Responding to Writing: Contexts and Strategies

Response to student writing is a time-intensive activity. Consider the following scenarios.

Scenario 1: 8-10 page papers x 45 minutes for a careful reading and detailed response.
- 30 students—22.5 hours of response time (FT=0.56 weeks; 1/4FT=2.25 weeks)
- 60 students—45 hours of response time (FT=1.12 weeks; 1/4FT=4.5 weeks)
- 90 students—67.5 hours of response time (FT=1.68 weeks; 1/4FT=6.75 weeks)
- 120 students—90 hours (FT=2.25 weeks; 1/4FT=9 weeks)

Scenario 2: 1-page paper x 4 minutes for a quick read and simple evaluation
- 30 students—2 hours of response time (FT=0.05 weeks; 1/4FT=0.2 weeks)
- 60 students—4 hours of response time (FT=0.1 weeks; 1/4FT=0.4 weeks)
- 90 students—6 hours (FT=0.15 weeks; 1/4FT=0.6 weeks)
- 120 students—8 hours (FT=0.2 weeks; 1/4FT=0.8 weeks)

How you relate the trade-offs among length of paper, number of students, and type of response will probably be important in determining the success of your writing assignments. Giving assignments that take more time than you have will usually lead either to less than ideal response or to overwork. One key for making these decisions is to align your goals, the tasks, and the responses.

Here are a few examples.

Example 1: In lab classes and some other classes there may be a repeated writing task, where one of the goals is to teach students certain genres of writing as well as certain ways of thinking and presenting that thinking (e.g., ways of using evidence). For such classes, it may be useful to have a rolling focus of response (a specific section, for example) for each assignment. Thus, with a laboratory report, the first week might focus on writing the methodology section, the next on presenting results, the next on tables and graphs, and so on. Response then could focus on that section, with the rest of the paper perhaps simply evaluated with a primary trait scale (one that describes specific features for the task and rates them).
Example 2: Many instructors use informal in-class writing for a specific set of goals: encouraging attendance, motivating students to keep up with readings, promoting classroom discussion, making students active participants in the lessons, and monitoring students’ understanding of material to situate teaching. With these goals, the key is to making the writing work in the classroom and making sure the students see the value of the writing. Students might get minimal evaluations (check or check minus). These kinds of activities, however, take planning and generally need to be done routinely to be effective.

Example 3: Sometimes you may want students to write a longer paper based on library resources and/or some other type of data (observations, interviews, etc.). The goals of these activities may be to help students develop their written arguments, their style of writing, their clarity, their understanding of certain material, and their skills at certain types of inquiry. Response to students writing is likely to be effective only if students take it up and use it in a subsequent task (either another draft of the paper or some type of reworking of it, such as shifting from a research paper for the instructor to a web site for the public). There are a number of strategies for making the best use of resources. Peer or self-response sheets (see attached) that focus student attention on your key concerns may be an efficient form of response (and one that begins to shift evaluation from you to the students, a key goal). Class discussions about the paper can support students’ understanding of the task and their development of ideas. Oral reports before the paper is due may allow for feedback to students. In-progress reports may allow you to confirm or redirect students as they work through the process. A writer’s memo about the paper from the student may assist you in reading and responding to students. If you do choose to make a rich response to first drafts and require second drafts, you may ask students to annotate your response, explaining how and why they used it (or why they didn’t use it) in their revisions.
Sample response sheet: Peer evaluation

Name of writer:
Name of responder:
Date of response:
Exchange drafts of your papers on Friday. Read the draft and answer the questions below. You will have about 15 minutes in class to discuss your responses.

1) Is the purpose of the experiment clear to you? State it.

2) Does the report match the scientific format? Are all sections present? List them. Is the material in each section appropriate for that section? Note points you're not sure about.

3) Is the methodology clear to you? Briefly summarize it. If you have any questions, what are they?

4) Are the results clearly presented? Briefly summarize them. If you have questions or are confused on any points, what are they?

5) Does the discussion follow from the results and the stated purpose of the experiment? Briefly summarize it. If you have questions or are confused on any points, what are they?

6) Overall, did you find the paper interesting and enjoyable to read? Explain.

Suggestions: If you were writing this paper, what would you do next to improve it?

Writer's reflections  (After discussing the response, the writer should respond fully to the following sentence. This response sheet should be turned in with your paper.) Considering the written comments and the in-class discussion, I think I should take the following steps to complete the final draft of this paper. (Explain your answer.)
Response Sheet

Self-evaluation of your proposal

1) Have you identified the purpose of your research and who would be an interested audience for it? Please state these briefly.

2) What are the key terms involved in your research? How have you defined them operationally?

3) Does your proposal address the following crucial questions on the experimental design? (Answer the questions briefly as you go along.)

   • How did you select the measures? Do they fit the purpose of the experiment?

   • How did you select groups? Do your groups only differ on variables of interest to your experiment?

   • How will you sample from your groups? What procedure will you use for randomization?

   • What statistics will you use? Is your sample size adequate? (If n < 10, it is almost certainly not adequate.)

   • Is your methodology presented in sufficient detail that it could be replicated? (You might ask a classmate or friend to read it over before you answer this question.)
Sample instructions for a cover memo

When you turn in your final paper, please attach a one-page cover memo addressed to me that answers the following questions and raises any other issues you feel need to be brought up.

1) Overall, how do you feel about this paper? What part of the paper do you feel most confident in?

2) Briefly describe key points in the process of doing this paper (i.e., how and why you chose the topic you did, what parts of the writing process you spent the most time on, any major changes in your plans during the process, how your ideas developed and hopefully improved, and any particular problems you faced).

3) If you could start this assignment over or had further time to develop it, what would you do to improve it?

4) What issues are you particularly interested in having me respond to?