



Cornerstone Guide to Responding to Student Writing*

General Principles: Be sure your comments on student writing reflect the hierarchy of your concerns about the paper. Treat major issues first and at greater length; minor issues should be treated briefly or not at all. Grammatical or mechanical issues are probably less important than their handling of an argument, evidence, structure, and sources. Focusing your energies on just a few important points will yield a cleaner and more easily intelligible message to your students.

Reading the Paper: You may want to skim through four or five papers to get a sense of the pile before reading and grading any single paper. Whether skimming on a first time through or reading carefully, you might keep the following categories in mind, which will help you assess the paper's strengths and weaknesses:

- **Thesis:** Is there one main argument in the paper? Does it fulfill the assignment? Is the thesis clearly stated near the beginning of the paper? Is it interesting, complex? Is it argued throughout?
- **Structure:** Is the paper clearly organized? Is it easy to understand the main point of each paragraph? Does the order of the overall argument make sense, and is it easy to follow?
- **Evidence and Analysis:** Does the paper offer supporting evidence for each of its points? Is there enough analysis of evidence?
- **Sources:** Are the sources, including the transformative texts, paraphrased or quoted correctly and in context? Are they properly documented and is the bibliographical information correct?
- **Style:** Is the style appropriate for its audience? Is the paper concise and to the point? Are sentences clear and grammatically correct? Are there spelling or proofreading errors?



Marginal Comments

- Only edit or annotate texts if your comments are legible and clearly explain their concern or praise.
- Check marks, abbreviations or cryptic comments (awk, s/s, ?, or yes!) mystify students. Unfortunately, students often ignore the final comment and obsess about margin notes.

The Final Comment: Present your final comments in an organized way,

- **The paper's main point.** Beginning by articulating your understanding of the argument signals to the student that you take their writing seriously. A restatement in your own words will also help you ground your comment.
- **Discuss the essay's strengths.** Even good writers need to know what they are doing well so that they can do it again in the future.
- **Discuss the paper's weaknesses, focusing on large problems first.** Choose two or three of the most important areas in which the student needs to improve and present these in order of descending importance. If possible, suggest practical solutions so that the student can correct the problems in the next paper.
- **Type your final comments** if possible. If you handwrite them, write in a straight line and avoid writing on the reverse side of the paper. The more readable your comments, the more seriously your students are likely to take them.

Finally, on **multilingual or English Second Language** students: some features of writing are only known to life-long members of a language culture, like academic English. Save your energy, ignore these kinds of minor errors or issues and concentrate on larger structural problems. Improvement in these features of writing come only after a long time in our academic writing culture and with considerable practice. When in doubt, feel free to consult with the Purdue Writing Lab or the Purdue Language and Culture Exchange (PLaCE).

*Loosely adapted from the "Harvard Guide to Responding to Student Writing," Harvard Writing Project Brief Guide Series, with consultation from Harry Denny, Purdue Writing Lab.

