GRADING STRATEGIES

Responding Strategies: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

Good comments help writers not only understand their problems with a specific text but also develop strategies and a critical approach that can be used in future writing situations. Comments can be placed on the margin or at the end. Since there is no one set formula for these types of comments, each instructor needs to articulate a conscious rationale and philosophy for commenting in the way he or she does. In other words, many different types of comments can work as long as you understand why you comment in the way you do and how you believe these comments will help students in the future.

Marginal vs. End Comments

Marginal comments refer to those you write either in the margins or directly in the text of a paper, whereas an end comment refers to the usually more lengthy comment at the end of the work. The physical positioning of each type of comment allows you to provide different types of feedback. That is, marginal comments are more suited to feedback on specific sections of the text, while end comments are usually saved for more global concerns affecting the entire essay. Below are characteristics of good marginal comments.

Responding as a Reader:

Use comments that reflect your experience as a reader, not necessarily as a teacher. In other words, your primary concern is readability, not evaluating.

Examples:

- "You do a great job in this section of explaining hybridization in terms your audience will understand. Well done!"
- "I get a little lost right now. Tell how this information relates to what you just said about pesticide usage."
- "Here you seem to think it's important for the firm to invest in expansion and remodeling instead of securities. Explain why."

Filling Gaps:

To help students revise and develop a critical sense, comments ask for further exploration and can refer to content, organization, or even grammar and word choice.

Examples:
- "The paper talks about rural societies on the last page and brings them up again here. If there is a reason for organizing it this way, make that reason more explicit for the reader."
- "Tell why."
- "Tell how you think this youth development program should be implemented and who would oversee it."

Note:

All of the comments above can also be worded as questions. If overused or not worded carefully, however, questions can be interpreted as belittling (especially questions to which the writer surely knows the answer but failed to include it). Careful attention to tone can avoid this.

Noting Patterns:

Although our first tendency as graders is to mark every error we see, this is overwhelming for the writer. It is more helpful to note patterns in organization or grammar. It is usually best to explain an error the first time it occurs and merely to note its recurrence at other points in the paper. Students should know that you are not their proofreader and don't mark every error.

Examples:
- "Here 'were,' not 'was,' is the correct form because your subject, 'products,' is plural. Look for other times where I've underlined

your verbs. "
- "Here there are two sentences joined by 'however.' When this occurs, you need a semicolon before the however and a comma after it. Look for other instances of this."

End Comments:
Characteristics of good end comments include the following:

- Positive Comments - First, identify the paper's strengths.
- Priorities - Do not try to comment on everything negative. Limit your criticisms to a few key concerns so students aren't overwhelmed. Because your goal here is to give students enough guidance to apply their learning to revising both this paper and other papers they write.
- Specific Suggestions - Offer suggestions on how the student might address the concerns mentioned above.
- Notation of Patterns: Note patterns here if you have not already done so in the margins.
- Suggestions about Resources: Point out resources the student can refer to and/or invite him/her to come and see you if possible.

Examples:
- STRENGTHS: Good work, Jim. You have gathered together a significant amount of evidence to show readers that nuclear energy can be much safer than they have been led to believe. Also, you have done a fine job of acknowledging the opposing arguments and of providing counter arguments in most cases. Overall, a fine essay—well organized, well researched, and thorough in many aspects.

- AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT: Readers will need additional explanation or evidence in certain sections of the paper, such as on (see marginal comments) p. 2, 4, and 5. Development of these sections would further assuage the common fears associated with nuclear energy production and storage. Overall, Jim, this is a fine essay, the strongest you've written all semester. Good work!

Positive Responding Strategies ("THE GOOD")

Good comments usually include the following characteristics:
- A reflective and clear rationale for order and content of comments
- A positive orientation (i.e., a balance between advice and positive feedback)
- A style that directly addresses the writing rather than the writer (e.g., "the paper fails to connect short and long term goals," rather than "you forgot to connect short and long term goals.")
- A focus not on what is "wrong" but on what readers need for the paper to be effective (e.g.,"readers need more supporting evidence for this claim.")

Negative Responding Strategies (The Bad And The Ugly)

Negative responding strategies offer little concrete direction for the writer and may exist simply to justify a grade. Characteristics of Negative Responding include the following:

- Vagueness
- A focus only on surface-level features of writing (i.e., grammar, syntax)
- A lack of advice for improvement
- Unexplained coding schemes (e.g., "awk," "ww," "frag")
- A tendency to mark every error
- Knee-jerk reactions to annoying features (e.g., typos)
- A lack of feedback on good papers
- A sarcastic or demeaning tone

Examples:
- "There are way too many spelling mistakes in this paper."
- "You need more analysis."
- "Very good. A."
- "This isn't even English. You need to learn grammar."