A Brief Guide

to

Responding to Students’ Writing

Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning
A Brief Guide to Responding to Students’ Writing

Contents
1. Introduction
2. The role of the respondent
3. Some principles to think about when responding to students’ writings
4. Aspects of writing which could be addressed by a respondent
5. Other ways of providing feedback
6. Conclusion
7. Some useful references
8. Appendices

1. Introduction

Written assignments, and particularly academic essays, are still the main way in
which students are assessed in higher education. Students from secondary school are
seldom equipped to cope with the demands of writing at university. Not only are they
trying to absorb and understand the disciplinary content but they are also required to
learn the academic literacies\(^1\) of each discipline in which they are studying.

Research has shown that teaching *about* writing in a decontextualised way is not as
effective as helping students with their writing as part of the mainstream courses in
which they are a studying. There are many ways in which lecturers can help students
to develop their writing: Hodges (1997:78), as a result of her research on responding,
believes that

The margins of students’ written work are the ideal site for teacher-student
conversations … we can do some of our most successful teaching in the margins
and end spaces of students’ written work, perhaps more than we can in any other
site.

---

\(^1\) The term ‘academic literacy’ has gained common currency to describe the set of cultural
understandings or the ‘rules and conventions’ shared by academics in a discipline, to which students, if
they wish to succeed need to conform.

© Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.
2003
While many lecturers have experienced the sense that students pay little attention to comments on marked assignments, research has shown that students pay far more attention to comments on written work that is in progress, rather than comments on a final draft (Flower 1979; Paxton 1994). For that reason the drafting-responding process requires students to hand in a draft of an essay/assignment\(^2\) on which they receive developmental and constructive feedback from either trained writing respondents, tutors or lecturers\(^3\). Students then use this feedback to redraft their written work, which is then handed in to the lecturer for formal assessment.

The drafting-responding process is compatible with an outcomes-based approach to assessment in that:

- it encourages continuous assessment,
- assessment criteria are made explicit,
- students are given feedback on their writing, and
- assessment is used for learning.

Potentially there are five main ways in which student writers may benefit from the process:

- They could be helped to understand how to construct knowledge and what counts as knowledge in specific disciplines (‘domain content’),
- By having the discourse conventions of essay writing in general and of specific disciplines made more explicit to them, they may be able to express their knowledge in ways more ‘appropriate’ to the university and disciplinary culture (‘rhetorical processes’).
- They will be encouraged to view writing as a process; as a tool for clarifying and extending thought rather than just a product.
- Through the comments, students will be made more aware of and understand better the criteria which are used to assess their writing.

\(^2\) A ‘draft’ is used here to mean a full essay: the student’s best effort.
\(^3\) Referred to as ‘respondent’ from now on.

© Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.
2003
Ultimately it is hoped that the process will lead students towards becoming critical readers of their own writing.

2. **The role of the respondent**

The respondent has a different role to that of the traditional ‘marker’ of academic writing. As opposed to giving the writer summative judgements on his/her work, the respondent’s role is to provide comments always with a view to how the writer can use these in revising his/her writing. So, the role of the respondent as opposed to the traditional teacher is to:

- coach or guide rather than instruct,
- respond rather than mark, and
- provide formative assessment (to encourage *learning*).

The focus of the respondent’s comments should be on helping the student to *revise* his/her writing as opposed to only *editing* it. Revision here refers to the process of reformulating ideas and focusing on the meanings expressed in the writing. Editing refers to grammar, spelling and punctuation. Research shows that it is essential for writers first to concentrate on revision and when they feel they have expressed their understandings clearly, etc. only then should they concentrate on editing their writing. The respondent’s task is thus to develop, help and support students to clarify their understanding of concepts, to learn how knowledge is constructed and to express it as clearly and coherently as possible and in a way which is appropriate for a specific discipline.

In conversation speakers get clues from one another as to whether their meanings have been understood. In writing, a writer has to be aware of the needs of his/her reader by, for example, providing sufficient context for the reader to understand

---

4 The ideas expressed here are often referred to as ‘academic literacy’. Understanding academic literacy involves: learning how knowledge is produced and represented in different disciplines and contexts (e.g. the conventions for what counts as an acceptable argument or convincing evidence) and learning the strategies for understanding, discussing, organising and producing texts in different disciplines (structure, voice, referencing, explicitness, links between theory and practice, vocabulary, etc.).
something that is being referred to. A respondent can, through the comments she makes, provide writers with a sense of *audience* through engaging in a written conversation with them. Comments can help writers to consider their writing from a reader’s point of view and also help the writer to establish the ‘appropriate’ relationship with his/her reader.

3. **Some principles to think about when responding to students’ writing**

Depending on the needs/level of your students and the issue being addressed there are essentially two ways of responding.

- The first is by asking *questions* in the body of text. The idea is to give the writer a sense of taking part in a dialogue with the reader; of negotiating meaning with the reader and also to direct the writer to problem areas in his/her writing without telling him/her what to do but encouraging him/her to formulate ideas for him/herself. (See appendix 1 for examples of the types of questions you could ask). The questioning format is generally more tentative and allows students to disagree with the respondent and retain ownership of their writing.

- The second way of responding is by providing *explicit and direct comments* so that the student knows exactly what is required. Comments should, where possible, provide writers with clear and specific suggestions for revising text.

- It may be beneficial to use a combination of the two types of responses described above but it is important that they appear *in the body of the text*. Successful comments are both local (i.e. target a specific statement, passage or point in the text) as well as global (i.e. those that give overviews of the text and that give cohesion to local comments). A clear relationship between in-text and summative end comments is crucial. For example, “*John, as you read through your essay, I want you to note that all my questions are asking you to work on one important aspect of writing: make connections between your assertions about ….. and the relationship of that connection to ...*”.  

© Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning, Rhodes University, Grahamstown. 2003 4
Prioritise issues in a piece of writing. Students can seldom benefit from criticism of more than two or three problems. Therefore, the most crucial decision in commenting is which problems to focus on and that decision can’t be made until the whole essay has been read. As a general rule focus first on the meaning which the writer is trying to express.

Comments should be constructive rather than destructive. Provide positive feedback: students don’t always know what they do well. The point of the drafting-responding process is to enhance, not damage, student motivation. One way of providing positive feedback is through giving “descriptive or observational feedback”. This will also help students to develop a metacognitive understanding of the writing (and thinking) processes they have used. For example, “In this paragraph you have provided a good argument by giving convincing evidence for your opening statement”.

Try to avoid an impersonal “God/truth voice” in your comments, e.g. “Unconvincing for me” rather than “Unconvincing”. (Even the main ideas in any discipline are arguable).

An effective response is addressed as a response to the writer; we are responding to a person, not correcting a paper. Using the person’s name may help the respondent to focus on the writer.

Feedback shouldn’t consist simply of scratching out the terms the student has used incorrectly, and superimposing more appropriate ones – this often serves to confuse the student.

Feedback in the form of “What?”; “What does this mean?”; “This makes no sense”, is not helpful. It might be more useful to summarise what you think the student means.

Try to avoid using unfamiliar jargon or vocabulary in comments. For example, a student may not understand a comment like “Your argument lacks cohesion.”

Respondents should resist taking over a student’s writing.

Avoid giving marks for drafts.

Try to complete the process as rapidly as possible so that students don’t lose interest.
4. Aspects of writing which could be addressed by a respondent

The main focus of feedback should be on the meanings being expressed by the writer. Once the writer has expressed his/her understanding of the concepts under discussion in the writing, then she can work on the more superficial aspects of editing such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc.

Having said that though, it is clear that it is impossible to separate content and form; to separate what is being said from how it is being said. Students are, to a large extent, assessed on the extent to which they have acquired the discourses of the disciplines in which they are writing. So, part of the respondent’s role is to make explicit to students the often implicit/tacit ‘rules and conventions’ of the discipline. This would include things like, feedback on:

◆ The structure of their essays. For example, introductions, conclusions, clear links between ideas, etc.
◆ The use of cohesive devices (i.e. signposts throughout the text, telling the readers where they have been in the text and where they are going).
◆ How to argue more effectively in academic essays.
◆ How to provide evidence for statements/assumptions in their writing. Feedback in terms of referencing should focus on fundamental questions of when to quote and when not to, and clarification of what is considered plagiarism, and why, rather than the mechanical aspects of referencing.
◆ Voices. Feedback could be used to encourage students to include their own voices (where it is appropriate) or to include the voices (viewpoints) of others. The way in which the issue of ‘voices’ is dealt with in an essay will depend to large extent on the essay topic and the discipline in question. Generally writers need to be encouraged to maintain a balance between allowing their voices to intrude into the academic essay and showing critical engagement with the theories or issues being addressed in the essay.
◆ Explicitness. Feedback could be used to remind writers that it is necessary to provide an explicit and clear context for the ideas which they present. For
example, it is not appropriate to start an essay with “This is a very important topic.”

◆ **Positioning** the reader. Generally in academic writing it is necessary for writers to be clear about whose opinion is being expressed and not to assume general agreement. For example, saying things like “everyone will agree…” is not usually acceptable.

◆ **Tentativeness.** In many cases, in academic writing it is inappropriate to present things as absolute facts. It is more appropriate to state things in a tentative way, for example, “It seems that…” rather than stating something as fact.

### 5. Other ways of providing feedback

It is not always possible for lecturers or tutors to give students feedback on their drafts. Most of the suggestions above can be applied to final versions as well. At the very least students will have an idea of why they obtained the marks they did and the more conscientious students may be able to transfer ideas from comments to another essay.

Another way in which students may be given the criteria for assessment and feedback is through the use of **feedback sheets**. These can either be generic (i.e. used for all essays in a department) or they can be designed especially for a particular assignment.

Students can be trained to give one another feedback on assignments. For **peer feedback** to me most successful, especially with younger students, it is useful to provide them with a checklist. Once again, the checklist can be a generic one (see appendix 2 for an example) or one especially designed for a specific task.

Finally, to further encourage students to become critical readers of their own writing, they could be given a **self assessment** sheet (see appendix 3 for an example) which they have to complete and hand in with their essays.
6. Conclusion

This guide has attempted to provide lecturers and tutors with some ideas of ways in which to ensure that the written assignments they assign to their students are used to encourage students to learn more about their disciplines as well as how to write in their disciplines. CHERTL staff members are available to run training workshops on responding to students’ writing with lecturers and/or tutors. Please contact the CHERTL for further information at CHERTL-admin@ru.ac.za or on 8171/3.

7. Some useful references


Hodges, E. (1997). Negotiating the margins: Some principles for responding to our students’ writing, some strategies for helping students read our comments. In M.D. Sofcinelli & P. Elbow (Eds.) *Writing to learn: Strategies for assigning and responding to writing across the disciplines* (pp. 77-103). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.


APPENDIX 1

Examples of the types of questions which could be asked in the body of the text

Can you provide evidence for this assumption?

Has this been proved or is it something which you assume to be true?

Have you read what ….. says about this?

What about ….’s point of view?

Can you give an example of this?

What does this example show about … (a specific theory)?

How does this link to what you have just said?

How is this relevant to the argument you posed in paragraph 1?

Can you link this idea more directly to the topic?

How can this be applied … (in the workplace)?

You have described the situation. Now can you explain why … ?

What is your opinion of this?

How does this relate to the specific case which you have mentioned?

What do you mean “they”?
APPENDIX 2

Peer editing checklist

What is the main idea in each paragraph?

1. Is it clearly stated?

2. Is it properly supported with evidence from the theorist’s writings?

3. Does the paragraph link well with the previous paragraph and the next paragraph?

4. Is there a clear thread of argument running through the writing?
APPENDIX 3

Self assessment sheet

1. strengths of this assignment ……………

2. weakness of this assignment ………………

3. how this essay could be improved ……………

4. the mark it deserves …………………

5. what I’ll do better in my next assignment ………

6. what I’d really like your comments on ………

Appendices 2 and 3 adapted from Parkerson in Leibowitz & Mohamed (2000).