How Do I Evaluate and Respond to Student Writing?
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Introduction
Undoubtedly, evaluating student writing can be one of the most daunting tasks an instructor can face. It takes time, and above all, it takes mental energy, and I think we are likely all looking for a way to make it a little bit easier. Unfortunately, as Nick Carbone observes, evaluating and commenting on student writing quite often becomes an exercise in simply "correcting" or "justifying" rather than a practice of offering useful feedback that promotes growth and the process of writing towards that improvement.

Instructors certainly face a host of challenges that can complicate the process of evaluating and offering feedback on student writing. Perhaps the most pressing concern is the issue of physical circumstance – most notably, time. There might be nothing more overwhelming than confronting a huge stack of papers and a classroom full of students who anxiously await their grades. We can likewise face environmental distractions that lead to inconsistencies in our grading: Are we more tired when we grade the tenth or twentieth paper? Do we have our own research to work on? Is there laundry to finish? Will we remember all of our own grading criteria? The list could be endless… However, this paper aims to offer some tangible strategies for improving and streamlining the complicated and intensive endeavor of evaluating student writing.

Student Frustrations
Before considering some approaches to evaluating and responding, it can be helpful to consider the student-writer perspective. Being aware of how students perceive and react to our commentary as instructors can positively inform the way we respond to their writing.

We have all been students before, and thus are probably all too familiar with the experience of receiving an essay littered with an instructor's **cryptic, illegible comments**. While instructors' time is obviously at a premium – we know that better than anyone – we must also remember that if students cannot read or understand comments, then those comments serve no purpose. Squiggly lines, exclamation points without context, and unfinished sentences mean nothing to them! Even in this new era of online grading, content management systems, and general technological wizardry that can create a paperless classroom with ease, students can still meet with cryptic comments from a hurried instructor.

Similar to the cryptic instructor comment is the ***misunderstood* instructor comment**. A 1990 study by Spandel and Stiggins revealed that students often misread the tone and meaning of instructor comments, even those which an instructor might believe to be clear and direct.

We must likewise be conscious of the **vague or rubber-stamped comment**. Nancy Sommers (1982) from Harvard University found that most instructors' comments were not text-specific and could be interchanged -- certainly a result of time and space constraints, but also frustrating for students who are unable or insufficiently prepared to apply a generic comment to their own specific writing sample.

So Now What? : Some Tangible Strategies
Clearly, as instructors, we must contend with many complexities when we sit down to evaluate our students' written work. Despite those complexities, however, one thing we must never lose sight of is

our purpose in grading and, more specifically, in providing feedback to our students regarding their writing. Above all else, beyond the need to have a grade to put in the box at the end of the semester, we are asking our students to write for us because it is a valuable process for demonstrating critical thought, analytical ability, communication, application… whatever our reason might be! It remains that if writing were not valuable, we would simply ask our students to take multiple choice tests and save ourselves the hassle. So with that in mind, it stands that the primary goal in providing feedback on our students' writing is **to promote overall improvement** as well as explain whatever grade we have assigned. What follows are some strategies for approaching the evaluation and commenting process not only to foster improvement and revision for your students, but also to improve your own efficiency and consistency.

Strategies to Promote Student Improvement

- **Respond as an audience**. Writers (especially young ones) struggle to see their own work objectively, and it is helpful for them to receive feedback that helps them know how others perceive and respond to their work. It is important to respond as a reader to the writing, not to the person. For instance, a useful comment might read, "As a reader, I'm having trouble understanding how this paragraph relates to the others…" rather than "What does this have to do with anything?"

- **Guide substantive thought**. Again, the goal is to help students improve their writing in general, and while it might feel easier to focus solely on surface-level issues, it is likewise important to help them with important issues like critical thought, development, purpose. Of course, different kinds of assignments and students might determine the amount of attention you pay to surface-level issues (Is it a very formal assignment? Is it a very young student who struggles so much with clarity that content is completely obscured?)

- **Be specific**. Providing students with some details specific to their writing will help them understand our response and work towards improvement. This means going beyond noting, for instance, that a passage is awkward, to explaining _why_ that passage is awkward. Such details can help overcome the common complaint that comments are "cryptic" or "rubberstamped."

- **Encourage skills improvement and emphasize choice**. When possible, we should strive to provide feedback that will help students recognize and improve foundational skills. For example, instead of just indicating that a paragraph is unclear, you might suggest that the student include a topic sentence to provide focus.

  Similarly, it is important to emphasize that there can be many "right choices" in writing, and in your commentary, it can be beneficial to leave students with those choices in order to imbue them with ownership of the piece. This can help circumvent that student impulse to just "fix" whatever the instructor marked and instead encourage them to approach the revision in a thoughtful way.

- **Provide a positive environment**. Ultimately, we must remember that unlike taking a test, writing and receiving feedback is an intensely personal experience for many. When providing feedback, we should respect that vulnerability and create a positive environment that will encourage students to improve, rather than discourage them from trying. And as Nick Carbone points out, student writers don't have the same experiences as we do, so we need to learn to like their honest attempts.

Responding to ideas rather than just presentation can show that you value what the student has to say. Further, asking questions and responding as an audience can also help take the sting out of a critical comment. And don't forget to highlight what the student has done well in addition to what needs work.

Strategies to Improve Your Own Efficiency and Consistency

- **Prioritize**. It is in your best interest as well as your students' to "pick your battles" when providing feedback on their writing. Too many comments on too many aspects of writing can confuse and overwhelm them as well as devour your time and energy. After reading an essay, choose what you believe to be the most important areas on which to concentrate; try focusing on "higher-order" concerns first, such as focus and development. To help you accomplish this, try reading through the entire paper first without marking it at all to help you get a good idea of what the primary issues are.

- **Respond to content first (if possible)**. As instructors, it is indeed hard to resist the urge to simply "fix" the errors we see in our students' writing and move on. However, if comments focus solely on those issues, student might think nothing else needs improvement. Conversely, other students might become discouraged and feel the grade was assigned arbitrarily, with no way to improve. In terms of efficiency, focusing on content might help you limit the amount of time you spend on marking and commenting.

- **Do not edit**! Yes, you want to make it clear that surface errors matter, but if you fix every error in an essay, students will not learn to identify the problems and make the corrections themselves, and you will have wasted a great deal of time. Here are a few strategies regarding surface errors:

  > **Strategies for Efficiently Marking Surface Errors**
  > - Try marking errors with a check mark or "X" in the margin. Let the students figure out what needs to be revised.
  > - Carefully edit just one paragraph, showing the level of correctness you expect for the entire paper.
  > - Note major patterns of error you see throughout the paper, offering a few examples.

- **Provide a substantive endnote** to summarize your response to the paper as whole. Use the margins of the paper to make more specific comments. In the endnote, be sure to comment specifically on the strengths of the paper, assess a major problem to work on, and give procedural recommendations towards revision.

- **Use your office hours**. If a paper is really in trouble, it might be impossible to truly help the student with marginal commentary. Save your time and instead invite the student to come to your office so that you can discuss the essay or revision more in depth.

- **Discuss common problems with the entire class**. If you find that a problem is common to many papers in the class, you do not have to take the time to explain it on every single paper. Instead, explain the problem and teach the skills to your class as a whole.

- **Tailor comments based on the type of assignment**. Remember that not all kinds of assignments require the same type of feedback and grading process. Short journal assignments might call for short, more content-oriented feedback, while longer, more formal essays would call for more extensive commentary. If you are responding to a paper that is likely to be revised, provide substantial feedback to assist with the revision. Conversely, if it is an end-of-term paper that will not be revised, your feedback might be more summative.

- **Set a time limit**. Decide on a reasonable amount of time to spend on each paper, and adhere to that limit. Use a timer if necessary.

Some Quick Strategies for Assigning Grades
- **Read the entire set of papers first**, without marking or grading them. Do this quickly to give you a feel for the entire range of student responses, to size up what the best papers are like, and remain consistent.
- **Use a rubric** to help you grade. These can help you clarify your criteria for yourself as well as your students, and keep you focused during the grading process. Provide your students with the grading rubric before they begin writing.

What is a rubric?

In a nutshell, a rubric is simply a scoring tool that outlines important criteria. There are 2 basic kinds of rubrics:

- <u>**Analytic Rubrics**</u> break down the various criteria into separate components and often assigns some sort of individual value or weight to each element. These can be useful for precise and fair assessments.
- <u>**Holistic Rubrics**</u> describe the qualities of an assignment at various levels of expertise, providing an overall judgment of the piece. These can be especially useful for rapid grading.

For some sample rubrics, see the resource links at the end of this article.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, evaluating and providing useful feedback on student writing will always be a complex process! It's much more than reading a paper and slapping a grade on it, especially if we want to help our students become better thinkers and writers. However, if you find the strategies that suit your style, with some forethought and finesse, the process can become less complicated and time-consuming. The TLTC likewise offers additional workshops and individualized consultations on evaluating student writing, designing writing assignments, and creating rubrics for instructors who are interested in further exploration of this topic.

<u>**Online Resources**</u>

Rubistar. http://rubistar.4teachers.org/
> *This website offers a free tool to help instructors create their own rubrics. It also offers a search tool to find sample rubrics.*

Carbone, Nick. "Commenting on Student Writing." Bedford Workshops on Teaching Writing.
http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/technotes/comment/respondingncbsm.html

This commentary offers in particular a list of thoughtful insights from the writer on providing effective responses.

Hyslop, Nancy B. "Evaluating Student Writing: Methods and Measurement." *ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Digest,* #50. March 1990.
http://www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/digests/d50.html
This is a brief overview of some of the literature regarding methods of response to student writing and measuring writing quality.

Procter, Margaret. "Responding to Student Papers Effectively and Efficiently." University of Toronto Writing Support Center.
http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/faculty/responding-and-evaluating
This site provides lists of specific, practical tips for instructors while giving an assignment, grading an assignment, and after returning an assignment.

"Ten Tips for Evaluating Student Writing." Manhattan College Writing Across the Curriculum. Adapted from *Writing Across the Disciplines*. Young and Fulwiler, eds. Dartmouth, NH: Boynton/Cooke, 1986.
http://www.manhattan.edu/services/wac/pages/responding_to_writing/tips_for_evaluating.html
This is another brief list of practical tips taken from Toby Fulwiler designed to help instructors respond effectively for students and engage them in the process of writing and revision.

Additional References
Bean, J. C. (2001). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. San Francisco,CA: Jossey-Bass.

Elbow, P. (1993). Ranking, evaluating, and liking: Sorting out three forms of judgment. *College English*, 55 (2), pp. 187-206

Hedengren, B. F. (2004). *A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Sommers, N. (1982). Responding to student writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 33(2), pp. 148 – 156.

Sommers, N. (2006). Across the drafts. *College Composition and Communication*, 58 (2), pp. 248 – 257.

Spandel, V. and Stiggins, R.J. (1990). *Creating writers: Linking assessment and writing instruction*. White Plains, NY: Longman.