

**Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center  
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## **Responding to Written Assignments** by Margie Thickstun

Commenting on student writing can seem overwhelming: this task is something that none of us was trained to do, but that threatens to occupy huge amounts of our professional time. It can also be very frustrating, as some students don't seem to improve despite our most heroic efforts. Having struggled at this task for some time now, I have come up with some guidelines that help me keep my responses within bounds and that seem to produce reasonable results with my students.

### **The Theory**

A good response to a piece of writing involves real communication with a real student, as well as awareness that learning to write well is an ongoing process. I don't believe that successful commenting about writing requires focussing on grammar or knowing technical terms, although identifying some of them, such as passive voice and lack of subordination, can offer insight into the source of a student's difficulties with writing about your subject. I begin with a simple question: "What can I say that will be most helpful?" Remember **triage**? In a disaster, you can't save everyone; in a disastrous paper, you can't realistically fix everything. Most students have the ability to process about three ideas, so I try to identify the most serious but surmountable problems that the student needs to work on. My comments look toward the next writing assignment: "What can I say about the writing in this paper that the student can carry forward either into a revision or to the next assignment?"

### **Where to say what**

I divide my comments into two categories: local, which go in the margins, and global, which go in the end comment. In both places, I focus on organization and argument: does the essay have a clearly articulated (and defensible) thesis statement, as well as clear topic sentences that lead into well-developed paragraphs? Does the writer present adequate evidence to support claims and is that evidence used accurately? Does the writer provide clear transitions between the parts of the argument?

In the end comment, I also discuss stylistic problems that seriously impair ability to communicate, such as passive voice and impersonal constructions that obscure who is doing what to whom, lack of subordinating conjunctions to indicate the relation between ideas at the sentence level, and failure to provide introductory and summary comments to guide my understanding of quoted material.

I identify grammatical errors in the margins of the paper, but I refer to them in the end comment only if a particular error recurs or if the quantity of local errors suggests either a serious problem or lack of proofreading. In the latter case, I might ask whether the student would like to see me for extra help on grammar. (You could suggest that the student go to the

Writing Center.) Often such a suggestion will be enough to chasten the student into better proofreading, whereas a student with real deficiencies will probably seek help.

### **General Points**

Students often have difficulty accepting that the purpose of an essay or research paper is to communicate, rather than to impress through obfuscation: instead of explaining their ideas, they sit down to “commit acts of literature” (Source?). Here are some useful points to make to students who seem to have serious problems expressing themselves on paper:

- 1) Write for a real audience, such as members of the class.
- 2) Explain the argument to a friend or writing tutor and have that person take “dictation,” because often what you say to a real audience will be clearer than what you write down.
- 3) After you have written the first complete draft, try to make an outline of the argument. Do your topic sentences express the main point of each paragraph? Have you presented the argument in the most logical order? Have you explained the transitions?
- 4) Use simple, accurate language--words you are sure of.

Students who write well often exhibit a different kind of problem: they use elegant expression and false transitions to mask lack of organization. In these cases, suggest that the student outline the argument after completing the first draft to be sure that the paper proceeds in a logical order. The writing tutors can be particularly helpful at this exercise.