

# Sweetland

GAYLE MORRIS SWEETLAND WRITING CENTER

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*Sweetland*  
**Writing Center**  
*/ English*  
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**Writing**  
**Workshop**  
**Winter 1999**

Monday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Tuesday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Wednesday  
9 a.m. - Noon  
and 3-5 p.m.  
Thursday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Friday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

*Please call*  
*for an*  
*appointment*

**Peer Tutors**

Sunday-Thursday  
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**Writing Lab**  
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[http://  
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owl.html](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/help/owl.html)

## **Pedagogical Theory and Practice: Responding to Student Writing**

Compiled by Phyllis Frus, Associate Director

This Special Issue of the Sweetland Newsletter brings together some of the best advice available about responding to student writing—whether you are teaching a writing-intensive course at the introductory or advanced level, or simply assigning an essay or two over the term. The suggestions presented here come from Sweetland lecturers, from Sweetland Writing Seminar Fellows and Consultants, and from composition researchers whose scholarship has proven useful in a wide range of pedagogical settings.

We offer a compilation of methods that facilitate success in this most challenging of tasks: responding to student writing—in individual conferences, class discussions, and written comments on papers. Written comments may take the form of paragraphs at the end of a student draft, or notes on e-mail or a web-based environment such as eNotebook. Later Special Issues will treat in more depth topics that are only touched on here, such as guidelines for teaching grammar in a writing-intensive class, strategies for responding to ESL writers, and suggestions for training students to respond helpfully to their peers. We will also feature suggestions for holding effective conferences about writing, scheduling them, and motivating students to prepare for them. Our experience in Writing Workshop (available to students enrolled in any LS&A course) and in Practicum (where each student has a conference with the instructor every other week) has taught us that short conferences are often an effective way to respond to work in progress: we can offer a few key suggestions about revision strategies and immediately gauge whether the student understands our points.

Increasingly, instructors are responding to student writing in ways that will lead to improvement—in development of ideas, organization, use of evidence, or mechanics—before students submit the finished product for a grade. Specialists in writing pedagogy call this “commenting toward revision,” and this process method became the dominant way of teaching college-level writing more than two decades ago. Writing research shows that not just any comments will do, however, for students frequently do not understand or choose to ignore their instructor’s remarks, even when those are substantive and point out specific passages that trouble comprehension. Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon believe that a response is only constructive within an ongoing dialogue between teacher and student. In other words, context is all: if the student can relate a question or request for clarification to conversation about writing among teacher and students in a class—or in conferences or over e-mail—she may be less resistant to changing her draft. This idea of fitting responses to particular papers into a larger conversation is based on the theory that more experienced writers have a specific audience in mind as they write and revise, and that inexperienced writers can internalize such a “Questioning Reader” if their instructor or peers respond to drafts over the course of the term in non-prescriptive ways.

Nancy Sommers, Director of the Expository Writing Program at Harvard, worked with Knoblauch and Brannon on a study of teachers’ actual practice of commenting in the early 1980s; she points out that “without comments from readers, students assume that their writing has communicated their meaning and perceive no need for revising the substance of their text.” If they can, over time, become their own critical

reader, she argues, they will be able “to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing.” An ongoing dialogue helps students learn when writing does not communicate, when points fail to become clear, and how to achieve precision in an organized presentation of evidence. This dialogue will necessarily be minimal in courses where there is little writing, but it is still useful to keep in mind the value of providing an articulate instructional context for responses to particular papers.

### *Sweetland Writing Center Suggestions*

**Explain your grading standards before the first paper is due.** This lets students in on your specific expectations and particular interests in their writing, which allows them to concentrate productively on important issues. A handout on standards can usefully begin a discussion about writing in the context of your course. Beginning in this way can minimize student confusion and spare you from the repetitive chore of merely explaining grades in your responses to student writing.

**In a writing-intensive course think of yourself as a guide or instructor as well as a judge.** One of the most important goals of a writing instructor is to help students develop a method of drafting and revising. You should, therefore, not always evaluate the first draft turned in, but begin to help students develop a notion of revision by directing instruction toward that end. One way to do this is to create an assignment sequence in which each successive task requires students to rethink and enlarge on their ideas about a particular topic, to raise new questions that they want to pursue. You might, for instance, ask students to consider one kind of evidence or case example in the first paper, then another situation or set of circumstances in the next, and so on; in the final assigned paper (the one that you grade), the students might summarize competing claims, evaluate the evidence for both sides, and then take a position and argue for it. Such a sequence of tasks guides the student through substantive revision of an initial idea.

**Make clear comments, and make them sparingly (don't overwhelm the student writer).** Experienced writing instructors agree that, as Sweetland Lecturer John Fulton puts it, “You have to have just a few priorities, a couple of things you single out to the writer. Otherwise, students can easily get discouraged or be unable to discover a focused strategy for improvement.” The best practice involves responding briefly to something in progress, then making a few follow-up comments while grading. It's a good idea to get students attuned to the notion that comments are meant to guide them toward improvement—of this draft or the next essay. Grading comments might best be focused on pointing out the one or two most

important strengths and weaknesses of the essay. Since writing is the vehicle of thought, our comments should engage the substantive intellectual quality of the work.

**Don't take over the paper.** Resist the impulse to solve the writer's problems. After all, you don't know what he intended to say; you only know what you do not understand. It's helpful to communicate the problem so that the writer can consider what would clarify the meaning. The writer's job is to think of other ways to tell you what you are asking to know. Your goal is to locate conceptual and expressive issues, not to rewrite the paper.

**Offer instruction rather than just correction.** It is not effective to comment on a draft as though it were finished (in need of mere editing) while asking for more development of ideas or additional support. The problem of when to introduce students to the difficulties created by grammatical or punctuation errors is a vexing one. Sweetland Lecturer Dennis McEnnerney reports he has learned that marking errors does little good without an explanation, for many students have not had a recent (or any) review of the conventions and rules that govern English prose. “It's hard to get them to internalize the conventions, when they haven't learned them in the first place,” he says. His solution is to point out to them ways in which grammar and punctuation are integral parts of clear expression and communication. It can be helpful for the teacher to identify pervasive errors, offer instruction about how to correct them, and require the student to do the correction—with the goal of eliminating the error in the future.

**Avoid editing.** Research shows that students make little sense of formulaic responses such as “edit for wordiness,” “awkward transition,” or “verb agreement.” Likewise, shorthand symbols for mechanical errors and comments on diction, usage, or punctuation are of little use. Instead of saving instructors' time, such a shorthand actually wastes time. Research consistently shows that teachers' correcting student work has almost no effect on skills development. When the teacher makes such marks on a draft, students are likely to get the idea that correcting mistakes is the same as revising. There are ways, other than to say “awk” or “tighten,” to assist students to learn to edit at the sentence level. There are exercises available at various on-line tutoring sites that direct students to find and eliminate unnecessary words in the models, which may alert them to similar constructions in their own writing.

Associate Director Phyllis Frus holds editing workshops called “editing for powerful prose” on the day a revised essay is due. She hands out an exercise made of sentences from students' drafts grouped into patterns of wordiness, punctuation, syntax, and usage errors. Students correct the passages together and then turn to the

drafts of their editing partner and mark sentences with similar errors—without correcting them. By the time the students get their own papers back to fix the problems, they are able to see many more of the omissions or mistakes and, with the help of a handbook, to correct them.

Instructors might better imagine themselves as engaging intellectual respondents than as editors. Particularly helpful are questions about organization (“Shouldn’t you define situational ethics before giving its history?”), missing transitions (“How did you get here from the previous paragraph?” “What’s the connection between x and y?”), or faults in evidence (“What evidence would be needed to support this claim?”). We are obliged to point out where the writer is contradicting a statement made elsewhere. Finally, instead of marking a passage as a digression, the instructor might ask, “How is this paragraph related to your claim in this section?”

*The Teaching Fellow’s Guide to Student Writing*, a pamphlet published by the Harvard Writing Project, lists terms that students may find confusing without a thorough explanation in class or a glossary of terms. One comment is “unfocused,” which may mean that there is no clear thesis statement or the topic is too broad, that the structure is not logical or that there are no transitions. As the guide suggests, the instructor making the comment “should identify the main *cause* of the problem, and suggest how, specifically, the student can remedy this problem in a revision or on the next paper.”

**Respond to the entire class on issues that concern everyone.** Another reason to develop a focused strategy for responding is to save time: teachers often report taking far longer than the recommended 20 to 30 minutes per draft or final essay. One way to reduce the amount of time spent responding to a set of papers is to address a comment sheet to all the writers at once. Some instructors compile a set of remarks about students’ performance on an assignment, which they photocopy and distribute to the class when handing back papers. Sweetland Lecturer Josie Kearns goes one step further, using transparencies that she calls “Secrets Revealed.” When she gets the first set of papers, she extracts paragraphs or sentences that work very well and those that are less effective. With student examples projected for all to see, she can remark, “Here’s how it works, here’s how it doesn’t work, here’s how you get out of the trap.” It’s good for students to see specific analysis and counter-argument or opposing arguments. When they see specific instances, they learn how the abstract principles work.

Kearns believes emphatically that “you can learn how to fix something by seeing how others have solved the problem.” Then when, for example, she wants more concrete details to support an argument someone is making, rather than writing “be specific” she can say, “Remember that simile so-and-so used,” or “Remember

that list of phrases that mean ‘drunk’? Make a list of other ways to say phrases I have underlined; one of them is bound to be closer to what you have in mind.”

Sweetland Lecturer Helen Fox does something similar in a class of international graduate students. She copies paragraphs or sentences (no names attached) with typical difficulties and puts them on an overhead so that the class can work on them together. Although no names are attached, “students usually identify themselves as the writer when their particular example comes up.” She finds that this practice saves her from writing the same kinds of comments again and again, and notes that it gives students practice making helpful comments to their peers. They can recognize that something is wrong when they see it in several examples, even if the example is in their own paper. As Anne Berggren tells students, “It’s easier to analyze problems and think of solutions in other people’s writing because you have some writing distance from it.” One way to get distance from your own writing is to see it copied anonymously; and that goes for examples of good writing as well as prose with problems.

**Get students involved.** Students can be asked to comment on one another’s drafts in groups or in pairs. This strategy can powerfully improve writing without adding substantially to the instructor’s workload. When a peer says that a passage is unclear or a point unsupported, that response seems objective—unbiased by arcane teacherly agendas. Revision is called for!

Instructors who report success in using peer responses recommend handing out guidelines for making helpful comments. Teachers vary these guidelines according to the particular writing task involved. George Cooper, a Sweetland Lecturer who often consults with faculty across the disciplines, says, “The object of making an argument is generally different from that of narrative or exposition, in which case you want to alter your guidelines accordingly. For an argument you may want your students to critique the use of evidence in relation to a topic sentence. Or you may want students to identify an opposing view that has been integrated into the argumentative structure. In cases such as these, the guidelines should contain directives for the peer respondents to ‘Write out the objection and determine how it relates to the overall argument.’ Other appropriate questions might be ‘Is the evidence of a logical, emotional, or ethical nature?’ ‘Explain the relationship between the argument and evidence.’”

If you also model carefully the style of commenting you expect, students will understand what they are being asked to do and will imitate your method when they see similar organizational or structural problems in their peers’ papers. Sweetland lecturer Barbara Monroe’s method is to model small-group workshops. She says, “I do several as a whole class, during which sessions I demonstrate to students the kind of things to look for and comment on to get them

used to giving—and taking—honest constructive criticism. This modeling can go on in small groups and I do this *all* the time in my classes: I move around and sit with each of the groups as they are critiquing someone's paper and once again model how to focus and comment on concerns." She also reminds instructors that electronic exchanges of drafts can simplify the mechanics of peer responses.

You can also require students to do a self-evaluation on each piece they turn in. This might take the form of a checklist or a reflection on the process of writing the paper. Ask students to describe problems that came up and tell how they solved them; ask them to tell what still needs work or what they'd say about the paper if they were you. If a student already knows that the thesis is still unsupported or counter-arguments are not considered, you can efficiently make suggestions for solving those writing problems. The more thoughtfully practiced students become in commenting on their own writing, the more they will internalize revision strategies.

Most of us realize the dramatic effect a perceptive reader has on our own writing. Our students will learn to write as we have: through the intellectually stimulating responses of just such shrewd readers. To practice this kind of response, we need not write pages, and we should not act as obsessive editors, but we do need to demonstrate engagement with substantial issues. An excellent response to student writing can therefore be delightfully time efficient.

Employing a wide range of kinds of responses, such as written comments from the instructor, peer critiques, conferences, and class discussions of excerpts or essays, both enhances learning and makes the entire class responsible for acting as engaged, challenging readers. Such an ongoing discussion of writing projects—much of it outside of class, perhaps in e-mail exchanges among students—significantly enhances the students' mastery of course content. Writing in this way does not take students away from content but more deeply into it.

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### Recommended Web Sites

"Writing Resources." Sweetland Writing Center links at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/ecb/help/resources.html#handouts> (18 Feb. 1999)

"Responding to Student Writing." *Speaking of Teaching*. Stanford University Newsletter on Teaching 3.2 <http://www-ctl/Stanford.edu> (24 Feb. 1999)

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Purdue University Online Writing Lab. "Purdue OWL Handouts." (No. 27—Conciseness and No. 28—Eliminating Wordiness are useful handouts to give students.) <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/writers/by-topic.html> (16 Feb. 1999)

Harvard Writing Center Writing Tools. (You can refer students to "Transitioning: Beware of Velcro" and "Ending the Essay: Conclusions.") <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/html/tools.htm> (17 March 1999)