

Techniques for Responding to a Peer's Writing*

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Why respond? Responding to writing is a vital activity (after all, we all need readers), but not necessarily an easy one. Response can take several forms: You might respond as a way of starting a discussion with your peer about his or her paper content. You might respond as a way of building a relationship with the writer. You might respond to share your reactions as a reader. You might respond in the role of “expert” to provide specific knowledge and feedback about the writer’s approach. However, whatever your specific purpose, the bigger picture to keep in mind is that your response should enable the writer to learn, whether that learning will show up in subsequent drafts or future papers.

Below are several strategies for both summary response (commentary that sums up your feedback to a writer’s draft) and in-text comments (the feedback that you place throughout the draft):

Summary Response—Make it personal: It might seem simple enough, try to start your overall response to your peer by addressing him or her by name. This “personal” touch has meaning for the writer as it conveys sincerity and acknowledgement of the student as a writer. And who of us doesn’t pay more attention to what we read when it starts with addressing us by name?

Summary Response—Start with the positive: No matter how much of a mess your peer’s paper might be, it is important to begin your response with anything he or she did well. If a goal is to have writers learn from your comments, an initial focus on what works allows for a smoother transition to what needs work. Leading with what writers did well, whether it be a strong sense of purpose, a vivid detail, or a focused controlling sentence, allows messages of concern to be more readily accepted and translated into improvement.

Summary & In-Text Response—Stop at Three: You don’t have to ask very many writers (and perhaps you were one of them as we were) to find someone who’s had the experience of getting back a draft that was “bleeding” in red ink. Some instructor’s imperative to be comprehensive in their response often can end up overwhelming and intimidating writers. Three is a useful number to keep in mind: Focus on three areas of concern in the writer’s paper or three specific suggestions for revision. More than that won’t necessarily be productive.

Summary Response—Think Big to Little: When offering summary response, start with higher-order concerns first and then to move to later-order concerns or, in other words, talk about general issues first and then focus on specifics in the text. Keep in mind that you are responding to both sets of issues here, but that you want to foreground this “big” concerns of focus, detail, evidence, and structure, before you get to respond to how the sentences were put together.

In-Text Response—Respond as a reader: It is awfully easy to read anyone’s writing with a pen or cursor ready to mark, correcting those grammar errors, cutting out those excess words, or offering alternatives. This act of editing can be effective in small doses (for instance, one or two paragraphs) as a way of modeling one way to rewrite the someone’s words, but in large doses it is largely ineffective if you want your peer to learn to improve his or her writing (and it largely leaves student writers dispirited and unmotivated). Instead, respond to the writer’s draft as a reader, and that means primarily asking questions or indicating something that works well or some things that need clarification: “I don’t know what you mean here.” “I expected you to tell me your focus at this point.” “Great detail!” “What do you mean by this?” “What happened next?” “I needed a transition between these two ideas.”

Additional Resources for Responding

Peer-Review Guidelines from M. Maner *The Research Process*, 2nd ed. (McGraw Hill, 2001):
<http://www.mhhe.com/mayfieldpub/maner/resources/peerreview.htm>

*Adapted from Gillespie, Paula, and Neal Lerner. *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*, 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2003.