Providing Feedback

Given the central role of practice in learning to write, no teaching strategy is more important than providing feedback to students. Certainly students learn from astute comments on their final drafts. However, they learn even more when they receive response—from a peer or a professor—to a draft that they can then revise. This is the most vital pedagogy for professional writing teachers, who ideally work in environments where they can regularly read and respond to student drafts, consult with students about works in progress, initiate collaborative and peer interactions, and so on.

Many professors believe there's a direct correlation between the volume of the comments they make and the degree to which they are being helpful or, even, responsible. Covering papers in ink (or Track Changes comments) may suggest serious rigor, but no one—student or professor—should mistake that practice for necessarily improving student writing. In fact, it can have just the opposite effect (see proposition 2, below). There are smarter ways of responding to student writing. On page XX, I've included thirteen observations, again grounded in research and theory.

Of course, professors aren't the only people who can provide useful feedback to students, especially for works in progress. Students can help their peers understand how their drafts are read or understood by others and can offer suggestions for revision. Now, many faculty have been disappointed with peer response, as students either do it meanly or perfunctorily or aimlessly. Investing some time discussing this issue with students is useful, as is providing some clear guidelines, questions, or roles.

Page 21 is a handout that we've found useful to provide students before they do peer response. It may be productive to have students talk about their own experiences of what works—or doesn't—before giving them this handout.

Page 22 shows one kind of peer response, in which students are asked to address specific questions about someone else's draft. The nature and number of questions to be asked, of course, is endless, but choose effectively based on the specific assignment.

Page 23 shows a different kind of peer response, in which students are asked to take on a role and write a general, more "narrative" comment to a classmate.

Use the approach that appeals most to you.

Peer Reviewing: General Advice for Students

Common Pitfalls

A surface-level reading. The greatest compliment you can pay to someone else's writing is to engage with it. Sincerely let the writer know how the text affects you as a reader.

Fear of negativity. If you avoid critiquing, you might make yourself feel better, but you won't help the writer strengthen the text.

Critiquing the person instead of the text. Instead of saying "You're not making sense here," a judgment about the writer, try "This section doesn't make sense to me."

Techniques that Work

Respond as a reader. You don't have to know how a writer should revise something; you just need to know what you like to read. Explain how the text affected you intellectually and emotionally. Be specific. Did you connect with it? Was it dull or confusing in places? Were there sections where you had to work to hard to see the main point or the connections between supporting ideas. Good writing does the hard work for the reader.

Use I-*statements.* Use *I*-statements ("I laughed here!" "I get confused here—I had to read this twice") to show the writer how a reader responds to the text.

Dig in. The instructor is going to scrutinize the argument/thesis in the writer's final draft. You'll do the writer a favor if you do the same. Is it sufficiently complex and insightful or simplified and obvious? Can you read it once and summarize the main points? Are you persuaded? Where are the holes? Are there other possible options, counterarguments, or pieces of evidence the writer could have offered? Do you get lost anywhere?

Remember, it's just a draft. The reason why we call them *rough drafts* is because they're still in their formative stages. Remind yourself that a tactful critique of a draft won't upset the writer.

Prioritize. You don't have to mention everything a writer should revise to make an A paper. Simply help writers see how a reader responds to their work so they can focus on 2 or 3 areas to improve in the next draft. That means you'll let some things go. How do you decide which 2 or 3 areas to mention?

- Choose higher-order concerns over lower-order concerns. Focus on issues that impede your understanding of the ideas. Don't worry as much about issues that are more cosmetic.
- Choose recurring issues over isolated issues. Focus on the issues that crop up repeatedly rather than the issues that appear only once.

Example 1: Peer Response Questions and Directions

by John Tiedemann and Eliana Schonberg

Reviewer's name: _____

Writer's name: _____

*Directions to **Writer**: Please choose three questions you'd like the reviewer to address. Circle them.*

*Directions to **Reviewer**: Please read the work and provide clear and detailed answers to each of the THREE questions to which the writer has asked you to respond. Continue on the back, if needed. After you've completed this, talk about your answers with the writer. Then write up a half-page synthesis and suggested plan for further action.*

1. How can this writer make the central argument of this work stronger, clearer or more easily accessible to readers?

2. Identify any paragraphs whose purpose is unclear or that seem to be working at cross purposes, and explain how the writer can revise them to make the purpose clear.

3. Does the sequence of the argument build successfully? If not, suggest a way to reorder it and identify transitions that may need clarifying.

4. Writers can offer their readers guidance in a number of ways, such as clearly defining their terms, explaining exactly how the evidence supports their claims, etc. Identify places in this essay where these forms of guidance could be stronger, and explain specifically how the writer can strengthen them.

5. Are there places in which you feel the textures or structures of language are not serving the writer's purpose effectively? Are there places in which the language could be modified?

Example 2: Narrative Peer Response

You may prefer not to have students answer specific individual questions about a classmate's draft but, instead, provide a more sustained response. I often give students a broad set of directions to create and extended response. One approach that's very useful is to assign students to respond in a certain role. That way, especially if they have critiques, they enjoy the cover of speaking in a persona and not as a classmate. Following is an example of this kind of assignment, with two actual student responses.

Letter to a classmate about her or his draft of Project 5. I'll pair you up with another student. Your task in this letter is to respond in the role of someone who disagrees with the author of the paper; explain as carefully as you can why you disagree. State your own arguments and explain why they lead to a different conclusion. Now, I want you to be polite about this; don't indulge in extreme partisan rhetoric of the kind we looked at earlier in the quarter. However, to be helpful to the author you should be as persuasive as possible—even if you're playing a role that you actually disagree with. Send this letter by email, with a copy to me (dhesse@du.edu).

Stephen
WRIT-1122
March 3, 2007
Hesse

Letter to Leslie.

To begin with I thought your paper was very thorough and well thought out. It was lengthy and covered all the important things you needed to. But as the point of this assignment is to disagree and offer constructive criticism there are some things that I think would help clarify and convince your readers who are on the fence to your position.

You use a lot of statistics and surveys in your paper. This is good, it added credibility and "scientific reasoning's" but when I see these I wonder where did you find these studies and are they themselves factual? You reiterated multiple times that in abstinence only education they will use statistics that are untrue or slanted to favor there position. How does the reader know that you haven't made these facts up or slanted them in your favor? My suggestion would be to label your studies and who they came from. If one of them is from a government agency, you can include the address so if the reader wanted to they could verify the facts that you offer. I'm not accusing you of doing this but it would only make your paper more believable.

You stated on page two that the SAM review found that consensual acts of sex between two young kids had no mental health effects on them. I whole heartily disagree with this point. Regardless of age and relationship status of the two parties involved someone always gets hurt when a sexual act occurs. If there was a relationship before, it has the potential to be destroyed due to the baggage related to close sexual acts. If one of the parties involved uses it as a one night stand and the other person really liked the other, he or she suffers emotional distress that could be extreme. Also, do you know if the study you used includes guys/girls that have suffered sexual abuse or single parent families? I know many girls who's father has left them and they seek that affection through random hookups and always receive heartache. This continued self abuse has to hurt them mentally. Further more, what is the SAM review? Also on page six you included an excerpt from a study that talked about depression. When I read the excerpt I was confused. "……who were not depressed at baseline and who acquired an STD between wave I and wave II….." Since we didn't do the research for your topic, its necessary for you to explain your sources as I mentioned in the first paragraph.

I received my first taste of sexual education when I was in fifth grade. I knew that what we were learning was something weird and interesting, I remember my teacher giving the permission slip and telling us that if we didn't want to take part in sex ed. we were to be assigned an alternative assignment. Even though I had no idea what I was getting myself into I knew that I didn't want to be the weird kid who was doing the alternative assignment. You mentioned that that sexual education could make kids feel weird and uncomfortable but at the same time if they don't participate in it, they will be ostracized by their fellow students for not participating. I know that if any kid was in high school and their parents said no to sexual education they stood a good chance to be made fun of.

Because I am a strong believer in no sex before marriage its difficult for me to make more thorough points for you to use. I think that sex before marriage causes more problems then it solves and that most people know that condoms are very effective. It is a personal choice and I do believe that giving out sexual education can encourage

people to engage in sexual acts before they are ready and should have more facts to encourage students to participate in sexual acts till marriage or at least until they are older (18yrs+) to limit the amount of emotional trauma they receive which no study can find.

Dear Stephen,

It is apparent that you have a true feeling for what you are writing about, yet your obvious opinions create a lack of credibility. I find myself asking, how can I trust that what the author is saying is more than just opinion? You do not cite your facts about affirmative action—the percentages could easily be made up for the purpose of supporting your argument.

You write about the potential that the lack of the men in professional fields such as medical and aeronautical could have on our nation—and potentially the world. I have to ask—would not the lack of men in such professions be easily filled by women who can do the job just as well? You say, "not to say that women cannot take on this position," but that is exactly what you *are* saying. If a woman were to got to a school for the same study as a man—mechanics for example—wouldn't she be just as qualified for the position? Or does her gender affect her ability to perform?

I have reason to question your information sources—how do you know that men are not being admitted into schools? Where did you find your statistical evidence? Yes, the lack of *people* in collage—and therefore getting an education—may increase the rate of crime, but where do you find the evidence to suggest that men commit the majority of crimes? How does this point relate to your argument?

Without men as political leaders, will we be in a very bad place as you say? What is to say that it wouldn't be a *better* place if the educated women of society were able to make political decisions rather than the men who have been controlling political systems since the beginning? It may well be time for a change as drastic as this one. For example, war after war has been begun and lead by male politicians, yet what have we learned or gained from any of them? Other than a select few, wars have proven to be costly—in dollars and human life—and lacking in beneficial purpose.

Where do you get the idea that men will be so scarce in collages that it would effect the athletic programs? Wouldn't a school not still try to recruit male athletes to fill the spots on their teams? They do not necessarily chose from the people they accept rather than chose from the potential students for their school. Even if you were to say that men are less often accepted into school than women, it is still the desire, or lack there of, for men to apply to and attend school that will create an effect as you suggest.

Also, how does a school benefit from not admitting men into their school? Are you suggesting that it is in the interest of schools to have an all-female student body or a student body dominated by female students? Shouldn't it be their interest to preserve balance in gender in their school? Could it be that women are doing more to be accepted into college and that they are in fact more qualified than men to attend school? Your arguments need further research—they are not credible.

Sincerely,
Leslie