**Brief Guide on responding to student writing**

**Introduction**

There is an extensive body of research on the purposes of feedback on student writing, how students receive feedback and the differences between student and lecturer and/or tutor perceptions of what might constitute effective feedback (see Ferris et al, 2013, Rolfe, 2011, Price et al, 2010, Hounsell, 2007, Hyland & Hyland, 2006). It is the last issue viz. differences in perceptions between the main parties, that can impact the most significantly on students’ engagement with feedback, the way in which lecturers and tutors treat student writing more generally, and by implication, student achievement. Central to the challenge of responding to student writing, therefore, accentuated by the student uprisings of 2015/2016 and ongoing calls for institutional de-coloniality and the democratisation of higher education, lie issues of equity, social justice and the imperative to examine our teaching and learning practices anew. This brief guide aims to enable lecturers to (re)consider their role (and that of their tutors) as ‘writing respondents’ in the context of their disciplines and a changing environment.

The theoretical perspective that underpins this guide is that writing is a ‘social practice’, hence value laden, never neutral, and always needing to be understood as a contextualised practice. Our teaching practices can be understood in the same. This is important for recognising that the choices we make about what we ask our students to write, and how we respond to their writing (and how we induct our tutors into becoming ‘writing respondents’), is inherently ‘subjective’ even when academic practices and conventions are presented as ‘natural and obvious by those for whom they [have become] natural and obvious’ (van Heerden, ibid: 4).

To be alert to previously perhaps unconsidered features of our ‘ways of doing and being’, van Heerden et al (2016:2) recommend ‘considering the pedagogic purpose of feedback anew’. In concert with Lange (2017:42) who says, ‘…university education, especially at undergraduate level, is to a very large extent an exercise to make transparent the ‘black box’ of knowledge construction within the disciplines’, van Heerden et al (ibid) make the point that ‘central to a reconsideration of the pedagogical role of feedback is the disciplinary knowledge that students are reading and writing about, and how this knowledge works to shape … what kinds of writing and meaning-making are recognised as valid, and for how valid knowledge can and should be written about’.

It is within the above frameworks that this guide has been revised and developed.

**What are your students writing and why?**

Written tasks and assignments are still the main way in which students are assessed in higher education, and ‘the essay’, though variously interpreted, remains the dominant genre. Many first year students though are seldom equipped to cope with the demands of writing in the university. This can apply to both students from disadvantaged and advantaged schooling backgrounds. Not only are they trying to absorb and understand the disciplinary content but they are also required to learn the academic literacies of each discipline in which they are studying.

Research has shown that teaching *about* writing in a decontextualised way is not as effective as helping students with their writing as part of the mainstream courses in which they are a studying.  Consider the following which endorses the views of both Lange (2017) and van Heerden et al (2016) above:

Each discipline has unique ways of asking questions and solving problems. Similarly, each discipline has unique expectations for the types of claims that are made and the way those claims are supported. These differences play out in the ways that texts are written and in the demands those texts place on the readers. For these reasons, we can say that each discipline has its own discourse community, a shared way of using language and constructing knowledge (Rainer & Moje, 2012:73).

So before we can talk about the ‘how’ of responding, it is necessary to talk about the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of the writing your students are doing, as a critical function of feedback/ responding to students’ writing is to induct them into the ‘institutional practices of mystery’ as Lillis (2001:76) names them The very important role of the discipline expert, therefore, i.e. the lecturer or the ‘knowledgeable insider’, is to ‘make tacit disciplinary academic practices and expectations more explicit’ (van Heerden et al, ibid. ) *through their teaching*. In this context, ensuring that all the writing students do is discipline-related, and relevant and meaningful to students, immediately allows for authentic, purposeful responding.

**Writing as a process: Adopting a drafting approach**

The majority of undergraduate students (particularly) approach a writing task with one aim in mind which is ‘to get it done’. As a consequence, little time is given to planning, trying out our ideas, drafting more than one copy, self-editing and so on. So while many lecturers have experienced the sense that students pay little attention to comments on marked assignments, it is also true to say that many lecturers do not build a drafting process into significant assignments. Were they to do this, the research shows that students pay far more attention to comments on written work that is in progress, rather than comments on a final draft (Flower 1979; Paxton 1994).  Providing developmental and constructive feedback from trained writing respondents, tutors or lecturers allows students to use this feedback to redraft their written work, before handing it in to the lecturer for formal assessment.

The drafting-responding process is compatible with an outcomes-based approach to assessment in that:

* it encourages continuous assessment,
* assessment criteria are made explicit,
* students are given feedback on their writing,
* assessment is used for learning.

Potentially there are five main ways in which student writers may benefit from the process, all in keeping with the underpinning premises of this guide indicated above viz.:

* They could be helped to understand how to construct knowledge and what counts as knowledge in specific disciplines (‘domain content’),
* By having the discourse conventions of extended/ ‘essay’ writing in general and of specific disciplines made more explicit to them, they may be able to express their knowledge in ways more ‘appropriate’ to the university and disciplinary culture (‘rhetorical processes’).
* They will be encouraged to view writing as a process; as a tool for clarifying and extending thought rather than just a product.
* Through the comments, students will be made more aware of and understand better the criteria which are used to assess their writing.
* Ultimately it is hoped that the process will lead students towards becoming critical readers of their own writing. Peer assessment can contribute to this proficiency too.

**Responding to student writing: A focus on qualitative feedback only**

Anyone who gives feedback on student writing can clearly be described as a ‘writing respondent’. However, a distinction can be made between a writing respondent who gives qualitative feedback only, and one who responds both qualitatively and quantitatively. In the latter case, this kind of respondent is often (though not always) giving the writer summative judgements on his/her work and in most cases awarding marks or a grade too. If it is a ‘pure’ summative situation, the absence of qualitative comment is likely to be because the marks allocated are going towards a term or examination final mark and the students will not see that work again.

Here, we consider the role of a respondent giving qualitative feedback only, be they a lecturer or a student-tutor, in a continuous assessment, formative learning context. This respondent’s role is to provide comments always with a view to how the writer can use these in revising his/her writing – and integrating this new awareness in the next piece of writing.  For this reason, giving this kind of feedback is often referred to as ‘feeding it forward’.

Revision here refers to the process of reformulating ideas and focusing on the meanings expressed in the writing. This is *not* editing which refers to checking grammar, spelling and punctuation and which should only be done at the *end* of the drafting process.  Research shows that it is essential for writers first to concentrate on revision and when they feel they have expressed their understandings clearly, etc. only then should they concentrate on editing their writing.  The respondent’s task is thus to develop, help and support students to clarify their understanding of concepts, to teach ‘through conversation’ in the text, how knowledge is constructed and to express it as clearly and coherently as possible and in a way which is appropriate for a specific discipline.

In real world conversations speakers get clues from one another as to whether their meanings have been understood.  In writing, a writer has to be aware of the needs of his/her reader by, for example, providing sufficient context for the reader to understand something that is being referred to.  A respondent can, through the comments she makes, provide writers with a sense of *audience* through engaging in a written dialogue with them.  Comments can help writers to consider their writing from a reader’s point of view and also help the writer to establish the ‘appropriate’ relationship with his/her reader.

**Some principles to think about when responding to students’ writing**

Depending on the needs/level of your students and the issue being addressed there are essentially two ways of responding.

* The first is by asking *questions* in the body of text.  The idea is to give the writer a sense of taking part in a dialogue with the reader as indicated above; of negotiating meaning with the reader and also to direct the writer to problem areas in his/her writing without telling him/her what to do but encouraging him/her to formulate ideas for him/herself.  (See Appendix 1 for examples of the types of questions you could ask).  The questioning format is generally more tentative and allows students to disagree with the respondent and retain ownership of their writing.
* The second way of responding is by providing *explicit and direct comments* so that the student knows exactly what is required.   Comments should, where possible, provide writers with clear and specific suggestions for revising text.
* It may be beneficial to use a combination of the two types of responses described above but it is important that they appear *in the body of the text*.  Successful comments are both local (i.e. target a specific statement, passage or point in the text) as well as global (i.e. those that give overviews of the text and that give cohesion to local comments).  A clear relationship between in-text and summative end comments is crucial.  For example, “*Zoliswa, as you read through your essay, I want you to note that all my questions are asking you to work on one important aspect of writing:  make connections between your assertions about … and the relationship of that connection to … “.*
* Prioritise issues in a piece of writing.  Students can seldom benefit from criticism of more than two or three problems.  Therefore, the most crucial decision in commenting is *which* problems to focus on and that decision can’t be made until the whole essay has been read.  As a general rule focus first on the *meaning* which the writer is trying to express.
* Comments should be constructive rather than destructive. Provide positive feedback:  students don’t always know what they do well.  The point of the drafting-responding process is to enhance, not damage, student motivation.  One way of providing positive feedback is through giving “descriptive or observational feedback”.  This will also help students to develop a metacognitive understanding of the writing (and thinking) processes they have used.  For example, “*In this paragraph you have provided a good argument by giving convincing evidence for your opening statement”.*
* Try to avoid an impersonal “God/truth voice” in your comments, e.g. “*Unconvincing for me*” rather than “*Unconvincing*”. (Even the main ideas in any discipline are arguable).
* An effective response is addressed as a response *to the writer*; we are responding to a person, not correcting a paper.  Using the person’s name may help the respondent to focus on the writer.
* Feedback shouldn’t consist simply of scratching out the terms the student has used incorrectly, and superimposing more appropriate ones – this often serves to confuse the student.
* Feedback in the form of “*What*?”; “*What does this mean*?”; “*This makes no sense*”, is not helpful.  It might be more useful to summarise what you think the student means.
* Try to avoid using unfamiliar jargon or vocabulary in comments.  For example, a student my not understand a comment like *“Your argument lacks cohesion”; “Your argument is polemic”.*
* Respondents should resist taking over a student’s writing**.**
* Avoid giving marks for drafts.
* Try to complete the process as rapidly as possible so that students don’t lose interest.

**Aspects of writing which could be addressed by a respondent**

To reiterate, the main focus of feedback should be on the *meanings* being expressed by the writer.  Once the writer has expressed his/her understanding of the concepts under discussion in the writing, then she can work on the more superficial aspects of editing such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc. Having said that though, it is clear that it is impossible to separate content and form; to separate *what* is being said from *how* it is being said.  Students are, to a large extent, assessed on the extent to which they have acquired the discourses of the disciplines in which they are writing.  So, part of the respondent’s role is to make explicit to students the often implicit/ tacit ‘rules and conventions’ of the discipline.

For conventional academic writing, this would include things like, feedback on:

* The *structure* of their essays.  For example, introductions, conclusions, clear links between ideas, etc.
* The use of *cohesive devices* (i.e. signposts throughout the text, telling the readers where they have been in the text and where they are going).
* How to *argue* more effectively in academic essays.
* How to provide *evidence* for claims /assumptions made in their writing.  Feedback in terms of referencing should focus on fundamental questions of when to draw on the literature, when to quote and when not to, and clarification of what is considered plagiarism, and why, rather than the mechanical aspects of referencing.
* *Voices.* Feedback could be used to encourage students to include their own voices (where it is appropriate) or to include the voices (viewpoints) of others.  The way in which the issue of ‘voices’ is dealt with in an essay will depend to large extent on the essay topic and the discipline in question.  Generally writers need to be encouraged to maintain a balance between allowing their voices to intrude into the academic essay and showing critical engagement with the theories or issues being addressed in the essay.
* *Explicitness*.  Feedback could be used to remind writers that it is necessary to provide an explicit and clear *context* for the ideas which they present*.* For example, it is not appropriate to start an essay with “This is a very important topic.”
* *Positioning* the reader.  Generally in academic writing it is necessary for writers to be clear about whose opinion is being expressed and not to assume general agreement.  For example, saying things like “everyone will agree…” is not usually acceptable.
* *Tentativeness.*In many cases, in academic writing it is inappropriate to present things as absolute facts.  It is more appropriate to state things in a tentative way, for example, “It seems that…” rather than stating something as fact.

**Other ways of providing feedback**

Although the best option for student advancement in knowledge acquisition and the mastery of discipline-specific discourses, it is not always possible for lecturers or tutors to give students feedback on their drafts.  Importantly, however, most of the suggestions above can be applied to final versions as well.  At the very least students will have an idea of why they obtained the marks they did, the more conscientious students may be able to transfer ideas from comments to another essay, and you will be able to justify your mark choices if and/or when you are challenged by students to do so.

Another way in which students may be given the criteria for assessment and feedback is through the use of *feedback sheets*.  These can either be generic (e.g. used for all extended writing/ ‘essays’ in a department) or they can be designed especially for a particular assignment.

Students can be taught to give one another feedback on assignments.  For *peer feedback* to be most successful, especially with younger students, it is useful to provide them with a checklist.  Once again, the checklist and strategies provided as exemplars in Appendix 2.

To further encourage students to become critical readers of their own writing, they could be given a *self-assessment* and *self-editing* sheets which they have to complete and hand in with their essays. Exemplars of these are provided in Appendix 3.

Finally, there is the use of technology to enhance the effectiveness of feedback to students. Computer, audio and video technology have been available for a long time but a fairly limited use has been made of them, particularly to allow for student voices to be heard in relation to feedback (van der Kleij et al, 2017: 1095). For lecturers at Rhodes University keen to engage with new methods of feedback which they themselves have not yet tried, the time is now!

**Conclusion**

This guide has attempted to provide lecturers and tutors with some ideas of ways in which to ensure that the written assignments they assign to their students take cognisance of their transformative potential, are used to encourage students to *learn* more about their disciplines as well as how to write in their disciplines.  CHERTL staff members are available to run training workshops on responding to students’ writing with lecturers and/or tutors.

Please contact CHERTL for further information at [CHERTL-admin@ru.ac.za](mailto:adc-admin@ru.ac.za) or on 8171/3.

**Appendix 1**

**Questions you can ask**

1. **Examples of the types of questions – related to clarifying meaning, and pointing to issues linked to logic and structure - you could ask in the body of the text[[1]](#footnote-1):**

* Can you provide evidence for this assumption? Can you see that without evidence it becomes just ‘your opinion’?
* Has this been proved or is it something which you assume to be true?
* Have you read what ... says about this?
* What about ...’s point of view?
* Can you give an example of this? It would strengthen your argument if you could.
* What does this example show about ... (a specific theory/ experiment)?
* How does this link to what you have just said? Try and make your links clearer for your reader.
* How is this relevant to the argument you posed in paragraph 1?
* Can you link this idea more directly to your topic?
* How can this be applied in ... (the workplace)?
* You have *described* the situation. Now can you *explain* or *analyse* why...?
* What is *your* view of the relevance of all these different ‘voices’ from ‘the literature’? So far you have only used quotes/ citations.
* How does this relate to the specific case which you have mentioned? I can’t see the link.

1. **Examples of comments and questions which target *and teach* language usage which often impacts on meaning, logic and structure:**

* Who is ‘they/ he/ it/ she’ here? I can’t work it out. Can you make it clearer for me?
* You start this paragraph with a strong topic sentence but only sentence/s ... (2/3/4) are linked to this topic. Can you see that?
* Can you try to vary your use of words so that it makes *reading* your work more interesting?
* Remember, the connector ‘however’ in English, indicates *a change* in ‘direction’ of what is being said. Perhaps you mean ‘therefore’? (This type of comment can be used for all incorrect use of connectors).
* You have written this sentence as a statement of fact (e.g. ‘Psychology is an essential subject for all first year university Humanities students to take’) when it is actually *an opinion* as you provide no evidence for it. It is the words ‘is’ and ‘all’ that are the problem here.
* When you cite a source with any year date, you use the Simple Present Tense, not the Simple Past Tense *unless* you specify a particular historical period.
* You keep spelling the word ... like this, but it is actually spelt like this.... Please correct it all the way through.
* There is no relationship between the end of this paragraph and the beginning of the next. Can you think of a ‘transitional statement’ that will lead your reader from one to the other?
* There is no relationship between this sentence and the one that follows/ comes before it. Can you put that right? / Perhaps if you said....?

**Appendix 2**

**Peer editing**

**2a.** **Peer editing checklist**

What is the main idea in each paragraph?

1. Is it clearly stated?
2. Is it properly supported with evidence from the theorist’s writings?
3. Does the paragraph link well with the previous paragraph and the next paragraph?
4. Is there a clear thread of argument running through the writing?

**2b**. **Peer editing process**

Have students go over their writing and highlight (identify) the claim, evidence, reasoning and counter argument all in different colour. If possible, have the students copy and paste their writing into a Google doc and they can highlight right there. If they are using hard copies just try and use different colours so they can distinguish each component. Later on in the year you can have the other peer find all the components when you start put have the original writer highlight.

1. Have students switch with the another person and have the peer read through and see if they agree with all of the checked or highlighted components and make any comments or changes they feel are needed. Have them only focus on content of the writing first. Alternately, you can focus on a specific component, such as evidence or reasoning.
2. After editing, have them go back and focus on conventions, such as basic proofreading to improve spelling, punctuation, and grammar.
3. Once students complete editing they should share their feedback aloud and provide further context for the writer for their revisions.

Downloaded from and adapted from: [https://support.thinkcerca.com/hc/en-us/articles/203968136Peer-Editing on 24/11/17](https://support.thinkcerca.com/hc/en-us/articles/203968136Peer-Editing%20on%2024/11/17)

**Appendix 3**

**Self-assessment**

**3a. Self-assessment sheet**

1. The strengths of this assignment are …
2. The weaknesses in this assignment are …
3. I think this assignment could be improved by …
4. The mark it deserves is …
5. What I will do better in my next assignment is …
6. I’d really like your comments on …

Adapted from: Parkeson in Leibowitz & Mahomed (2000)

3b. Self-Editing Strategies

We suggest the following tips to help you edit and proofread your work:   
  
**1. Search for the occurrence of similar errors.**   
  
Ask yourself these questions:

What problems appear repeatedly in my writing?

What generalizations can I draw about my writing from these errors?

Do my ideas frequently appear disorganized in the text?

Do my paragraphs lack a topic sentence?

Do I tend to repeat the same idea throughout the text, unnecessarily?

Do I always write the same kind of sentence structure, e.g., subject-verb-object?

Multilingual students: in what grammar areas do I make most of my errors? E.g., are my errors related to the use of prepositions, verb tenses, articles, connectors, etc.?

**2. Build up a personalized editing checklist.**   
  
Once you've identified your patterns of errors, then you should create a checklist for yourself. The next time you edit a paper, you may want to focus exclusively on those errors, or pay more attention to them, and perhaps tackle them first.   
  
**3. Make time for the editing phase.**   
  
Remember writing is not over when you have finished your first draft, but after you have revised and edited it. Setting aside time for editing is essential for all of your writing, including in-class exams.   
  
**4. Work on a hard copy.**   
  
This creates some distance between you and the final product and allows you to manipulate the paper copy in a more controlled way (you can go back or move forward to previous portions of the text as many times as you want). It also allows you to take down notes directly on the text in an easy way.   
  
**5. Make focused passes through a text to look at a specific issue.**   
  
For example, search the text for errors in subject/verb agreement (-s missing from a 3rd person singular verb). Don't try to look at everything at the same time, because you will miss a lot!   
  
Self-editing looks impossible when you think of it in general. However, when you break down the task in pieces and prioritize types of errors, then self-editing becomes more manageable. If you have difficulties with the use of prepositions, but do not have much problem with verb tenses, then, focus on prepositions exclusively. One or two errors in verbs in your paper will not be as problematic as multiple errors in preposition usage. Then use the same procedure with different editing categories, one pass through for each one.   
  
**6. Ask somebody to read your paper aloud to you.**   
  
Listening to another voice creates distance from your own writing and allows you to move from the position of the writer to the position of the listener/reader. If this is not possible, then just read the paper aloud to yourself: listening to your own voice gives you some distance from the text itself. You may even record yourself while reading your text: listening to a voice, even when it is yours, creates some distance from your own work.   
  
**7. Ask a friend (maybe another student from your class?) to proofread your paper.**   
  
However, avoid asking your friend to correct it (if this is the case, you'll never learn how to proofread!). Just ask your reader to mark the potential problems in your paper, and then discuss those problems with him/her.   
  
**8. When proofreading, read the paper from back to front.**   
  
Breaking the flow of ideas sometimes helps to focus on language issues rather than on the content itself.   
  
**9. Use the dictionary (a lexicon or a thesaurus) in order to make an accurate and varied choice of words.**   
  
This way you will have access not only to meanings but also to synonyms, antonyms, shades of meaning, etc. A dictionary is a useful tool both for multilingual students and native speakers.

Downloaded from: <http://www.law.cuny.edu/legal-writing/students/grammar/editing/editing-self.html> on 24/11/17

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1. Adapted from: Responding to Student Writing. Brief Guide Series (Updated 2012) provided by CHERTL (RU) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)