



# Writing Forum

## From Awk to Overkill: Responding to Student Writing

by Claire Moisan

*Awk!* The word screeched like a gull in the margins of my 9<sup>th</sup> grade English paper, written for Mr. Boulanger, as I recall, on *A Separate Peace*. I remember being confused and mortified, for although I didn't know what the three letters could possibly signify, I was pretty sure, given the vehemence of the scrawl, it wasn't "awestruck." Awkward. What a horrible word to inflict on a high school student. What, I wonder with the wisdom I've acquired in ten years of teaching writing, was I supposed to do with that *awk*? The comment did not tell me what I'd done wrong or what I could do better; it was just a verdict sitting there on the edge of my paper, making me feel a pitiful fool.

Luckily, the "Great Awk" so rarely appears in the margins

"What is written without effort is read without pleasure."

these days that it seems to have almost gone extinct (like its unlucky cousin the Great Auk). But in an effort not to replicate the *awks* of yesteryear, have some professors taken their marginalia to the other extreme? Are they cramming so many comments and suggestions into the edges or at the end of papers that students don't know which ones to prioritize or where to begin the revision process? Are they taking up so much of their own time and energy—often up to 40 minutes a paper—to do so? Has academia moved from *awk* to overkill?

Finding a *juste milieu* between these extremes was the subject of last month's Teaching Writing at Grinnell lunch, (aptly titled *From Awk to Overkill: Responding to Student Writing*), sponsored by the Writing Lab and led by Professor of Sociology Kent McClelland and Associate Professor of English Erik Simpson.

Kent escapes overkill by making brief comments at the end

of the paper and by using rubrics (see sidebar p. 2) to evaluate and grade essays, presentations, and annotated bibliographies. Erik eschews the *awk* by outlining clear and specific goals for assignments, providing his students a framework for subsequent feedback, and holding two pithy conferences (one 10 minutes, one 15) during the writing process to help students first identify and steer clear of potential pitfalls, and second to understand the comments he addresses to them in a letter (see p. 5). Each avoids the other extreme as well: Kent writes, "Rubrics force me to account systematically for my own emotional reactions to the papers," and Erik maintains that his process does not take up as much time as it seems to, since the scheduled conferences forestall longer disquisitions during office hours.

Responding to student writing is perhaps one of the few pedagogical practices professors share across the curriculum and is, without doubt, one of the most fraught. We are con-

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vinced that providing responses helps students develop as both readers and writers. Forcing them to turn a critical eye—our critical eyes lurking in the margins—to their writing will help them, the doctrine goes, to be aware of their writing “issues”; this self-awareness then becomes a little voice in their head—an imagined reader—preventing them from making the same mistakes.

Without doubt, there is a nexus between critical reading, self-awareness, and writing; however, as composition theorist Nancy Sommers wrote in her landmark article *Responding to Student Writing*, “We don’t know in any definitive way. . . what effect, if any, our comments have on helping students become more effective writers” (83).<sup>1</sup> To be sure, Sommers’s study is quite old—it dates to 1982, probably the same year I received my first *awk*; nevertheless, her study sparked many further ones, and her findings about the effectiveness of professors’ comments on student papers continue to reverberate.

Her first finding is that “comments can take students’ attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers’ purposes in commenting” (84). When revising, the student no longer thinks about what *he or she* wants to say but rather focuses on how to fix the paper and to “please” the professor. As Sommers notes, we have all heard confused students say, “Tell me what you want me to do,” or “I don’t understand how you want me to change this.” Thus, for Sommers, professors appropriate their students’ writing

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## Scaffolding Paper Feedback

Erik Simpson  
Teaching and Learning Lunch  
March 2008

### Sample procedure for a major assignment

- **Provide specific, finite objectives or standards**
  - ◇ **Examples:** an essay prompt, a handout on thesis construction, specific points of mechanical or stylistic emphasis
  - ◇ **Goals:** provide a framework for subsequent feedback, keep the emphasis clear and manageable
- **Have students submit some small sketch of their plan, to be discussed in quick, pithy conferences**
  - ◇ **Examples:** an outline, a paragraph of description
  - ◇ **Goals:** spread out the student’s thinking time, spot obvious pitfalls to avert (some) disasters
- **Divide written response to the main assignment between reading marks and summary comments**
  - ◇ **Goal:** help students separate main priorities from smaller points that are still worth noting
- **Return written responses in another set of quick, pithy conferences**
  - ◇ **Goals:** convey main points in multiple formats for impact, spot and correct misunderstandings before they fester, communicate availability for following

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and, through their comments, force upon their students a different vision, an idealized version of what their text could and should be. Precisely because students seek to please the professor and make their text fit the ideal, they respond only to the comments in the margins and are either unable to see other changes that could make the text more effective or unwilling to take chances on something the professor hasn't singled out.

This appropriation, Sommers continues, is particularly egregious when the comments work at cross-purposes: when, for example, one comment tells a student to write concisely, while another suggests that she expand and develop her argument, and still another corrects errors of grammar and punctuation. Sommers' objection is that these multiple types of comments treat the text as both static and in-process, enjoining one to first (and counter-intuitively) edit the sentences and then develop the paragraph. "The language of the comments," Sommers writes, "makes it difficult to sort out and decide what is most important and what is least important" (86). In other words, they represent overkill.

Sommers' ironic tone borders on suggesting that professors take some sort of malevolent pleasure in appropriating texts, messing with students' brains and engaging them in a guessing game about what constitutes good writing. I don't think such malevolence necessarily the case, or, at least, I'm not sure how much pleasure one takes—malevolent or otherwise—in responding to student writing.

The fact that marginal comments can be confusing and multi-directional stems from the dual pedagogical purposes marginalia serve: they represent both the voice of an informed reader pointing out to the student places where logic breaks down or evidence does not suffice, and the voice of the pedagogue/editor showing an emerging reader how to fix errors in syntax and style. It is the hope of the latter voice that students will look at and understand the corrections and model their future syntax accordingly. It is the purpose of the former voice, however, to help an emerging thinker enter a discourse community. Both voices—both purposes—are essential to the learning-to-write process. That students get confused, that they can't yet tease out and un-

derstand the different tonalities, is part of the meta-cognitive process. Still, it is worth a short (pithy) conversation to tell a student which comments are most important and why.

At the *Awk/Overkill* luncheon, Kent and Erik both stressed the importance of prioritizing comments and not overwhelming students. Although Kent worries that the rubric implies that each area takes equal priority, the numbers actually help him to make a hierarchy of comments; a low score signals to him a particular problem to talk about more in-depth either in an end-note or in direct conversation with the student. Erik's scaffolded stages of responding likewise allow him to focus on what the student is saying, not on the details of usage and syntax.

Their approaches to responding seem steeped in their particular discipline—the "numbers" of Sociology and the "details" of English—yet their goals and their praxis ultimately converge; as Victoria Brown, straddling the Social Sciences and the Humanities in History, put it, "In grading I'm being challenged to come up with my own thesis, the main focus of

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my comments. I have to let the other stuff go and have faith in the process. I have to budget what they can take in, what is critical.”

If Sommers’ first finding suggests that comments can be overkill, her second—“that most teachers’ comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text”—implies that a whole range of comments function along the same lines as the *awk*. Indeed, as Assistant Professor of English David Ainsworth noted at the luncheon, the check mark and the word good in the margin essentially serve the same function. While clearly less psychologically damaging than the *awk*, the *good* and the ✓ denote that the reader approves, but they don’t say anything meaningful or text-specific, and so the writer has no idea *why* the reader approves.

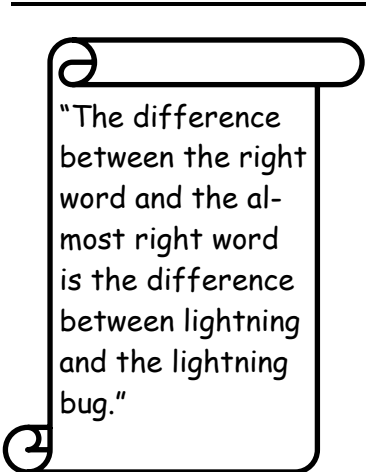
What Sommers calls rubber-stamps are, again, much more malevolent than the ✓ or the *good*, and even more than the *awk*. “There seems to be among teachers,” she writes, “an accepted, albeit unwritten canon for commenting on student texts. This uniform code of commands, requests, and plead-

ings demonstrates that the teacher holds a license for vagueness while the student is commanded to be specific” (87). One such rubber-stamp response, “be specific,” is anything but: it does not elucidate what kind of information would help to clarify or specify vague writing. Nor does it, or any of its brethren rubber-stamps, like “elaborate,” “be more precise,” “think about your audience,” offer the student strategies for doing so. “Revising,” Sommers laments, “becomes a guessing game” (87).

Because responding to student writing is at the core of pedagogical practices across the disciplines, because it is the means by which students engage in intellectual dialogue with their teachers and mentors (with marginalia often spilling into office hours), it should not be a guessing game. The lesson that emerges from the Learning Luncheon and from reading Sommers is that because the dialogue in the margins is so important, we must be mindful of what we are saying. As we respond to student writing, we must be aware that we inhabit and project those multiple voices (pedagogue and reader); that we have our own purposes in writing comments (to educate, to

model, to coach, to hear); and that we have a young and often insecure audience of emerging writers and so must attend to our tone. No more *awks*!

<sup>1</sup>Sommers, Nancy. “Responding to Student Writing.” in *Teaching Writing: Landmarks and Horizons*. Eds. Christina Russell McDonald and Robert L. McDonald. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.



“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.”

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McClelland  
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## ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR ACADEMIC ESSAYS

### CONTENT

Points

Comments

#### **Coherence of Argument:**

Does the paper have a main point, and is it clearly focused on that point? Is there a logical progression of ideas expanding and developing the main point?

/4

#### **Quality of Argument:**

Is the argument persuasive? Does it show original thought and lively engagement in the material? Would the paper be intelligible to a wide audience?

/4

#### **Quality of Evidence:**

Is the argument well supported by concrete facts, vivid images, and memorable details? Are points explained in enough detail to be convincing?

/4

#### **Accuracy of Evidence and Use of Sources**

When material is drawn from other sources, does the paper present it accurately? Does the text distinguish clearly between the author's perspective and the perspectives of the sources consulted?

/4

**Total for Content:**

**/16**

### EFFECTIVENESS

#### **Paragraphs and Organization:**

Are paragraphs unified, well organized, and coherent? Are paragraphs knit together tightly by the thread of the argument? Does the introduction frame the main point of the paper and provide a forecast of the argument? Does the conclusion leave the reader satisfied, but also with something to think about?

/2

#### **Structure and Variety of Sentences:**

Do sentences use coordination, subordination, and parallelism to make the meaning clear? Do sentences vary in structure and rhythm in order to focus the reader's attention on important ideas?

/2

#### **Vitality and Polish of the Prose:**

Has the writer combined concrete nouns with active verbs to create a sense of immediacy and energy? Is the writing concise and direct?

/2

#### **Word Choice and Use of Language:**

Are words chosen wisely to convey precise shades of meaning? Are idioms used correctly? Has the writer avoided slang, jargon, mixed metaphors, and clichés? Has the writer avoided stereotypes, demeaning labels, and sexist language?

/2

**Total for Effectiveness:**

**/8**

### MECHANICS

#### **Grammar and Punctuation:**

Is the paper free of grammatical errors? Is the paper free of errors in punctuation?

/4

#### **Spelling and Proofreading:**

Are all words spelled correctly? Does the paper follow conventions in the use of capital letters, hyphens, italics, numbers, and abbreviations?

/2

#### **Formatting:**

Does the paper have a reader-friendly format, with an informative title, page numbers, double spacing, wide margins, and a legible font? Do citations and references follow a recognized format? Has the writer given credit for help received?

/2

**Total for Mechanics:**

**/8**

**Total for Paper:**

**/32**

For information about other rubrics contact Kent at: [mcclel@grinnell.edu](mailto:mcclel@grinnell.edu)