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HARVARD WRITING PROJECT BULLETIN

SPECIAL ISSUE:

Responding to Student Writing

STUDY UNDERSCORES IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK

Does giving students feedback on their writing make a difference? According to the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, ongoing since Fall 1997, timely and detailed feedback plays a crucial role in students' development as thinkers and scholars.

Findings of the Harvard study suggest that most undergraduates regard thoughtful feedback in its many forms—written comments on drafts and papers, e-mail messages responding to proposals or introductions, and personal conversations in office hours or after class—as central to their learning experience. In the words of one study participant, feedback “makes the difference between just reading the assigned books and actually taking the course.”

Key Findings

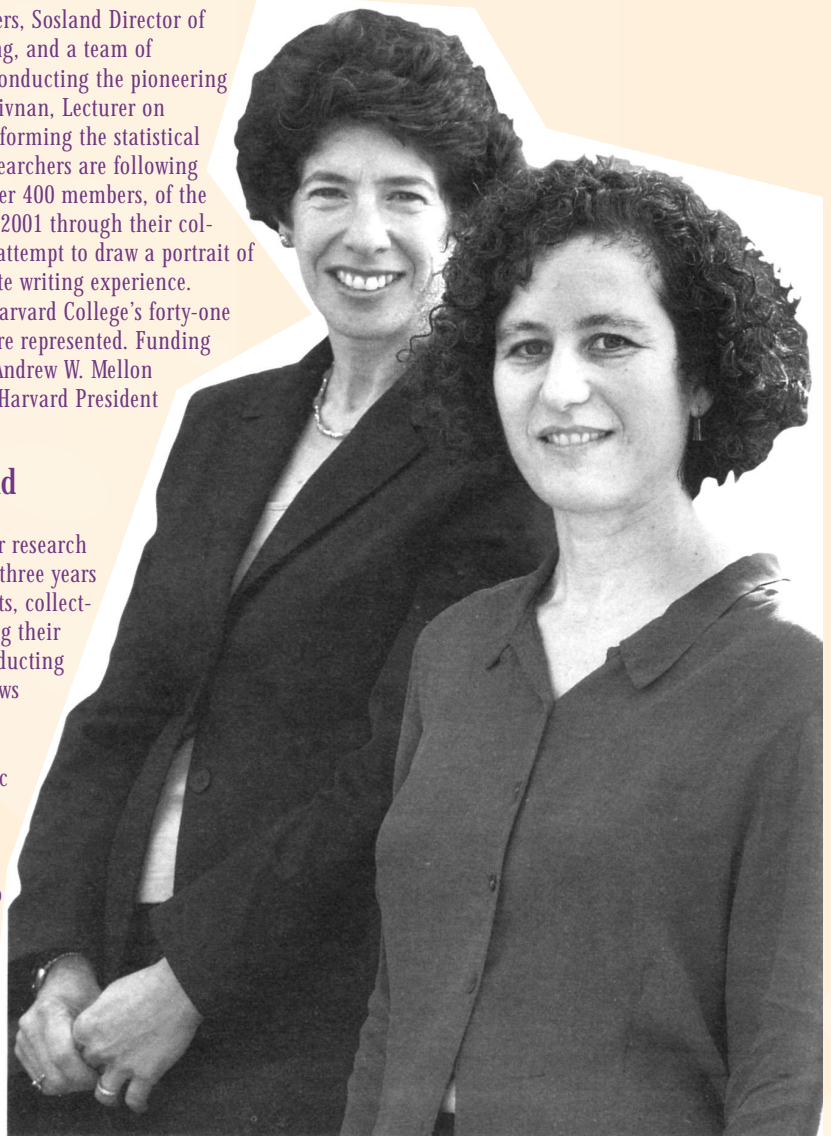
Among the key findings of the study is how students make use of the feedback their instructors give them. Study participants report using feedback not only to guide revision and improve their performance in the future. They also use it to understand an instructor's expectations, grasp methodology, gauge their progress in a course, and see their writing from a reader's perspective.

Not surprisingly, study participants testify to the vital role feedback plays in their very best writing experiences. Feedback improves their writing, as well as providing them with a more satisfying writing experience. Perhaps for this reason, most report that until they hear from their professor or TF, they consider a writing experience only half-finished.

Nancy Sommers, Sosland Director of Expository Writing, and a team of researchers are conducting the pioneering study. Terrence Tivnan, Lecturer on Education, is performing the statistical analysis. The researchers are following about 25%, or over 400 members, of the Harvard Class of 2001 through their college years in an attempt to draw a portrait of the undergraduate writing experience. Thirty-eight of Harvard College's forty-one concentrations are represented. Funding comes from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Harvard President Neil Rudenstine.

Feedback and Freshmen

Sommers and her research team have spent three years surveying students, collecting and analyzing their writing, and conducting in-depth interviews each semester. According to Sommers, specific feedback is especially useful for freshmen, who learn to adjust to college expectations through



Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz

instructors' responses to their writing. "Students describe their first semester at Harvard as entering into a foreign land, where 'something more, something deeper' is required," Sommers notes, "Freshmen use feedback to understand what it means to think in more complex and sophisticated ways." In the words of one study participant, "My TFs' comments showed me other possibilities to consider and what it would mean to go deeper into a subject."

Sommers reports that freshmen who received feedback early and often during their first year of college made the greatest gains as academic writers. These freshmen are best able to make the transition from writing papers that are "a shot in the dark," as one study participant puts it, to meeting new and higher expectations for thinking and writing. It is a testament to the essential role that feedback plays for freshmen that as juniors many students have vivid memories of the comments they received during their first year at Harvard.

Feedback also serves an important social function for freshmen, Sommers suggests, giving them a sense of belonging and helping them feel connected to faculty. At a large university like Harvard, where students may take courses in which they are one among hundreds of others, the feedback they receive may make them feel distinguished from the crowd. As one participant explains, "Everyone told me that I would feel anonymous at college, but the feedback made me feel as if someone was paying attention to me, reading my work, making me feel seen and heard."

Role of Comments

Sophomores, especially those in writing-intensive concentrations, find feedback useful in teaching them how to write within their chosen discipline—the kinds of questions to ask, approaches to use, and arguments to make. Laura Saltz, Head Preceptor in Expository Writing and a study research associate, points to another benefit of feedback for sophomores. "A goal of sophomore year is to find a good fit with a concentration. Feedback can often give students an important signal of how good the fit is."

Students widely report that among the best advice that faculty have given is to write about something that matters to them, something

they care about. Such advice often comes as a surprise to students, who may regard writing a paper as merely a course requirement. As they learn to see writing as an opportunity for personal and intellectual engagement with course material, they begin to have a greater stake in their own education.

One student's positive experience in a Core course illustrates this point. "My first comment from my Shakespeare TF was 'I hope you'll do something a little less safe on your second paper,'" she says. "I approached my second paper by thinking about something I didn't know the answer to, something I hadn't sorted out, something that bothered me about the play. It was a terrible process. I didn't have a definite answer, but I realized that a paper needed to be more of an exploration than a presentation of something safe."

Students' anecdotes about feedback aren't always positive, of course. Students report feeling insulted and angry when they receive little or no feedback on their

writing. "Grades seem like condemnations when there are no comments," observes one sophomore.

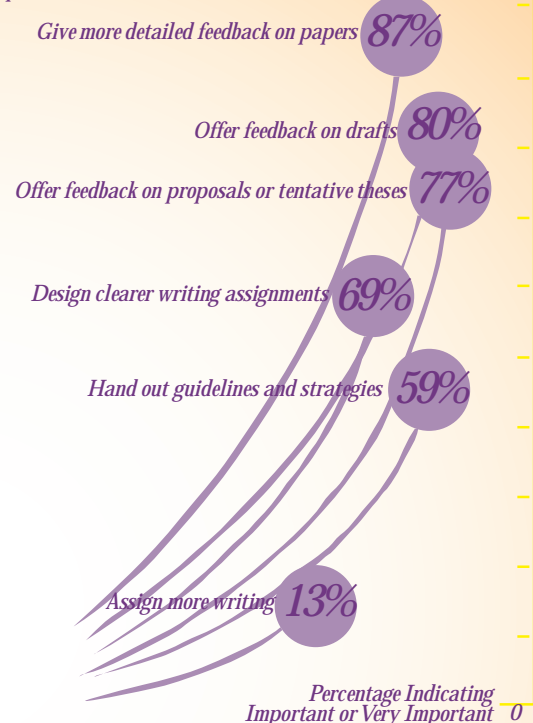
In fact, when asked what recommendations they would give faculty to improve feedback, as juniors study participants claimed to want more, and more useful, responses to their writing. A wide majority—87%—rated as "important" or "very important" the advice that faculty give more detailed feedback on papers. Other pieces of advice—that faculty offer feedback on drafts and on proposals or tentative theses—received similarly high ratings.

Sommers's research focuses on the range of writing experiences that students have in a Harvard career and on the courses and instructors that influence student writing. She has presented her initial findings at several meetings, and plans two books—one for a scholarly audience and one geared to Harvard students—once the study comes to a close.

—K. W.

Advice for Faculty:

If you could offer advice about writing instruction, how important would the following pieces of advice be?



COMMENTS THROUGH A *Student's Eyes*

by Cristin Hodgens "00

Over a two-week period during sophomore year, my world became Deborah Sampson Gannett (1760-1827), the subject of my American History and literature term paper. During the Revolutionary war, Gannett disguised herself as a man to fight the British; in 1802, she toured New England to prove herself a soldier. On the night she performed a 21-gun drill at Boston's Federal Theatre, Bay State newspapers heralded her as "The American Heroine."

My paper focused on how Deborah Sampson Gannett "taught" each speech she gave as a history lesson. As it happened, my experience of writing the paper was packed with lessons of another kind—how important teachers' comments can be.

Throughout the process of writing the paper, my tutor kept asking me pointed questions—about the terminology I used, the stance I took toward my subject, and the sources I drew upon. What name should I use to refer to Gannett? How could I temper my zeal with a critical edge? What other women in American history could I bring in for comparison? These questions bore fruit not only in a long line of drafts but also in my continually renewed desire to keep researching and writing.

The experience of writing the Gannett paper came to me as a sense of journey and promise, as if I were travelling through an archipelago of larger and larger thought—lands. Of course, not all of my experiences have been so positive. Some of the comments I've received on the countless response papers, short assignments, and term papers I've written at Harvard have left me feeling alternately abbergasted and flat as dead ginger ale.

The most flabbergasting comments I've received were from a TF who kept telling me: "Well, I didn't really get a chance to look your paper over in depth, but what you've got looks good. If you just iron things out, it'll be great." Uh? Instead of giving me a sense of movement, this remark made me feel intellectually inert and alone.

The flatness I've sometimes experienced comes from the comments that stay so close to the subject (and an expected answer) that they don't show any signs of engaging the idea I'm trying to voice. A couple of times, I've had teachers who seem to fight tooth and nail for me to write their own pre-pack



Cristin Hodgens

aged argument instead of helping me shape my ideas into an argument of my own.

By contrast, the fantastic comments I received on the Gannett paper helped me see that my writing and my subject could keep growing. Even once I was finished, my tutor alerted me to the American Antiquarian Society's holdings, a potential site for further investigation. In the end, such comments not only send me forward, on journeys both real and metaphorical. They also give me something concrete and inspiring to return to, when I need to reflect back on one writing project in order to complete another.

Cristin Hodgens is an American History & Literature concentrator writing a senior thesis on theater and activism in the 1960s.

Harvard Writing Project Bulletin

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The Harvard Writing Project, an initiative of Expository Writing, works with faculty and Teaching Fellows throughout Harvard College to develop effective ways of assigning and responding to student writing. Visit us at www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/hwp or contact us at expos@fas.harvard.edu.

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Too FEW? Too MANY?

The Mysteries of Marginalia

One of the most significant conversations a teacher can have with a student takes place, not in office hours, but in the margins and between the lines of the student's paper. Marginal comments are by nature dialogic and multi-purpose: in them, an instructor may give advice, pose questions, offer praise, express puzzlement, suggest new lines of inquiry, and provoke thought. A veritable index of a paper's strengths and weaknesses, marginal comments also form an important bridge between an instructor's overall assessment of a paper and particular textual examples that verify it.

To students, it can sometimes seem as if marginal comments come in only two sizes: too few and too many. Comments that consist of scattered marks—?, !, ✓—with the odd “good” or “vague” tossed in, are not only unhelpful; they leave student writers feeling cheated and angry, and wondering if their instructor read their paper closely or at all. On the other end of the scale are comments so numerous or lengthy that they literally obscure the student's words on the page.

Finding the middle ground between “not enough” and “too much” is the main challenge of marginal commenting. One effective method is to restrict comments to representative strengths and weaknesses—that is, to

patterns—and to mark and discuss each one only once or twice. When repeated problems with misreading evidence, randomly advancing claims, or failing to provide sufficient analysis are addressed in a marginal note or two, students have

One effective method is to restrict comments to representative strengths and weaknesses—that is, to patterns—and to mark and discuss each one only once or twice.

a much better chance of correcting them the next time around.

The “patterns” principle applies to sentence-level problems, too. Does the writer over-rely on empty abstractions, spurn active verbs, or structure every sentence in the same way? Is the paper marred by repeated errors in grammar or punctuation, or unclear sentences? By seeing such patterns named and discussed once, students will begin to see the patterns for themselves. They will also get the

message that their teacher's role is to advise, assess, and engage, not copy-edit.

Not every pattern has to be a negative one. “Good point,” “great move here,” “convincing evidence,” and other positive comments mean a lot to students, as do fuller indications of a reader's engagement with their writing. Positive reinforcement can yield dramatic results. As one student testifies, “My tutorial leader was very encouraging with his comments. He would write ‘great insight,’ or ‘I hadn't seen it this way.’ These comments gave me the confidence to become bolder with my interpretations. They made a huge difference to me as a writer.”

Marginal comments dramatize the notion—new to most undergraduates—that papers are written to be read. They tell a writer that each element in a paper, from the way the argument is formulated to how the sentences are crafted, has an effect on a reader's willingness to be persuaded by a writer's ideas. When made thoughtfully and judiciously, marginal comments can help introduce students to the world of written intellectual exchange. — *K.W.*

Six Tips for Effective Marginal Commenting

Tip #1: Comment primarily on patterns—representative strengths and weaknesses.

Noting patterns (and marking these only once or twice) helps instructors strike a balance between making students wonder whether anyone actually read their paper and overwhelming them with ink. The “pattern” principle applies to grammar and other sentence-level problems, too.

Tip #2: Use a respectful tone.

Even in the face of fatigue and frustration, it's important to address students respectfully, as the junior colleagues they are.

Tip #3: Make positive comments.

Students need to know what works in their writing if they're to repeat successful strategies and make them a permanent part of their repertoire as writers. Students are also more likely to work hard to improve when given some positive feedback.

Tip #4: Write legibly (in any ink but red).

If students have to struggle to decipher a comment, they probably won't bother. Red ink will make them feel as if their paper is being corrected rather than responded to.

Tip #5: Ask questions.

Asking questions in the margins promotes a useful analytical technique while helping students anticipate future readers' queries.

Tip #6: Use terms that students can understand.

Certainly all symbols, but also such words and phrases as “evidence?” and “more analysis needed”—common marginal comments—need to be explained, in either the margins, the final comment, or a glossary of terms and symbols.

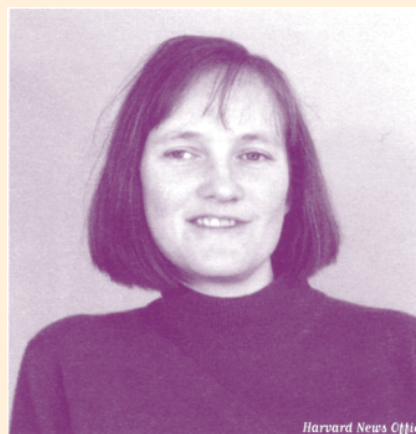
Harvard Writing

Responding to Student Writing in the Disciplines

Susan Pedersen

*Professor of History
and Dean of Undergraduate Education*

Wonderful works of history come in all forms, but usually they include two things—an argument of some kind, and a kind of curiosity about and empathy with real people in the past. I look for, and try to develop, both of these qualities when I comment on student papers. Usually, then, I begin a comment with a sentence or two encapsulating the student's argument. I go on to comment on the clarity with which the student states the argument and also on its persuasiveness—something that derives in part from the style of argumentation but even more from the student's ability to present supporting evidence well. Because I am a historian and not a lawyer, though, I always also single out for attention and praise passages in which the student shows a sensitivity to the unex-



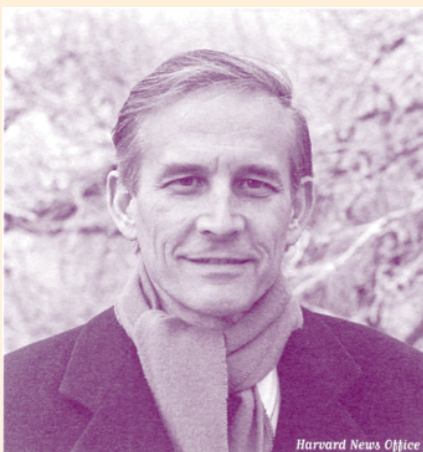
Susan Pedersen

pected, quirky, and unpredictable nature of many historical events and outcomes. I am not of the view that one should focus *only* on argument and ignore the human and dramatic qualities of the story. I often end, then, with the suggestion that some relatively minor but intriguing bit of evidence or piece of the story may be a fruitful subject for future research. This is, I find, how a lot of wonderful senior theses are born.

Lawrence Buell

John P. Marquand Professor of English

All academic writing should be evaluated for the effectiveness with which it presents its ideas and not simply on the basis of the “ideas themselves,” because quality of writing is inseparable from quality of thinking. Strictly



Lawrence Buell

speaking, there is no such thing as “ideas themselves” apart from the words, sentences, and paragraphs in which they are couched. Not only in literature but in all fields, the strength or weakness of an analytical paper will always hinge to some extent on success in organization and point-by-point expression. An instructor is sure to be influenced by the (in)effectiveness of the writing, regardless of whether she or he consciously realizes it. Such being the case, it is incumbent on the teacher to make a conscious effort to judge and to communicate how the paper has been helped or hindered by its writing.

Judith Vichniac

Director of Studies in Social Sciences

The biggest challenge in responding to student writing is to make constructive comments while maintaining a critical stance. One key to doing this is to be as specific as possible about a paper's strengths and weaknesses. Where does the paper succeed, and



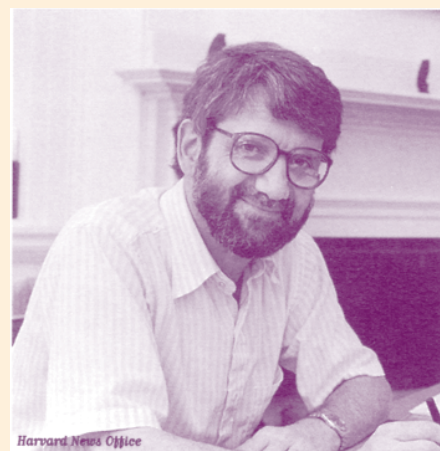
Judith Vichniac

how might its strengths be reinforced? Where does the paper fall short on the level of argumentation, analysis, or exposition—and how might its problems be addressed? Comments that are specific not only make students feel as if someone is paying attention, they also help them write better next time.

David Pilbeam

Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences and Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences

A prompt and thorough response to regular student written assignments is perhaps the most useful single thing we as faculty can give our students. In my own field of human evolutionary studies, I look for writing which is



David Pilbeam

Faculty Forum *continued*

clear and direct. Does it clearly explain the question being addressed? Does it articulate alternative explanations that might have been proposed? Does it explain how different scholars came to conflicting conclusions? Does it arrive at a well-supported opinion—that is, does it avoid a “split the difference between the experts” kind of conclusion? In my comments, I primarily address such questions as these, which pertain to the logic of a paper. I also spend time (particularly early in a semester) on questions of style: Are sentences mostly short? Has the writer avoided the passive voice as much as possible? The result is usually rapid improvement in students’ writing ability.

Maxine Rodburg

Director of the Writing Center

Tone is the art of commenting. How we as teachers express our criticisms of a student’s paper is as important as what our criticisms are.



Maxine Rodburg

This doesn’t mean that we should sugar-coat our message or concoct flattery where it isn’t warranted—in fact, students inevitably sniff out such falseness and then undervalue or even shrug off what we have to say. But assuming and respecting the student’s personal, intellectual investment in what he or she has written means responding without rancor or snideness, but rather with steadiness, clarity, and focused frankness. Our role as teachers is to attend not only to the student’s actual writing but also, always, to his or her greatest potential.

FINAL COMMENTS: *Pitfalls to Avoid*

Good final comments give student writers courage and guidance—first to look critically at their writing and then to improve it. Such comments take each paper on its own terms, while helping student writers not only imagine what a better, more interesting version would look like, but also begin to understand, in concrete terms, how to produce such a paper next time.

By contrast, bad final comments—generic, impersonal, perfunctory, confusing—can so demoralize students that both their writing and overall course performance suffer. Faulty final comments take a number of predictable forms; following are some of the most common.

Under-commenting – or making comments that are either too few or too general—prevents students from identifying problems and seeing practical ways of addressing them.

Over-commenting – or injudiciously commenting on every weakness in a paper—either leads the teacher to appropriate the essay, demoralizes the student, or both.

Mean-spirited comments are usually fueled by the teacher’s frustration at the number of problems in a paper, the student’s misunderstanding of basic ideas and concepts, or, yes, the workload. The teacher chides where he or she should encourage and advise.

Disorganized comments skip around from one concern to another: “You need an overarching thesis to tie your points together. I see that you use a title, which is good, but the title is too informal. More analysis would make your arguments stronger.” Bulleting points and organizing them from most to least important is a good antidote.

Mixed-message comments give contradictory advice—for example, that all the student has to do is a lot of extra research and a little polishing, and the paper will be done. Mixed-message comments leave the student writer baffled.

Picayune comments, which focus almost exclusively on small, local issues, often miss the *real* problems in a paper—an inarguable thesis, lapses in logic, misuse of evidence, lack of analysis, and so on.

Comments that ambush find fault with those elements of a paper that the student has gained prior approval for – for example, a topic, thesis, or structure.

Content-only comments purport to separate out the ideas in a paper from their presentation. In some versions of content-only comments, the teacher seems to assess a paper’s strengths and weaknesses in terms of whether he or she agrees with the student’s point of view rather than whether the argument is persuasively presented.

Content-less comments, a type of under-commenting, fail to engage with the paper in any genuine way, typically imparting generic advice instead: “If you were to think more deeply about your argument and tighten your prose a bit, you’d have a really good paper here.” In the absence of meaningful feedback, the student will write the same mediocre paper over and over again.

MAKING THE MOST OF *Final Comments*

Commenting on student writing gives teachers their best shot at shaping the way students formulate ideas and arguments, the principal currency of both the academy and the larger world of educated people. The final comment, which usually takes the form of a letter addressed to the student and appended to the paper, is an especially important vehicle for communicating expectations and offering guidance.

The best final comments take student writers seriously, conveying an understanding of what they were trying to do and making concrete suggestions for how it might be done more effectively. Put differently, the best comments balance allowing students to discover and establish their own authority with actively helping them improve.

Too often instructors upset this balance in their final comments, as suggested by typical student complaints. On the one hand, students may think, teachers don't intervene enough in their writing: "His comments weren't specific enough," "I couldn't

The best final comments take student writers seriously, conveying an understanding of what they were trying to do and making concrete suggestions for how it might be done more effectively.

figure out what she wanted me to do," "I never knew what he was looking for. On the other, teachers sometimes run too much interference: "She only liked what I wrote when I gave her back her ideas," "He made a suggestion that would have meant a whole new paper," "I wrote what she wanted to hear."

Striking a Balance

To give student writers appropriate direction, it's necessary to find a middle ground where students have enough comments to guide and motivate them, but not so many that they feel programmed or pushed around. In this middle ground, complaints ideally give way to gratitude: "My instructor helped me figure out what I wanted to say."

To write final comments that attain the middle ground, many instructors keep the following points in mind, and even use them to structure their remarks:

Try to understand and appreciate what the student was attempting to do.

Students will be much more receptive to suggestions if they feel listened to. Opening a comment with a restatement of the thesis (or, in the absence of a thesis, the subject area) lets the student see that the instructor took the paper seriously; it also helps ground the comment in the paper's argument.

Stay in touch with what's good about any particular piece of writing.

Praise in the final comment, as in the margins, goes a long way to encouraging writers. It not only acknowledges their efforts but also helps them identify and develop their strengths. As one student puts it, "When my instructor said something was good, I felt very proud, and this helped my writing." Specific examples make the praise believable.

Limit the number of critical points to three or four.

It's not necessary to comment on every little thing that went wrong in a paper. Three or four points is all any writer can handle at one time. These should be presented hierarchically, in what Nancy Sommers, Sosland Director of Expository Writing, calls a "scale of concerns"—from global (problems with thesis, structure, analysis, and so on) to local (problems with sentences and formatting). Specific examples help the student to

It's not necessary to comment on every little thing that went wrong in a paper. Three of four points is all any writer can handle at one time.

see the paper through the commentator's eyes. Practical solutions to the problems discussed in the comment give the student hope and encouragement.

Chicken Scratch

One last tip: If students can't easily read comments, they're likely to ignore them. Handwritten comments should be written legibly and in a straight line, not on an angle, up the side of a page or onto the reverse side. Instructors with unclear handwriting should type final comments.

Although responding effectively to student writing can be challenging, a comment that urges, and perhaps inspires, a student to become a better, more self-critical writer and thinker is usually worth the effort

— K.W.

A Format for *Final Comments*

Many instructors use the following format to present their comments in an organized way:

- I Salutation ("Dear So-and-So")
- II Restatement of the paper's main point.
- III Discussion of the paper's strengths.
- IV Discussion of the paper's weaknesses, focusing on large problems first.
- V Concluding remark(s).
- VI Closing and signature ("Sincerely, So-and-So")

RESPONDING TO *Response Papers*

Frequently Asked *Questions*

How long should my final comment be?

There is no standard length for a final comment, just as there is no standard amount of time that it takes to read and respond to a piece of student writing. The final comment needs to be long enough for students to understand the issues at stake but not so long that they'll feel overwhelmed. In most cases, this means a final comment that, single spaced, is about a half-page to a page long. This is a guideline only, and there are many exceptions.

Should I mark grammatical and punctuation errors?

It can be difficult to resist "fixing" students' sentences, but extensive copy-editing is a bad idea: it detracts attention from global issues, such as argument. Either copy-edit representatively, to give student writers an example they can emulate, or, in the margins, note patterns of sentence-level problems, including punctuation, grammar, and other mechanical errors. And remember: confusing prose may be a sign not of writing problems per se but of conceptual problems. As students become familiar with a subject matter and the principal methodologies for approaching it, their writing is likely to improve dramatically.

How can I give students low grades without hurting their feelings?

All but the most self-critical students may feel hurt by a low grade, but that doesn't mean instructors shouldn't give them. Honest grades help students see the strengths and weaknesses of their writing more clearly. Using clear and consistent criteria to discuss and judge student writing can ease the pain of a low grade. As one student noted after getting back a paper that had been assigned a low grade, "If my pride was hurt, I can't complain that the grade was unfair. I'm looking forward to improving on the next paper."

Response papers are fast becoming a staple of Harvard courses, and for good reason. When written in response to a focused assignment, these one-pagers do more than guarantee that students are prepared for section.

They also give students practice using the skills necessary to write a five- or even twenty-five-page paper successfully—foundational skills such as close-reading a text and assessing an argument.

Many students like response papers because, in the words of one junior, they "give you more opportunities for feedback."

A Commenting Strategy

Comments on response papers should make two moves:

A good comment names one thing the student writer has done well. Maybe the writer has chosen an interesting passage or two to focus on, or analyzes evidence well, or is proposing an interesting argument. By learning what they're doing well, students can repeat their success in the future.

A good comment names one thing the student writer needs to work on. This means identifying the main problem, giving

"Response Paper" Comment on a Critical Summary

Dear Marty—You do a good job of summarizing Rankin's argument in your own words, and the few snippets you quote are vivid and short. That's great! But you sound as if you buy every argument Rankin is making. What are some of his underlying assumptions? Does he fairly and accurately represent the text? What are possible objections to his argument? Just because he's famous doesn't make him right! Try reading him again from a skeptic's point of view. Doing that is what makes a critical summary "critical."

— Joanne

In fact, feedback is crucial if students are to derive the full benefit of these short, skill building assignments. The check mark (~1+, 4, or NI-) that most instructors assign to response papers lets students know if they're on the right track. A brief but pointed comment does much more: it affirms or redirects their efforts—before they tackle a longer paper, where more is at stake.

an example from the student's writing, and suggesting a strategy for addressing it.

Many students experience writing for a particular course or discipline as a process of trial and error. Brief, thoughtful feedback on response papers can give student writers a welcome sense of purpose, as well as a new understanding of disciplinary conventions and expectations.

— K.W.

PROBLEMATIC PAPERS:

Diagnosis and Treatment

Even the most effective commenting strategy won't be successful unless the commentator has fully understood and appreciated the problems and possibilities inherent in a piece of writing. It takes time and practice to develop such insight, the special brand of diagnostic skill that enables some readers to know from just a quick glance that a well-written paper lacks an arguable thesis or that a structural nightmare has the spark of a great idea.

What such skilled diagnosticians recognize is the importance of having a

scale of concerns, in which global issues (thesis, structure, evidence) take precedence over local issues. Focusing on the big picture first can help student writers do the same.

Just as the ability to rank writing issues on a scale of concerns is crucial to diagnosing papers successfully, so also is having a mental catalogue of typical ways a paper can go wrong—and a strong sense of how a problematic paper might ultimately go right. For understandable reasons (the relative coherence of the American educational system being an important one), student

papers often fail in predictable ways. By being able to recognize some of these, teachers may deepen their insight into student writing.

Below is a chart featuring a few common types of problematic papers, as well as ways to diagnose and treat them. (Note that most involve difficulties with thesis.) It can be useful to keep these types in mind while reading student papers, many of which combine the characteristics of more than one type.

— K.W.

Types of Problem Papers

<i>paper type</i>	<i>symptoms</i>	<i>diagnosis</i>	<i>treatment</i>
The Museum Tour a.k.a. The Laundry List	Lists reasons, components, proofs, or examples rather than exploring a question or developing an argument.	The apparent problem is a predictable structure, the actual problem is a descriptive rather than argumentative thesis.	The writer should ask a provocative question and posit a good answer about one coherent issue or theme.
The confusing paper	Typically the product of a student writer who doesn't know either how to develop a thesis that drives a paper's structure or how to organize ideas.	The apparent problem is an unpredictable structure; the actual problem may have to do with thesis.	If the paper lacks an arguable central claim, the writer will require assistance to discover a better one. If the paper has such a claim; the writer needs concrete advice about how to argue for it logically.
The Unpersuasive Paper	Falls into two main types, in which: (1) the claims are based on a misreading or a preconception; (2) the claims are sound but insufficiently substantiated; if provided, the evidence is insufficiently analyzed.	Unpersuasive papers play fast and loose with evidence and/or fail to analyze the evidence sufficiently, i.e. connect it to the claim.	The writer needs to re-examine both claims and evidence by asking: Where's the evidence to support my claim? How do I account for the counter-evidence? Have I analyzed the evidence such that my reader can see what I see?
The Hard-to-Read Paper	Usually exhibits the symptoms of one or more of the above paper types, but also has hard-to-read sentences—either highly abstract and contorted or simplistic, choppy, and inert.	Conceptual problems are compounded by problems with style and audience. The contorted writers believe that academic writing is inflated; the simplistic writers have little writing experience in an academic context.	Contorted writers profit from hearing their writing read aloud and making written sentences as clear as spoken ones. Simplistic writers profit from patterning their sentences after good models.

COMBATTING THE *Subjectivity of Grading*

There's an old joke about a professor who grades papers by hurling them down a staircase: the farther the flight, the higher the grade. As this joke suggests, grades are seen by many as random and subjective, a belief that rampant grade inflation at the college level has helped to reinforce.

Yet grades have the potential to be among the most powerful tools in a teacher's kit. When standards are announced and consistently applied, grades provide a reasonably objective measure of achievement, signaling to students the extent to which they need to challenge familiar ways of thinking and writing.

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As useful as grades are, assigning them can be a perplexing business, for new and veteran teachers alike. This is especially so when the stack is high and the papers aren't easily categorizable: a smart, lively paper may lack a coherent argument; a misshapen wreck may yield up some breathtaking insights. Given the inherent difficulties of grading, how can it be accomplished in a fair, consistent, and efficient way?

Grading Criteria

For students to be motivated by grades, they need to believe the grades they get are fair, not arbitrary or idiosyncratic. Students must, in other words, trust their teacher's judgment. One way to encourage this trust is to provide students with grading criteria early on and to use the criteria when discussing or evaluating. (see p. 11 for sample criteria.) When students are made aware of the widely shared qualities of good writing, and when their

writing is measured against these criteria, they're better able to trace a disappointing grade back to the source – the paper, not the teacher – and to see how they can improve next time.

Most experienced readers agree that the primary hallmarks of excellent writing are an interesting, arguable thesis; the development of the thesis in a logical yet supple way; the substantiation of it and any subclaims with incisively analyzed evidence; the engaging use of properly attributed sources when appropriate; and a clear, compelling style that conforms to standard usage.

Many teachers create and distribute "grading rubrics" in which these qualities are used to

describe A, B, C, D, and E papers. Maxine Rodburg, Director of the Writing Center, believes that handing out a grading rubric is essential. "The last thing I want," she says, "is for my students to believe that grades are mysterious entities that arrive like gifts or punishments from the capricious and unreadable mind of the teacher." (See Rodburg's grading rubric on page 11.)

Nothing But the Paper

Grading with clear criteria in mind helps to ensure fairness and objectivity. So does another principle of grading: *Grade the paper and nothing but the paper* – not the person who wrote it, the effort that went into it, or the improvement it shows. This principle dramatically simplifies the task of evaluation by eliminating second guessing; it also guarantees that students are judged on an equal basis.

"Grade the paper and nothing but the paper" means grading the *entire* paper, not just a part of it. Papers bend and swoop and turn, and grades need to be responsive to their sometimes erratic

flight patterns. It means grading the *actual* paper as well. Rather than assigning a grade based on what a paper seems at first glance to be, or what in hindsight it might have been, it's more fair – and more objective – to grade the paper as it actually is.

Concrete Strategies for Grading

When used in conjunction with the above principles, the following four-step method further reduces the subjectivity of grading:

Step One. *Read through the stack before grading any paper.* Identifying what the strongest papers are doing (and not doing) and the ways in which the weakest ones go awry can indicate what ideal responses to the assignment may look like.

Step Two. *Use grading criteria to describe each paper.* Stepping back from a paper and describing it in terms of grading criteria can lead to a more dispassionate judging process. Chances are, most papers will just "seem like a B+" until the qualities they exhibit are identified and compared to the ideal.

Step Three. *Determine upper-half and lower-half papers.* Whether a paper is in the upper half or the lower half of the grade range depends primarily on how effective the paper's thesis and structure are: a readable A paper with a clear argument will usually receive an upper-half grade (B- or higher); a paper that's difficult to read and doesn't have a clear argument will usually receive a lower-half grade (C+ or lower). Note that instructors who de facto compress the grade range (from A through E to, say, A through B-) will draw the upper-half/lower-half border at a correspondingly higher point (at B+, for example).

Step Four. *Make line distinctions.* To home in on more precise grades, consider why a paper should receive a particular grade, not something slightly higher or slightly lower.

Although grading a piece of writing will never be an exact science, implementing the simple techniques discussed here can make the process less subjective and even less agonizing. Grading without a staircase may turn out to be not so difficult after all.

— K.W.

A GRADING RUBRIC

by Maxine Rodburg, Director of the Writing Center

CRITERIA FOR GRADING *Student Writing*

Keeping the following criteria in mind while reading student writing can help make grading a less overwhelming—and less subjective—process.

THESIS: Is there one main argument in the paper? Does it fulfill the assignment? Is the *thesis* clearly stated at 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? Does the evidence suggest the writer's knowledge of the subject matter? Has the paper overlooked any obvious or important pieces of evidence? Is there enough analysis of evidence? Is the evidence properly attributed, and is the bibliographical information correct?

SOURCES: If appropriate or required, are sources besides the main text(s) under consideration used? Are they introduced in an understandable way? Is their purpose in the argument clear? Do they do more than affirm the writer's viewpoint or represent a "straw person for knocking down? Are responsible inferences drawn from them? Are they properly attributed, 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?

These are the standards I adhere to when I grade essays. Pluses and minuses represent shades of difference, as do split grades (e.g. B-/C'). I assign grades on the evidence of the essay submitted, not on effort or time spent.

A Excellent in every way (this is not the same as perfect). This is an ambitious, perceptive essay that grapples with interesting, complex ideas; responds discerningly to counter-arguments, and explores well-chosen evidence revealingly. The discussion enhances, rather than underscores, the reader's and writer's knowledge (it doesn't simply repeat what has been taught). There is a context for all the ideas; someone outside the class would be enriched, not confused, by reading the essay. Its beginning opens up, rather than flatly announces, its thesis. Its end is something more than a summary. The language is clean, precise, often elegant. As a reader I feel surprised, delighted, changed. There's something new here for me, something only the essay's writer could have written and explored in this particular way. The writer's stake in the material is obvious.

B A piece of writing that reaches high and achieves many of its aims. The ideas are solid and progressively explored, but some thin patches require more analysis and/or some stray thoughts don't fit in. The language is generally clear and precise but occasionally not. The evidence is relevant, but there may be too little; the context for the evidence may not be sufficiently explored, so that I have to make some of the connections that the writer should have made clear for me. OR A piece of writing that reaches less high than an A essay but thoroughly achieves its aims. This is a solid essay whose reasoning and argument may nonetheless be rather routine. (In this case the limitation is conceptual.)

A piece of writing that has real problems in one of these areas: conception (there's at least one main idea but it's fuzzy and hard to get to); structure (confusing); use of evidence (weak or

"The last thing I want is for my students to believe that grades are mysterious entities that arrive like gifts or punishments from the capricious and unreadable mind of the teacher."

—Maxine Rodburg

C non-existent—the connections among the ideas and the evidence are not made and/or are presented without context, or add up to platitudes or generalizations): language (the sentences are often awkward, dependent on unexplained abstractions, sometimes contradict each other). The essay may not move forward but rather may repeat its main points, or it may touch upon many (and apparently unrelated) ideas without exploring any of them in sufficient depth. Punctuation, spelling, grammar, paragraphing, and transitions may be a problem. OR An essay that is largely plot summary or ~interpretive summary" of the text, but is written without major problems.

OR An essay that is chiefly a personal reaction to something. Well-written, but scant intellectual content—mostly opinion.

D and E

These are efforts that are wildly shorter than they ought to be to grapple seriously with ideas; OR Those that are extremely problematic in many of the areas mentioned above: aims, structure, use of evidence, language, etc.;

OR Those that do not come close to addressing the expectations of the assignment.

TEACHING FELLOW *Spotlight*

Teaching Fellows do the lion's share of commenting and grading at Harvard. Undergraduates, grateful for the time and effort that many TFs spend responding to papers, testify to the profound influence their section leaders and tutors can have on their writing. Participants in the longitudinal Study of Undergraduate Writing (see this issue's cover story) praise TFs most for giving them concrete advice on the *how's* of writing—how to approach course material, how to go deeper into a subject, how to connect ideas to larger questions, themes, and issues.

With me help of TFs, undergraduates become bolder, more confident writers. Following are the thoughts of five experienced TFs on the topic of responding effectively to student writing.

Rena Selya

History of Science

I try to make my comments on papers useful for the student either for writing the next paper or for reworking the current one. It's often tempting at the end to write "Fine" or "Weak argument" and a grade, but that doesn't teach students anything or help them understand what their instructor is looking for. I tend to focus on argument and organization, so I try to offer concrete examples and ways in which students' ideas can be reorganized or presented in a stronger way. I also try to link the assignment to the larger goals of the course, to help students see how the writing they do connects to the other things they are learning. Questions such as "How does your approach fit in to the way we have been thinking about this particular issue?" give them clues as to how to write better papers for the class in the future.

Rena Selya is a fifth-year doctoral student in the History of Science. She has TF'd for several courses in her home department and was recently Head Teaching Fellow of Historical Studies B-46: The Darwinian Revolution. She is currently a Graduate Fellow at the Dibner Institute for the History of Science.



Rena Selya

Christopher White

The Study of Religion

I generally have a list of things I'm looking for—clear, contestable thesis, clear organization, thoughtful argumentation, well-integrated quotations, and so on. I type up this list and discuss it with my students so they know what I expect and how I grade their work. I find that when students know how they will be evaluated, they feel more confident as writers and more comfortable with my criticism. When I write comments on student papers, I use this list as a guide, and I often refer students back to it. In general, I have found that having this list helps students improve their writing. It also helps me grade their work fairly and consistently.

Chris White, a Ph.D. candidate in the Study of Religion, has served as Head Teaching Fellow for Religion 13: Scriptures and Classics, and has TF'd for several other courses, including Religion 2042: Religion, Nationalism and Peace, and History 1661: Social Thought in Modern America.



Christopher White

Alice Ristroph

Government / Law School

Like many TFs, I don't like grading insofar as the task involves ranking papers and trying to make ever-elusive distinctions. What redeems the whole endeavor for me is the knowledge that responding to papers offers an unusual opportunity to give students individualized attention. When I evaluate a paper, I can focus my energy on a single student much more completely than is typically possible in a section of '6 to '8 students. In my comments, I try to help students with their particular weaknesses and at the same time encourage them to develop their individual strengths.

Alice Ristroph is a fifth-year doctoral student in Government and a third-year student at the law School. She has TF'd for several courses, including Moral Reasoning 22: Justice.



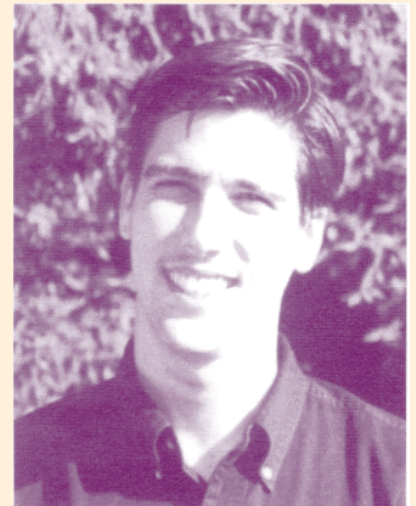
Alice Ristroph

Daniel Gutierrez

History

Marking grammatical and stylistic mistakes with red ink might prove to students that someone read their paper, but the real joy of responding to student writing is engaging in a dialogue about ideas and their presentation. If clear writing is a reflection of clear thinking, then there is no better way to help students improve their writing than to focus on the main ideas of their paper, to challenge them to re-think and better articulate their arguments. My comments on a paper are most effective when they're an extension of class discussion. And like any good discussion, the best comments are based on a series of tough questions that do not presuppose the existence of any one right answer, but which are intended to help students think for themselves.

Daniel Gutierrez is a fourth-year doctoral student in History. He was Head Teaching Fellow for Historical Studies A-s3: Democracy, Equality, and Development in Mexico.



Daniel Gutierrez

Casey Due

Classics

When students try to write a paper on a topic that is completely new to them or for a class outside their concentration, they tend to substitute general observations, which no one would take issue with, for an arguable thesis. Interestingly, many students do come up with a thesis—in their concluding paragraph. I encourage students to meet with me after they have written a draft but before they have handed in the final version. My advice is almost always the same: Take your last paragraph and put it first, then argue your main point with support from the text. In many cases, the rewriting involved is minimal, but the result is a focused paper that makes an argument instead of an observation.

Casey Due is a fifth year doctoral student in Classics. She will be Head Teaching Fellow for Literature & Arts C-14: The Concept of the Hero in Greek Civilization in Spring coo, and has TF'd for many other Classics courses, including Literature & Arts C-61, The Rome of Augustus. Her dissertation, in progress, explores the oral tradition of Homeric poetry in The Illiad.



Casey Due

RESPONDING TO *Student Writing in the Sciences*

by Cassandra Volpe Horii

Science courses may be one of the last places students expect to write, much less to write well. But as any working scientist knows, the discipline demands clear, concise, and frequent writing. In the laboratory or research environment, we write to document methods, record results, and interpret data. In the scientific literature, we write to share our findings with colleagues. In our quest for funding, we write grant proposals. And in our desire to communicate scientific information to a wider audience, we write essays, textbooks, letters-to-the-editor, and book reviews.

When students write in science courses, they acquire an important professional skill. Writing also gives science students a powerful tool with which to understand and delve into new and sometimes difficult concepts. In writing, they can turn the concepts over and around and inside-out until they have exhausted alternative hypotheses and expressed technical ideas clearly and concisely.

As science instructors, we may believe that we lack the necessary expertise to give our students useful, relevant feedback. In my experience, two discrete strategies can make responding to student writing in the sciences much easier.

Expectations

The first strategy is to delineate expectations for each assignment and to recall these expectations when assessing student writing. I answer the following questions for myself then share the information with my class

What is the purpose of the assignment?
I. e., What do I want students to learn In the process of completing it?

How does the assignment fit into the objectives and structure of the course?

How will I evaluate the results?

For example, the purpose of a weekly lab report may be for students to demonstrate their understanding of specific scientific concepts and details of experimental procedures. I therefore expect the writing to convey a great deal of accurate, factual information in an organized fashion. By contrast, a research paper may be the place where I want students to conduct an independent analysis and present their results within the context of the field. I expect to find a hypothesis that is relevant to existing scientific research, along with a readable discussion of the student's methods, results, and conclusions.

By making my expectations explicit, I have found that my students are in a stronger position to write good papers and that I have a clearer sense of the criteria to be used in my assessment.

Uncertainty and Writing

The second strategy derives from an insight—that uncertainty of thought in undergraduate science writing often masquerades as “writing problems.” I used to make the mistake of addressing these

basic writing problems to the exclusion of the student's underlying conceptual difficulties. But then I realized that mere summary, grammatical mistakes, overly “scientific” or “unscientific” word choices, and other fundamental problems typically appear when students are in the process of sorting out concepts that they are only just learning to think about. This realization prompted me to develop a more productive feedback strategy.

When responding to student writing, I read first for the overall point and then summarize it in a few sentences. If the student has lost the thread of logic while trying to write about an unfamiliar or technical subject, this tactic often suggests where the argument foundered. When I open my comment with these sentences, I also indicate to the student that I have read the work, respect the student's thought process, and wish to help the student think independently and critically about the subject.

After summarizing the student's main point, I have found that my most helpful comments address the specifics of any misunderstandings or misinterpretations. By explaining a physical principle precisely and concisely in writing addressed to the student, I both elucidate the concept and provide a working example of how to write about it. In sharp contrast to comments focused on “writing problems,” such comments give students a useful starting point for rethinking their ideas.

Cassandra Volpe Horii is a sixth-year Ph.D. candidate in Earth and Planetary Sciences. Her dissertation topic addresses the role of reactive nitrogen in the chemistry of the earth's atmosphere. She has been a Teaching fellow in CPS and the Core, as well as a consultant for the Derek Bok Center, a Senior Teaching Fellow, and a Graduate Writing Fellow.



Cassandra Volpe Horii

STRATEGIES FOR *Speeding Up the Process*

There's no doubt about it: responding to student writing is a time-consuming process. But while reading, commenting on, and grading papers will always take time—anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes for a typical 5- to 7-page paper—many instructors find that taking certain steps can help make the process faster and easier.

Many of these steps have been described elsewhere in this issue of the Harvard Writing Project Bulletin. They include

The rationale for each of these strategies is that knowing what to look for in student

- **skimming through the pile to discern the range of responses to an assignment;**
- **reading each essay through quickly, before making any marks, to identify major strengths and weaknesses;**
- **thinking about strengths and weaknesses in terms of clear assessment criteria—thesis, structure, analysis and so on;**
- **commenting representatively in the margins by noting patterns;**
- **using a reliable format for structuring final comments—for example, restatement of thesis, discussion of strengths, and discussion of weaknesses;**
- **identifying in final comments no more than three or four areas for improvement.**

writing, and knowing how to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of papers with students, can make the commenting and grading process more efficient and effective. But these strategies are not the only ones available to instructors who wish to facilitate the responding process. Taking certain

steps *before* the papers come in can make a significant difference in the quality of writing students produce—and thus in the experience of responding to it. Four strategies in particular are worth trying out:

Designing Effective Writing Assignments

The motto of assignment design is “You get what you ask for.” An unfocused, inexact writing assignment is likely to yield unfocused, inexact papers. By contrast, an assignment that creates an occasion for sustained argument has a good chance of actually producing it. One way of conceiving of a good assignment is to imagine an ideal paper on an issue, text, or set of texts, then to think backwards from the paper to the assignment that will produce it. Having drafted the assign-

Taking certain steps before the papers come in can make a significant difference in the quality of writing students produce—and thus in the experience of responding to it.

ment, it's crucial to read it from a student's point of view for clarity and comprehensibility.

Responding to Proposals, Outlines, and Drafts

Although responding to students' efforts at various stages in the writing process is itself time-consuming, the investment is worth making: the five minutes it takes to read and critique a tentative thesis or outline via e-mail, or the 20 minutes spent with a student in office hours discussing a draft, not only saves time down the line, it can mean the difference between getting an uninteresting, descriptive, or confusing paper and one that's refreshingly original and well-argued.

Organizing Students into Writing Groups

By participating in a writing group of two or three people who are assigned to read and respond to each others' papers, students derive two main benefits: they start working on their papers earlier than they might otherwise have done, and they begin to realize that, for their writing to be effective, it must engage and persuade real readers. And although students can't necessarily provide one another with scholarly guidance (for example, the context for a debate or a list of relevant sources), they can learn to identify weaknesses in an argument and make concrete suggestions for revision, skills that they can in turn apply to their own writing.

Asking for a Cover Letter

Self-awareness in writing—knowing what works in a paper and what doesn't—is one of the keys to improvement. Students who are required to submit their papers with a cover letter attached become more self-conscious writers through the experience of reflecting on a paper's strengths and weaknesses. Cover letters also facilitate the commenting process by creating a dialogue between reader and writer: given the chance to respond to a writer's specific concerns and questions, the instructor (or any reader) is better positioned to make comments that are more individualized and thus more useful.

Good writing is a pleasure to read. By implementing teaching techniques that encourage good writing, the sometimes onerous process of responding to student writing can be made not only more expedient but more enjoyable as well.

—K.W.



***The Harvard Writing Project
offers two kinds of workshops
for faculty and TFs on responding
to student writing***

- > **Course-specific workshops**, in which Writing Project consultants attend a staff-meeting to share strategies for commenting and grading using papers from the course, and
- > **College-wide workshops** on responding to student writing for faculty and TFs from different courses.

To schedule a workshop for your course or to find out the dates of the college-wide workshops, contact Tom Jehn, of the Harvard Writing Project at <trjehn@fas.harvard.edu> or 495-5785.