

Responding to Student Writing in STEM Fields

Susanne Hall, Campus Writing Coordinator in the Hixon Writing Center and Lecturer in Writing

Session Goals

- Understand the purpose and importance of feedback on student writing
 - Gain familiarity with best practices in responding to student writers
 - Set goals for your approach to offering feedback on student writing
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Session outline:

1. Who am I to teach writing?

Many TAs and college professors feel like it is not their job to teach writing. While this feeling is completely understandable, it is important to understand that **part of the content of your field is the way scholars and professionals in your field communicate knowledge**. Students can learn a great deal about writing in an English class. However, while an academic English paper and a physics paper do share many core features and rhetorical moves, they also have many very important differences. We must all work together to teach students how to write in our fields if we want them to be competent researchers and communicators in those fields.

2. How did you learn to write and communicate in your field? What positive and negative experiences have you had as a learner in this area?

5-minute writing

For the next 5 minutes, think back to your own undergraduate training. Where and how did you learn about academic discourse? Did you receive explicit instruction about how to write in your chosen discipline, or did you figure it out some other way? What helped you develop as a writer? What kinds of resources, feedback, or classes would have helped you become a more effective writer?

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(5-minute writing, cont.)

3. Approaches to commenting on student writing: studying two examples

Review the two sets of comments on an undergraduate's partial draft of a project proposal. What are the strengths and weaknesses you see in the comments each TA has offered to the writer? Which will result in a better final draft? Which more successfully promotes student learning?

Use this space to take notes as you read:

4. Best practices in responding to student writers

Five guiding principles

- Explain the goals you have in commenting
- Don't over-comment
- Respond differently to working and final drafts
- Be mindful of tone
- Develop a common language with students (including a rubric, if applicable)

Modes of commentary and response styles

- Corrections
- Evaluations
- Qualified evaluations
- Directive
- Advisory
- Closed questions
- Open questions
- Reflective statements

5. Managing your time

6. Confronting challenges

7. Final reflection and goalsetting

What are two specific goals you wish to set for your work teaching writing and communication to undergraduates as a TA?

1.

2.

8. Further resources

- There are a number of books written to help faculty across disciplines with the teaching of writing. As a TA, I'd suggest you start by consulting ***A TA'S Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines***, by **Beth Finch Hedengren (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004)**. It contains a good list of additional resources, should you want to pursue them.
- Also, our library maintains an online list of books it holds on academic writing. You can access it here: <http://libguides.caltech.edu/writing>
- The Hixon Writing Center exists to support your work as a writer, which is inextricably related to your work as a teacher. Find more info on our website: <http://writing.caltech.edu>