

# Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip

## Prioritizing Responses to Student Writing



**Rationale:** We do not have time to comment on everything; research shows that overwhelming students with comments is counterproductive. Alternatively, focused feedback provides **strategic**, **substantive**, and **specific comments** to guide the writer's revision efforts.

### How to prioritize responses:

#### *Be strategic in your approach*

- Review the assignment to remind yourself of the most heavily weighted criteria.
- Skim all drafts to detect common problems. If you notice a common issue in many drafts, avoid writing the same comment on those drafts, and instead address the issue briefly in class.
- Skim the entire draft before you begin to offer written comments—to assess the overall quality, to identify patterns, and ultimately, to save time. Mark passages for possible comments with a pencil or typed symbol, which you can remove later.
- Limit your comments to two or three major issues relative to the paper's content and structure.
- Focus primarily on higher-order concerns such as organization, substance, and clarity of ideas/argument (Bean, 2011).

#### *Offer substantive comments*

- Liberate yourself from correcting every grammar, spelling, or punctuation error. Instead, identify error patterns, and comment only on those patterns that interfere with reader comprehension.
- Point out what worked well, and why it did. ("The executive summary was appropriately concise, and conveyed clearly the business plan's structure and content.")

#### *Be specific*

- Name the most important revision task(s). ("The counterarguments need to be addressed more fully.")
- Express your comments in complete sentences; student writers often misinterpret or misunderstand single-word or phrasal comments. Although a complete sentence can take longer to write than a cryptic word or phrase, being strategic means that you are making fewer comments.
- Ask specific questions to prompt revision. ("I'm not sure how this example supports the claim. Can you add detail here, to clarify the quality of the evidence?")

Prioritize responses to manage the paper load; use responses to prompt revision rather than to simply justify grades.

### Learn more:

- To read a strategically commented-upon sample draft, visit <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/faculty/methods/responding.shtml>; read the entire draft at <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/faculty/methods/examples/response.shtml>
- Student Writing Support information for instructors: <http://writing.umn.edu/sws/instructors.html>
- Quick Tips: <http://writing.umn.edu/sws/quickhelp/index.html>
- Bean, J. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**Questions?** Visit us online at <http://writing.umn.edu/tww/index.html>

**Further support:** Contact a member of the WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) team for a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation: <http://z.umn.edu/twwconsultation>

*Our purpose is to provide practical strategies for teaching with writing. Our goal: to offer timely and pragmatic support to faculty members and instructors who teach with writing in undergraduate and graduate courses in all disciplinary areas.*