Identifying and Prioritizing Specific Problems in Student Writing

Whenever you're responding to student writing, you confront two limitations. One is your own time; probably your professional and personal life includes a thing or two beyond responding to student papers. The other, more interestingly, is the diminishing rate of return on the investment of your comments. As the "13 Ways" above suggest, comments beyond a few targeted ones tend to blur, especially for writers unable to sort out which have priority. The analogy is corrupt, but think of a patient coming to a doctor's office and the physician putting equal attention on the patient's hang nail, baldness, and heart arrhythmia. That last deserves attention.

Try, then, to identify first the highest level issues with a piece of writing. Generally, these consist of idea development, logic, or clarity. This doesn't mean that you should ignore surface features, but do recognize their place. It doesn't matter if words are misspelled if the student has done completely the wrong assignment, or the paper's argument is vapid or wrong. The following questions might help you identify why papers strike you as strong or weak. You might also develop responses from the grading rubrics we've included below.

A last word: tell the student what he or she is doing well. Praise is a good teaching tool, and it tempers critical comments with the message that you're working to help the student, not just looking to bludgeon.

1. Is the student doing the task assigned? If not, does the task that the student is doing have sufficient merit that you can sanction it?
2. Do errors, carelessness, or presentation so interfere with reading that the student needs to turn in a "clean" copy before your can respond? Is the paper in the proper format? Note: Papers that have this problem need not be marked; they might more effectively be returned, perhaps with a grade reduction.
3. Are there fundamental misreadings of information or ideas? Does the student accurately summarize and represent readings or sources?
4. How effective, appropriate, or ambitious is the focus? Is the thesis or topic
    1. clearly established and maintained throughout?
    2. worth proving or addressing?
    3. susceptible to coverage or demonstration in the situation available?
5. How well does the paper fit its intended audience?
    1. Are the ideas "new" or relevant enough to intended readers?
    2. Does the writing assume the right things of readers—or too much, too little, or the wrong thing? Consider in terms of information, facts, basic assumptions but also beliefs and values?
    3. Is the tone appropriate, or is it pitched too high or low or simply "off?"
6. Does the paper have the right kinds and amounts of evidence for claims?
    1. Are evidence and support present, or are they missing or inadequate?
    2. Does the writer address countering positions or confounding information or alternative interpretations? Or are these slighted or missing?
    3. Are complexities or subtleties treated well?
    4. Does the paper have the right kinds of evidence, suitable to the task and audience?
    5. Does the writer explicitly connect evidence to claims, or does he or she merely deploy it?
7. Is the structure of the paper effective?
    1. Does the introduction provide enough context or clearly signal purpose, without being padded or gratuitous? Is the introduction appropriately engaging?
    2. Is the paper balanced in development? Do important ideas or elements get relatively more attention than less important ones?
    3. Is the organization clear to readers? Is the sequence of parts the most effective one?
    4. Is the conclusion apt and engaging, or is it absent, superfluous, or perfunctory?
8. Is the style of the paper effective?
    1. Are word choices and sentence types appropriate for the audience?
    2. Is the paper free of stigmatized grammar, usage, and punctuation errors?
    3. Is the style appropriately economical and lively? Does the voice of the paper emulate the voice associated with good professional writing in this area?

Example: Part of Student Paper with Marginal, Final Comments, and Rating

Following is a page I excerpted from the middle of a DU freshman paper written in my WRIT 1122 class in winter 2007. The student was analyzing the features of political discourse on YouTube. You'll see my comments (I like to use the comments features of Word), my final statement to the student, and my grading rubric (which I'll discuss in the next section). Note: the purpose of this course is to improve student writing, so by necessity I spend 15 or so hours per week per class responding to student writing, something I certainly wouldn't expect of content area faculty.

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compilations of the best of George W. Bush. It features the classics such as "Fool me once...shame on you..." and "The literacy of our youth ARE appalling." These have been displayed over and over again for the public and are things that Bush will never shake from his reputation because of it.

Comment [DH1]: Nice phrase.

So, whether it be an actor depicting a hypothetical situation that mirrors the concepts of the Bush Administration, or an anthology of our President's greatest moments, the world according to YouTube has come to define our President as an "American Idiot" whose plans do not appear to be credible nor derived from the slightest bit of intelligence. I had originally questioned whether it was only those who disagreed with President Bush that had the motivation to create such video clips, and this may still be true; yet when a collection can be made of things that Mr. Bush himself has said, my inquiry is not validated—when it is, essentially, George W. providing the mockery, or at least the material for it.

Comment [DH2]: Do you see why I suggest this change?

Comment [DH3]: This is an awfully broad claim to make on the basis of two videos. Even if you don't want to take the time here to summarize several more videos (and I don't think you do), you might include something like, "In an hour of scanning YouTube's George Bush videos, I glanced at 25 of them. All were in the same ridiculing vein." That helps your point.

Comment [DH4]: I'd thought you weren't really answering that question; in coming back to it now, though, I wonder if that's really the point you want to make. If so, you'd need to follow quite a different line of thinking.

As we have already recognized, it is that much easier to address an issue through humor. Through humor, and the aid of YouTube.com (among others)—whose motto is "Broadcast Yourself"—the American public is both encouraged and rewarded (with those desirable 15 minutes of fame) for their mockeries of the President of the United States. The availability of a method for self-expression such as YouTube is revolutionizing the Internet and the way by which we obtain our opinion-basing information—the population of America can now both express their opinion and see how others feel about any issue by the simple click of a button. However many displays of personal opinions there are, there are that many more clips of things spoken by the President himself—the opportunity for people to see such stupidity in action, to pause, stop, repeat, laugh, play

Comment [DH5]: True. Did you turn up any positive portrayals or defenses of Bush?

Comment [DH6]: So, you found that there are more videos like the second you describe than like the first? That would be a good point to quantify, even in the approximate fashion I described above.

Final Comment on and Evaluation of "Sarah's" Paper

Sarah, this is a promising topic, as I mentioned when we talked about your partial draft last week. I wish you'd been able to turn in a full draft, as I'd like to have shared more thorough responses earlier. The idea of looking at Bush videos and analyzing them is interesting. The question you pose of what they represent is also interesting, but I don't think you resolve that question (do they represent the American attitude or the inclinations of people who post on YouTube?). You chose two types of videos to tell about in detail: one in which an actor created a scene, the other consisting of a greatest hits compilation. It would be interesting to know which of the types is more prevalent. Even if you're sensibly only going to describe a couple of videos (your audience would be game for a few more), describing how systematically you viewed several more would enhance your piece. The essay takes too long to get into your specific observations. Grounding your analyses more specifically in examples would let readers value your insights more. You should include a works cited page that includes information about how to find the videos.--DH

Rating, According to Project 3 Evaluation Standards

Discussion of specific "artifacts." Clarity and fullness of the examples. Ambition and thoroughness of choices. In the best papers, writers will thoroughly present some well-chosen artifacts (readings, television shows, articles, observations), in a way that is clear and engaging. 0-30 points.
Your score: 20

Quality of the interpretation. Insights generated. Connection of the "artifacts" to the interpretations. In the best papers, writers will go beyond some obvious comments and offer some interpretations that bring to light new insights. Those insights will grow out of the artifacts rather than simply seem to have been brought to the task. Or, the writer may make some familiar points but do so in a way that is refreshing, well-articulated, and specifically illustrated by the examples chosen. 0-30 points.
Your score: 25

Organization and balance of treatment. The best papers will be easy to follow. Their organizations will seem intentional and calculated rather than random. (For example, there will be reasons why some ideas come earlier and others later.) The most significant parts of the paper will receive the most attention and development. 0-15 points

Your score: 10

Style of the paper. The best papers will have engaging openings and closings and will present examples and ideas in a voice and manner that readers will find compelling and interesting. 0-15 points
Your score: 12

Editing. The best papers will be substantially free from errors in grammar, punctuation, usage, format and so on. They will be appropriately documented. 0-10 points
Your score: 6 (fine except for lacking documentation)

> Note: Papers that have extreme problems in any single area may result
> in the overall grade of the entire paper being reduced.

A = 85. B = 70. C = 55. D = 40

Your score: 73