teach them to be their own editors. Mere retyping of faculty corrections was more often than not a mindless task for the student (215).

Robert J. Connors has traced our concern for correctness to the late 19th century when writing teachers were expected to teach 140 to 200 students and grade 216 themes a week: "At some point between 1870 and 1900 the teacher as commentator on the general communicative success of a piece of student writing—form and content—was succeeded by a simplified concept: the teacher as spotter and corrector of formal errors" (67). Our passion for editing and grammar is particularly intriguing in light of Patrick Hartwell's comprehensive review of over fifty years of research that demonstrates that teaching grammar does not affect the quality of student writing or the frequency of error.

Given the overwhelming evidence that reg-flagging mechanical errors fails to improve student writing, our tendency to respond in this way is perplexing. Perhaps we highlight errors because we love language and expect students to craft their ideas

with care. As writers and critics, we believe sentence-level errors are important and cannot be dismissed, that our students must be competent editors if they are to succeed as business people, and that they will learn from our copy-editing. Also, we're good at editing and can easily justify grades by marking errors.

Like the overworked composition teachers of the 1870's, many of us are faced with unrealistic case loads. Obviously, time restraints play an important role in the way we respond to student writing. With standard courseloads of two or three writing courses a semester (and community college teachers often teach four or five writing courses a semester) and with an average of twenty-five students per course, most writing teachers spend thirty to forty hours each week evaluating papers. Accustomed to marking errors and faced with mountains of student papers, many of us grow weary and understandably have some difficulty embracing the above recommendations or experimenting with new techniques, no matter how well grounded they are in theory and research. In some ways we are like the weary miner who has been digging in the same cave for as long as we can remember. Finding occasional gold nuggets convinces us that the next shovelful will hit the motherlode.

Nevertheless, in light of the process movement, we are more aware than ever before of the importance of responding to students' ideas. And yet how can we reasonably be expected to provide formative commentaries on seventy-five papers a week? How can we integrate the recommendations of recent research, and still deal effectively with the paper load?

Naturally, the single most reasonable action would be a reduction in class sizes for writing teachers and for teachers who assign extensive writing assignments. Expecting teachers to review more than forty essays a week is unrealistic and counterproductive. Also, teachers must experiment with the portfolio method discussed above.

However, faced with a society that demands grades—that produces bumper stickers that exclaim "My son is an honor student at such and such elementary school"—teachers are typically expected to evaluate all writing by assigning grades, even though the best pedagogical response is positive feedback and suggestions for revision.

Fortunately, we have a powerful alternative way to respond to student writing that allows us to achieve most of the goals outlined above in roughly the same amount of time as it takes to flag errors: taped evaluations. Like the many other teachers and scholars who have experimented with taped, oral commentaries, I have found that students prefer taped responses because they are more comprehensive. For many reasons, as analyzed below, taped evaluations can enable us to provide more formative responses—that is, the kinds of commentaries that show students alternative ways to develop their material.

Because speaking is approximately five hundred times faster than writing (Klammer), we can more effectively use the same time dedicated to writing marginal comments to discussing content-level issues, showing syntactical options, suggesting stylistic alternatives, and altering our intonation to personalize the evaluation (Petite; Rubens; Olsen; Stratton; Klammer; Carson and McTasney). The extra time provided by this method provides us with the opportunity to show students how their intended audiences would respond. We can also demonstrate the flexibility of language—the wide variety of stylistic and syntactical options. Instead of concentrating on superficial surface problems—places where students have made grammatical errors or deviated from expectations and standard techniques or formats—we can discuss content-level issues. In short, we can transcend

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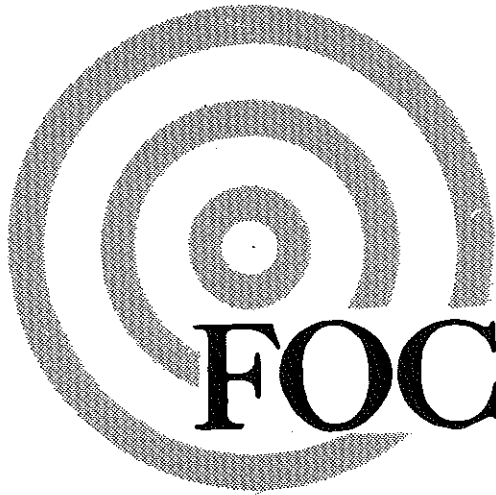
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our role as gatekeepers and police of English. We can *show* students where meaning breaks down and why by mentioning *how* we are confused or misled by vague statements and confusing passages.

When I have asked students to respond anonymously to questions about whether they prefer oral or written evaluations, many of them have indicated that they prefer taped commentaries because of their more comprehensive nature:

I think the oral evaluations are much more personal and give a better relationship between teacher and student. It is an excellent idea.

I like oral evaluations because they help me understand, not only where my mistakes are, but possibly why I made them and definitely help me understand how to change them and possibly avoid making them again.

This is the first class I have ever taken where oral evaluations were provided. While written evaluations may pinpoint errors and provide visible corrections, they are time consuming and as a result may end up being cryptic requiring "translation" for the students. Oral evaluations provide an indication that a professor has taken time and interest in your work; also in a subtle way she/he has read the whole paper. Oral responses enable the exchange of more information. I like a combination of both.

Some additional advantages to taped responses have been identified since they were introduced in the 1960's. For example, because taped responses are multisensory, they broaden the learning experience. Education specialists have frequently pointed out that we all learn best in response to a variety of approaches (Petite; Coleman; Volger; Olsen).

In addition, many of my students have mentioned that they prefer taped commentaries because they provide a permanent, cumulative record of each writer's strengths and weaknesses, a record that each writer can refer to at any time:

Oral evaluations are much better because I am able to go back to old essays and listen to the tape again. With written evaluations the special marks are often forgotten and I can't be sure what mistakes were made.

Students also have mentioned to me that they appreciate being spared the embarrassment and shock of receiving marked papers back in front of their peers.

Other teachers who have experimented with taped responses report positive results: In independent investigations, Robert Lumsden, Bernard Tanner, Philip Rubens, Jean McGrew, and John Harris have reported that oral evaluations quickly establish a rapport, are appreciated by students, and prompt more frequent exchanges between teachers and students than traditional grading practices. David L. Carson and John B. McTasney, both from the United States Air Force Academy, examined students' perceptions of taped responses. They found 94% of the 367 students who participated in a semester-long study reported at the end of the semester that they preferred cassette grading to conventional, written grading. My informal polls have netted similar results:

Although oral evaluations take more time, it seems like private tutoring.

When the professor is talking to me I pay attention. If I don't understand a problem, at least I have his words to consider - problems are basically easier to attack when I

can hear what he's saying. I guess this boils down to a PERSONAL, INDIVIDUAL approach which motivates me more than scratches in a margin.

I prefer oral evaluations because I can hear the voice and I usually don't have to guess what was meant by a statement. Oral evaluations are nice because hearing the inflection in the voice adds meaning to the words.

Of course, not focusing, for example, on grammatical errors does not mean that we totally ignore such problems. When students are polishing completed drafts, rather than writing "review subject-verb agreement," we can explain what the problems are, and we can refer students to specific reference books and previous class discussions. Responding orally to grammatical errors gives us the flexibility to reduce the confusion that can occur when students fail to understand our abbreviations: *awk*; *agr*; *ref?*; *frag*; *run-on*. Also, by checking the aural against the written word, our students learn the helpfulness of a powerful editing technique: hearing writing spoken out loud helps writing (Bartholomae; Petite). By reading their sentence fragments aloud we can help students identify the dangling incompleteness of their thoughts, as well as demonstrate by example the value of reading work out loud. Moreover, Joseph Petite has discovered in his research that taped commentaries significantly reduce the number of fragments that his developmental students write.

While the vast majority of students prefer the more comprehensive and personal nature of taped commentaries, a few students are uncomfortable with this approach. For example, one student writes:

Oral evaluations are more personal although at times they can be more threatening as the human element of voice is involved. All-and-all, I think both approaches should be used.

Certainly, the above student raises some important concerns: 1) evaluation, no matter how it's presented, can be difficult for all of us to digest. Inexperienced writers, who have so much to learn about the craft, can become stymied in response to evaluation. We clearly need to be sensitive to how much each of our students is open to criticism. Thus, we must remember Donald Murray's advice to establish a positive ambience in the classroom, one that promotes constructive criticism by establishing it as an inevitable and important aspect of composing. Taped responses do not necessarily preclude written comments. In fact, I often write a sentence or two at the end of the student's manuscript.

Ultimately, to best tailor our responses to our students, we should allow them to decide whether their writing is evaluated in writing or orally. It is interesting to note that although I only require students to try taped responses *once* at the beginning of the semester, very few students—say four or five out of sixty each semester—elect not to use them.

Clearly, taped evaluations provide a useful alternative to traditional written evaluations. Ultimately, however, we must remember that the message is more important than the medium. Poor advice on our part is still poor advice, whether it is conveyed in written or oral form. Also, we need to recognize that taped evaluations could be more pernicious than written ones because of their more personal and comprehensive nature if we don't follow the guidelines discussed above for responding to student writing.

For those teachers who wish to try responding to student writing via tape recorders, I make the following recommendations:

1) To avoid confusion, have students write their names on their work folders, cassettes, and cassette boxes. 2) Read the entire piece and briefly review the student's rough drafts before making any comments. (Asking students to submit their drafts with the final product helps you see the amount of work a student has completed, and it also serves as a useful check against plagiarized papers.) 3) Identify the major strengths and weaknesses of the piece before tape recording. I typically greet the student, mention which report I'm reviewing, respond to the significance of the subject matter, refer to the audience the student has identified in an audience profile, and then respond to some of the interesting ideas he or she has raised. Whenever possible, I praise strong writing. As I mentioned earlier, I also think it's important to mention one or two major problems with the manuscript. After this summary, I clarify, when pertinent, how a particular word, sentence or paragraph exhibits these weaknesses and/or strengths.

Near the beginning of each writing course, I read through each student's manuscript line-by-line and try to provide what Peter Elbow calls "movies of the mind." In other words, I try to model the questions the student's intended audience would ask while they read the piece. As the course progresses, though, I make fewer of these line-by-line reviews. 4) Somewhere near the end of each commentary, I assign the paper a grade, if it is a final draft. Many students have mentioned that they would prefer that I place their grades on their papers, but I think it is more effective to mention the grade somewhere on the tape because it ensures that they listen to the tape. In a sense, this is a tricky way to ensure that they listen to my response. 5) Then, at the end of commentary, I summarize the goals that the student should address when rewriting the current piece or when writing his or her next paper. Also, I always encourage each student to come see me if he or she has any questions.

Ultimately, taped responses cannot replace the immediacy of the one-to-one teacher-conference. Yet, it is an extremely valuable technique, one worth trying.

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DEFINING AND TEACHING VOICE IN WRITING: THE PHONOLOGICAL DIMENSION

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Teaching students to write is difficult, but we've found ways to do it better and more systematically through studying language and cognitive processes, social and personal contexts, and textual structures and features. One feature of text that still eludes us is "voice." Most of us will grant that it is one of the most important aspects of good writing, but no adequate definition exists. By adequate, I mean a definition that is both conceptually useful, to help us understand what goes into making up what we call voice, and pedagogically useful, to indicate directions for classroom practices that can actually help our students develop textual voices. Only a few attempts have been made to come to terms with this difficult but important area. Ken Macrorie, who himself writes with a wonderful sense of voice, tells us that the key is the ability of writers to hear what the text sounds like (185-86). Wallace Chafe, who has written recently about the role of punctuation in getting across a sense of voice, corroborates Macrorie's view with a quote from one of the twentieth century's master storytellers, Eudora Welty. In her autobiographical essay, *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty tells us that voice is something she hears, internalized but "spoken": "Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me . . . My own words, when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice that I hear when I read in books." To develop the concept of *voice*, then, it seems we must at least begin with some version of a spoken voice that is learned so well that the writer is able to hear written lines.

But how does a writer accomplish a sense of her own voice, distinct and interesting, along with other qualities she may want to project? In *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty says that her writing begins with a sense of "rumblings." Other writers—Edgar Allan Poe, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, to name a few—have said that they too first get a sense of rhythmic motion, some felt turbu-

lence or beauty. One thing we might do with students is to have them listen for the sound a piece of writing seems to have before beginning to set pen to paper, and to keep listening during drafting. I know that before I begin to set pen to paper I listen, for a quiet, concentrated moment, for the sound the writing is to have. I do this even with most business writing, especially if the audience or form is new to me. I also look for a sense of shape in that moment. And I don't think the two—sound and shape—are separate at the discourse level, though I'm not sure why I think that. Perhaps I extend what I do know about sound and shape at the phrase level, where the two are not separate. It is at this level, of the phrase, that I think we can best begin an exploration of the concept of voice and its involvement in shape and meaning.

Though linguists have studied phonology for a century, only in the last two decades, with the publication of Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle's *The Sound Pattern of English* in 1968, has research on the accentual contour of the phrase progressed. The area of linguistics that deals with the sounds of language—with their shapes, structures, and the relation of sound to meaning—is phonology. Of all areas of linguistic study, phonology is the most scientific; it was the rigor of phonological study that afforded linguistics its scientific status. From the study of phonology we can arrive at a conceptual basis of the "sound-shape" of the English phrase as a beginning toward a definition of voice. From phonology we can also draw some practical applications for the classroom instruction of voice. In the first part of this essay I summarize relevant linguistic research on the sound, shape, and meaning of phrases, and in the second part I describe a set of classroom procedures for helping students to become aware of the phonological rules underlying spoken English and to learn to incorporate that knowledge in developing a written voice.

The "Sound-Shape" of the English Phrase: Toward a Definition of Voice

Though linguistic research on phonology applies to oral speech, written texts, according to Carlos Gussenhoven, are read in "full focus"—the sound pattern described for speech by Chomsky and Halle in 1968.¹ Chomsky and Halle proposed that a basic sound pattern ("shape"), characterized by a contour of ascending levels of prominence from sentence beginning to sentence end, was the norm for all English sentences. An accompanying set of distressing rules was proposed to account for the positions of lesser degrees of prominence. Much subsequent work contributed to the refinement of the theory and the rules, and some linguists took issue with the motivational aspect of the theory, which Chomsky and Halle asserted was syntactic. But for the first time, linguists looked beyond the word level to the phonology of the entire sentence. As with most earlier (since 1948) and later linguists, Chomsky and Halle used a four-level system of prominence: three degrees—primary, secondary, and tertiary—and one level of non-prominent syllables, which was the baseline from which the voice began and to which it returned in its forays into other prominence levels. Actually, the gradations of prominence are finer, but the human ear can detect at most four levels; therefore, only four levels are perceptually relevant.

According to Chomsky and Halle's theory, the sound pattern of English is such that new information falls at the end of the sentence, or the "phonological phrase" (which could be something shorter than a sentence). Thus, primary prominence, the highest degree of accent, falls on the word that is the focal point of the new information. This focal point is normally the last *lexical item* in the phrase. (A *lexical item* is a word bearing information—nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—rather than