

Ten Observations and Suggestions

When you ask students to respond to each other's work, you'll need to provide them with a useful set of directions, and those directions will always be specific to your writing assignment.

While the observations and suggestions below may not be directly transferable to your course, they may still prove useful as you figure out specific directions for your students and when you respond to student work.

Address the big picture first, nit-pick later.

As writers revise, intellectual clarity and accuracy is more crucial than error-free writing. Proofreading is important, but it comes last in the process.

Mirror content.

Writers need to know what readers understand. "When I read this section, it tells me that..."

Comment on the writing, not on the writer.

Thus "you've done a good job introducing this topic" becomes "this introduction clearly tells me what's going to follow it."

"You're being contradictory here" becomes "these two paragraphs look contradictory to me."

Identify strengths.

"This example really supports that assertion." "Yes." "Nice phrasing."

Identify confusions by asking questions.

"This sentence loses me. How do your readers get from the data to this conclusion?"

"Does this sentence mean _____ or does it mean _____?"

"This seems like a big jump. Has something been left out?"

Be supportive. Assume the writer wants to follow the assignment and wants to be clear (even if this doesn't seem immediately obvious).

Instead of “this isn't what was assigned,” try “I'm not sure where this is headed” or “I would like a clearer connection to what was assigned.”

Respond to errors minimally. If you must respond to individual errors, don't let those responses overpower content-centered responses.

Multiple comments on sentence-level errors give students the message that if they only fix those surface errors, then they'll get good grades. In other words, noting an error risks sending the message that the sentence is otherwise clear, lucid, elegant, and intellectually accurate and complete.

Do make some comment about the general level of polish which the draft reflects.

“As I read along, I did see a few spelling errors”

“This draft is still pretty rough and needs to be proofread carefully before it's handed in.”

Suggest a next useful step in the process. Use your own writing experience as a possible model.

“I'd work first on finding support for the assertion on page 2.”

“When I'm having trouble organizing something, I'll try to outline it. Please try that and let know how it works for you.”

Summarize your response with a sentence that talks about your overall sense of the draft, and/or use a sentence to repeat your most significant response.

“A solid introduction and many nice phrasings. That middle section still leaves me confused, and I recommend that you ____.”