Improving Student Writing

ITeach 2008
Beth Fisher, Asst. Director, The Teaching Center
Doreen Salli, Director, The Writing Center
Discussion

What are the challenges that you face in helping students improve their writing?
Students’ Views

- Disappointment and frustration when comments are short

- Appreciation for
  - Questions that stimulate thinking
  - Brief summaries
    - What the reader understood
    - Difficulties that the reader encountered
  - Constructive, respectful feedback

Course Planning

- **Define objectives** for student learning.
- **Compose assignments** that allow students to work toward these objectives (to acquire and master requisite writing skills).
- **Develop grading criteria** that allow you to measure students’ progress toward course objectives.
  - **Craft comments** that give students a clear idea of whether they have or have not achieved these objectives (and with what degree of success).
Talk with Students about Writing

- What is “good writing”?  
  - Explain discipline-specific standards and conventions; provide examples
- What role does writing play in the discovery, communication, and refinement of ideas in your field?
Feedback: Why is it useful?

- Why is feedback essential for any writer?
  - Discuss writing as a **process** of drafting, revising, and editing.
  - Feedback is an important part of the process.
  - Draw on your own experience as a writer.
One Method for Responding to Papers

1) First, read the paper.

2) Write comments at the end of the paper, engaging the paper's ideas.
   • e.g., describe what the paper accomplishes and what it does not, referring to the learning objectives associated with the assignment.

3) Add questions, suggestions, praise in the margins of paper.

4) Finally, indicate the paper’s grade.

Respond as a Reader

- Do not tell students how you would write the paper: encourage them to develop their own solutions to problems you identify.

- **Ask questions** to help students REVISE and IMPROVE.
  - Stimulate further thinking.
  - Point out gaps in logic or support.

- **Limit your response**: focus on the 3 or 4 most important elements of the paper.

- Think of your response as part of a dialogue.
Additional Guidelines

- Begin by making positive comments.
- Comment on “higher-order” or “global” concerns (e.g., thesis, organization, support) before “lower-order” or “local” concerns (e.g., sentence structure, spelling, etc.).
- Resist the temptation to edit. Instead, mark patterns of error or weak construction.
- Use a positive tone.
- Model clear, concise writing.

Be Specific

We often rely too heavily on comments like the following, which leave students without a clear idea of what we are trying to point out:

- “Vague”
- “Confusing”
- “What?”
- “???”
- “Good”

Be Specific

“Vague”

“Which research finding are you referring to here?”

“Confusing”; “What?”; “???”

“I lost the thread of your argument. Why is this information important?”

“You imply that this point supports your thesis, but it actually contradicts what you argued in paragraph 3.”

“Good”

“This excellent example moves your argument forward.”

What else can you do?

- Ask students to evaluate their own writing.
- Hold peer-review sessions.
- Provide opportunities for revision.
- Consider providing opportunities for publication.
- Recommend that students work with tutors from The Writing Center.
Sources


For Further Ideas and Assistance

- The Teaching Center
  workshops, consultations, and online resources
  105 Eads Hall
  http://teachingcenter.wustl.edu
  bfisher@wustl.edu

- The Writing Center
  tutorials, workshops, and consultations
  111 Eads Hall
  http://artsci.wustl.edu/~writing
dssalli@wustl.edu