

Responding to Classmates' Writing: Best Practices

In courses that involve writing, we are often asked to comment and critique others' work. You may be asked to do so as part of a lesson plan or as a means of improving drafts in the revision process, yet many of us have little explicit instruction regarding how we should go about the process. This handout is designed to give you some helpful suggestions for how to be an effective reviewer of others' work. You can use these tips in any class, and with any writing.

- **You do not have to be an expert to comment expertly.**

In many instances, you will be asked to comment on writing that is rather foreign to you. This might be because it is a topic that you have not researched fully, it uses foreign sources, or is an exposition of someone's experiences or opinions. That's okay. Your job is not necessarily to have all the answers, but to have your own questions. When you approach someone else's writing, try to express the questions that you have about the text. For example, if you are not certain of how a paragraph relates to the rest of the text, write this (i.e. "How does this paragraph relate?") Similarly, if there are questions to which you feel you should know the answer but don't, it is perfectly fine to include these (i.e. "Is this block quote format?" or "Which source does this come from exactly?"). Most of the time, when you have a question about the text, it is because the text itself is unclear. And since it is the obligation of the writer to deliver an easily-interpreted text, these are exactly the questions you should ask: You are always an expert regarding your experience as a reader.

- **Try commenting in the margins, not in-text.**

Often, when asked to comment on others' writing, we resort to line-editing details. While copyediting is extremely important in final drafts, it can often inhibit us in the earlier stages of revision. For example, if you wanted feedback on the overall organization and clarity of a final paper but received a critiqued draft which only commented on misspellings, this would give you little help in strategizing your next revision. One way to avoid this is to ask question in the margins. Try coming up with a single question you have about each paragraph and express it in the margins; taking this approach will help you to be more critical of the "higher order" problems in the text, the kinds of issues that have a disproportionate impact on the final draft. Here are some examples of questions you could ask in the margins:

- What is the function of this paragraph? Should it have a more prominent claim?
- In other paragraphs, you have evidence from the source text, but not here. Why?
- Who is the author of this quote?
- This seems like the same content as paragraph 8; should they be combined/linked?
- How does this fit within the focus you defined in the intro?

- **Avoid being overly complimentary.**

The most frustrating experience as a writer is to receive feedback that is so positive that it is impossible to implement in the next draft. Comments like “Good work,” “This is really interesting,” or “I like it” do not give the writer a toehold that they can use for revision. Being critical is not the same as being mean; you can always find something to comment on, regardless of the quality of the draft. If you are having trouble coming up with helpful suggestions for improvement, consider looking at the following:

Proportion. If a paper has multiple points, it has multiple sections. It is generally a good idea to develop these in a logical, proportionate manner. Are there sections of the text that are over-developed and others that are scrawny? Is evidence used in some spots but not others? Does most of the paper rely on paraphrase while one section has a monstrous block quote? Ask the writer about this in the margins.

Parallelism. Strong papers will be developed consistently and with an eye towards consistency. If an author has used evidence (sources, description, etc.) extensively to back claims in most of the paper, but it is suddenly lacking, ask the writer for their motivation. If an author has been used extensively throughout the text to back claims but is suddenly replaced by a different author, feel free to comment on this. (You don’t have to know why, just note that it is a trend.)

Progression. Often, writers will start out on one path and veer onto another. These are some of the hardest issues to diagnose in our own writing. If you are reading a draft that seems to change tack over the course of several pages, ask the writer why this is. If the paper has an introduction that includes a preview of the paper’s progression (“*I will argue X based on 1, 2, and 3.*”) double check that this is in fact the order and content contained in the paper.

Still stuck? Try using this rubric to diagnose issues for the next revision:

	Not at all		Very			Which Paragraph?
Thesis/claim is clear	1	2	3	4	5	
Progression is logical	1	2	3	4	5	
Evidence is consistent	1	2	3	4	5	
Sources are used well	1	2	3	4	5	
Format is accurate	1	2	3	4	5	
Etc.						