

# Responding to Student Papers

## General Hints

- Keep in mind the ways in which students read commented papers. They look for the grade first. If there is no grade, they scan the marginal comments for the tenor of the evaluation. Key words like "excellent," "good," "strong," "weak," or "poor" carry immensely strong connotations about corresponding grades. Also, the sheer volume of comments can sometimes be taken as an evaluative statement.
- Let this assumption guide you: *No student ever does a bad job on purpose*. It is easy to feel personally affronted by bad papers or oft-repeated errors you've worked hard to correct. Don't. Much better to be "fooled" by the one-in-a-thousand, than to risk causing gratuitous pain and discouragement to the much more prevalent sensitive majority.

## Marginal Comments

- Decide before you start writing comments what kinds of issues you want to target: grammar and sentence structure? Vocabulary usage? Argument? Organization? This will help you focus your thoughts when you sit down with a paper. You won't be able to address every problem in every paper, and students will feel overwhelmed if you try.
- When writing marginal comments, use complete sentences. This will encourage the student to consider your remarks carefully - as "help" rather than as "criticism" - and it will also help you recall your specific thoughts when the student asks about them several weeks later.

## End Notes

- After you have read through and commented on an entire paper, go back and read your marginal comments as a seamless text. Have you been more critical, or less so, than your feeling about the paper warrants? Have you pinpointed the major problems you want the student to address? Have you attempted to find at least one thing to -praise?
- Now write a more substantial assessment at the end of the paper in which you balance the marginal comments. The student should be able to gather from this end note a couple of succinct and focused directives for revising the paper. It is helpful to number paragraphs (or ask students to number them) so you can refer to specific sections in your endnote.