



Responding to Student Writing: Strategies for Instructors

*A Workshop for the
Center for Faculty Development*

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Feb. 24, 2010



Introduction...

- Names, departments
- Warm up:
 - Name one thing that you feel is **effective** when responding to student writing
 - Name one thing that you feel is **ineffective** when responding to student writing



A common experience of frustration and anxiety...

- “The process of giving feedback to student’ writing... fills me with anxiety because I am afraid that it will not help but only confuse the students more.”
 - (anonymous instructor cited in Ferris 2007, p. 165)
- “I am not a writing instructor! -- Help!”



My thanks to Dana Ferris

- Ferris has researched & written voluminously on the issues of responding to college student writing. Most everything I present here is directly attributable to her work.



A brief review about our students' language backgrounds

- For purposes of better understanding college students' needs, writing experts often categorize students into 3-5 groups. These are:
 - International students (have F-1 visas and plan to return to live in their country of origin)
 - US resident students with a background in a language other than English (also called "language minority students")
 - Late arrival resident students (in the US fewer than 8 years)
 - Early arrival resident students (in the US longer than 8 years) (also called "Generation 1.5 students")
 - US-born native English speakers



Characteristics that *may* pertain to these groups & affect their academic literacy skills

(Ferris 2009)

- International students:
 - Tend to be “eye learners” -- that is, “the primary route to English language learning was through formal classroom language study” (Ferris p. 30, citing Reid, 1998/2006)
 - Usually have a strong foundation in their first language (L1)*
 - Usually well educated in their home country
 - May exhibit different rhetorical structures (patterns of organization) in writing assignments than what is expected
 - May be unfamiliar with the process approach common in US writing classes (pre-writing, multiple drafts, peer and expert feedback, etc.)
 - Still struggle with grammar, vocabulary, use of appropriate register.

* *Note that students from India, Singapore, Nigeria etc. already speak and write English fluently because it is one of the national languages.*



Characteristics, continued

- Late arriving resident students
 - Some of them, depending on how much education they received in their home country, may also be primarily “eye” learners
 - Others may be “ear learners” -- that is, they acquired English primarily through naturalistic exposure to the language.
 - They may or may not be literate in their L1 (it depends on how much education they had in the home country and the type of L2 learning experiences they have had (e.g., formal or informal))
 - May have had little composition instruction in English prior to college.



Characteristics, continued

■ Early arriving resident students

- Primarily “ear learners”; they have acquired English naturalistically, on the playground, with peers, etc.
- Grammar analysis skills may be weak due to its under-emphasis in public school curricula (though this may be changing in recent years) (Scarcella, 2003). Students may not know the “parts of speech” etc.
- Oral skills in English are strong; these students are fluent English speakers.
- Often have limited or no literacy in the L1
- Can self correct based on intuition, more than on the basis of formal grammar knowledge
- Are more confident of their US cultural knowledge than the previous two groups
- May have picked up English from peers who speak in non-standard varieties
- May use overly conversational or informal style in their writing



Characteristics, continued

- US-born native English speakers
 - Have strong intuitive English skills
 - Are confident of their US cultural knowledge
 - May speak ethnic or regional varieties of English that diverge somewhat from “standard English”
 - Depending on previous schooling, they may not have much “grammar knowledge”
 - May not have had consistent or high quality instruction in writing beyond the sentence level (e.g., paragraphs, essays etc.)



What are some possible approaches for responding to student writing? Response may be...

- Part of a process approach to writing -- drafts, stages, revisions...
- A final evaluation of student writing (no intermediate feedback)
- A way to justify a grade
- Comprehensive or selective (focused on certain points, e.g., course content, rhetorical issues, language issues, improvement over last draft...)
- Provided by teacher, peers, self evaluation, outside resources (tutors etc.)
- In the form of written comments, rubric, checklist, 1-1 conference, email, ...



Explaining your approach

- Students don't necessarily understand why you use a particular approach, so
- It's helpful to explain it to them (possibly several times throughout the semester).
- In particular, explain what you expect them to do with the feedback they receive.



Some suggestions

- Read through the entire paper quickly before making any comments
- Prioritize the most important issues and select 2-4 feedback points
- Compose a summary or endnote identifying strengths as well as areas for improvement.
- Make sure your comments are **encouraging, clear, and specific**. Avoid jargon and ineffective questioning techniques.
- Avoid “appropriating” student text (writing *for* them)



Suggestions, continued

- Decide how you will handle errors (grammar, sentence structure, etc.). Will you
 - correct every error?
 - identify errors by type and let the student self correct?
 - Simply call attention to errors and let the student figure out what the problem is?
 - Some of both the above? (see treatable errors versus untreatable errors)



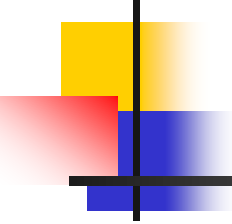
Treatable versus untreatable errors

- Treatable errors: You can teach students to recognize and correct these because they have a regular pattern (e.g., 3rd person singular -s on the present tense verb)
- Untreatable errors: There is no pattern. E.g. word choice, prepositions (in addition **of** the challenge *versus* in addition **to** the challenge)



Suggestions, continued

- Use a checklist or rubric
 - Establishes clear criteria that help you to be more objective
 - Helps you respond evenly to many students
 - Can also be used for peer and self evaluation
 - Saves you from writing the same thing a zillion times!



Holding students accountable for using feedback

- Ask students to write a short memo to be submitted with revision, stating how they took feedback into account (or not).
- Give opportunities for students to discuss feedback with you (editing sessions in class or 1-1)
- Consider revision efforts as part of grading scheme



Discussion and sharing

- Sample student text
- Sample checklist
- Sample cover sheet for student revision



The end!

- Thanks for coming!
- PS: Next workshop is on using peer review in your class.
 - Thursday March 11th, 1:30-2:45 pm



References

- Draper, V. (2003). What do writing assignments ask students to be and do? Workshop presented at the Writing to Learn conference, San José, CA, Oct. 24th 2003.
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- Ferris, D.R. (2007). Preparing teachers to respond to student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 16: 165-193
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- Reid, J. (1998/2006). “Eye” learners and “ear” learners: Identifying the language needs of international and US resident writers. In P.K. Matsuda, M. Cox, J.Jordan, & C. Ortmeier-Hooper (Eds.), *Second language writing in the composition classroom* (pp. 76-88). Boston: Bedford/St. Martins.
- Scarcella, R.C. (2003). *Accelerating academic English: A focus on the English learner*. Oakland: University of California.