Improving Instructor Response to Student Writing

Based on: Sommers, Nancy. *Responding to Student Writers*. Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011

Dr. Mark Larsen
How can we respond to each student:
- In a reasonable time
- To guide their essay revision?

Instructor with 50 Blackboard icons showing ungraded essays

Diane Arbus photo
Session Objectives

Present an overview of Sommers’s research’s insights, approach, and techniques to improve:

• Instructor’s focus when responding with comments
• Instructor’s sensitivity to student expectations
• Student’s understanding of instructor comments
• Student’s willingness to make changes
• Overall working relationship between instructor and student
Sommers’s 5 insights on comments

1. The aspect of our work we least understand

2. The most enduring communication we have with students

3. Help students feel less anonymous

4. Convey a sense of academic belonging to them

5. Are a sacred trust
Key findings

Students expect from writing classes

• To write about something that matters to them

• To engage with an instructor through written comments
  – Harvard Writing Study, 2001, 4 years, 400 students
Academic writing

• Not our mother tongue

• Requires instruction, practice and rehearsing others’ arguments

• Progresses:
  – One-step forward, one-back
  – One lesson at a time
6 Aspects of Sommers’s approach

1. Write to the student, not to the essay
2. Promote students’ authority and authorship
3. Address global concerns
4. Write in an encouraging tone
5. Develop a class language
6. Answer, “How do I write a good college essay?”
Example of Aspect 1

Write to the student, not to the essay

• Imagine sitting next to the student
  – How would I approach commenting?
  – Shifts monologue to dialogue

• Treat students as apprentices

• The language of comments should derive from the relationship forged in the classroom
Example of Aspect 3

Address global concerns

• Purpose
• Thesis
• Organization
• Evidence
• Clarity of ideas; otherwise,
• Revision looks a janitorial process: fix and clean
Example of Aspects 5

Develop a class language

• *So what? Who cares?* – significance of topic
• *Spice* – color
• *Face the dragon* – go beyond clichés
• *Slash and burn* – revise
• *Argumentative edge* – take a stand
Sommers’s 5 Techniques (in handout)

1. Revision Plan
2. Dear Reader letter
3. Trends and Patterns handout
4. Marginal and end comments
5. Control the workload
Techniques - roles

• Have students write:
  – A Revision Plan
  – A Dear Reader letter

• Instructor writes:
  – Dear Reader items to address
  – Trends and Patterns handout (or delegate to students)
Example – Technique 4

Comments

• Tone: consistent with the one in class

• Texts worthy of reflection, interpretation and discussion

• Marginal comments:
  – Local focus

• End comments:
  – Global focus
Comments

• Read through all pages first

• Comments should be:
  – Specific and clear
  – Balanced – neither over- or under-commented
  – Phrased constructively to help students focus and prioritize their revisions
Example: Technique 5

Control the workload

• Comment on what is developmentally possible between drafts
  – What single lesson to convey?
  – How will my comment teach it?

• Comment lightly:
  – Develop a Trends and Patterns handout

• For a rough draft, write a targeted response to one rhetorical element
No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.

- James Comer