Responding to Early Drafts

Promoting real revision of early drafts

Revision of early drafts should involve re-thinking. We want students to learn that genuine revision is an essential part of the writing process, that a first draft is just the beginning, and not the end, of the writing process. How do we create the circumstances for real revision of early drafts? The authors of *The Elements of Teaching Writing* tell us,

> The circumstances in which we typically assign writing discourage students from revising their work before they turn it in as finished writing. If they view assigned 'drafts' as virtually finished products (like submitted manuscripts), our students will be reluctant to revise those drafts beyond the changes we prescribe. *If we want undergraduates to view revision as a normal, essential part of the writing process, therefore, we must create circumstances in which revision seems normal and necessary.*
> (italics added)   (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 66)

Ask for early, not first drafts

Ask students to submit drafts that have been rethought, not initial drafts. Our comments are more useful when a draft has a discernable structure and argument and when the writer has corrected typos and grammatical errors.

Ask students to submit outlines of their arguments and thesis statements. Doing so encourages students to evaluate and revise their early ideas and organization.

Commenting on early drafts

The nature of the comments we give depends on each student's writing ability and where the student is in the writing and thinking process. **In general, our comments on early drafts should help writers see the strengths and limitations of the argument and structure, as well as fundamental stylistic problems.** Copy-editing or giving detailed direct instructions for change will result in the student making only those changes that you've addressed.

Consider framing **marginal comments** around the effect of the draft on you as a reader, showing how the draft worked for you. Offer open-ended comments, such as "At this point I am beginning to feel lost," or "How does this idea connect to the previous point?" **Leave the resolution of the problems to the writer.**

End comments can describe the draft's significant strengths and weaknesses and state your expectations for the final draft—the problems you expect the writer to solve. Connect the grade on the final draft to the student's meeting these expectations. Thoughtful comments on early drafts can reduce the need for extensive comments on final drafts. Gottschalk and Hjortshoj offer the following suggestions for end comments:

Describe rather than prescribe
Describe the experience of reading the draft
Ask questions
If possible, find the basis for revision in the draft itself
Limit editorial and stylistic changes to examples and brief passages
Don't be shy (be honest)   (70-71)

Editing of early drafts
Editing is useful for instruction on recurring errors. It becomes less useful, and quite time-consuming, when you rewrite full sentences. Rather than mark every error, mark errors in one section, then direct the student to find and correct other errors.

In-class discussion
You might want to use class time to discuss common problems that were present in a set of drafts.

Peer review/writing conferences
Other readers can provide valuable feedback. Consider using in-class peer review or Writing Center conferences.

Resources
Refer students to resources on writing, including the college style sheet, "Essentials of Writing," and to Writing Center materials. Consider requiring students to purchase a writing handbook, such as Diana Hacker's *A Pocket Style Manual*, Bedford/St. Martin's.

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Works Cited
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Gottschalk, Katherine, and Keith Hjortshoj. *The Elements of Teaching Writing*. Boston:
    Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.