

Responding to Student Writing in Online Courses

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Many of us are already familiar with providing feedback “online” through tools like Collab (or another LMS), Google Docs, or the comment function in Microsoft Word. **All of the best practices for responding to student writing still apply in these electronic formats: helpful feedback is dialogic, driving students toward revision and rewriting.** However, there are some other considerations when providing feedback in courses that are entirely online, where real-time interactions with students are less frequent.

We can start by rethinking what counts as “writing” in our courses, as the informal activities that many of us use to replace in-class discussion such as discussion boards or text annotations are also opportunities for students to explore different rhetorical situations. Even articulating a question about the course via email can count as writing! The collective wisdom of the Conference on College Composition and Communications’ Online Writing Instruction committee indicates that **instructors should not feel as though they have to respond to everything a student writes to support their learning; however consistent, specific feedback on early informal assignments can be useful as students work on their longer projects.**

We might also think about how our feedback is *received* online, as the rhetorics of electronic communication might impact the way that students process our comments. Hewett and DePew remind us that while text-based feedback is useful for online learning, it does place stress on students’ reading abilities, so **we need to build redundancy into our comments.** This strategy has the additional benefit of “addressing access concerns, such as those inherent to writers with neural processing disorders as well as those with weaker reading skills relative to instructional text.” We might also consider requiring students to respond in some way to the feedback they receive, to ensure that they were able to find, read, and understand it, in lieu of full class debriefs once papers are returned. Guasch and Espasa have studied this aspect of online classrooms, in cases where students write essays in small groups. The study showed that **peer-to-peer discussion of the instructor’s feedback greatly contributed to the revision process.** Their example might encourage us to experiment with some formal collaborative writing assignments.

When grading formal writing assignments, we can also take advantage of some of the affordances of communicating electronically to deliver feedback in different formats. For example, alongside comments offered in a google doc, an instructor could record short videos or voice memos that provide summative feedback. According to Nilson et. al., **offering multimodal feedback is also a strategy for accessibility,** as students with certain kinds of e-readers might experience difficulty accessing in-line comments. It’s also always a good idea to check in with students to ensure they are receiving comments.

We can also take advantage of the rhetorics of online communication, and make use of features such as different colored highlighters or emojis in our in-line comments. These more informal markers of response coupled with generous feedback helps give students a sense of us as people, which can be harder to capture without our classroom affect. **(To help save time, use features such as “macros” in word processing programs to build a set list of comments that come up frequently in student papers.** A caveat: some scholars note that some personalization also helps with student engagement). Many online teaching experts emphasize that clarity and attention to tone are particularly important when responding to writing online. Hewett and DePew point out that **online courses put more pressure on the**

instructors communication skills as well, and it's important for us to be even more careful that we are giving useful, precise, and digestible feedback to our students.

As we have a diminished ability to address mechanical or structural issues synchronously, some teachers develop short “microlessons” that students can work through on their own that certain grammatical structures that trip students up. Outsourcing mechanical issues to microlessons (see [example here](#)) invites students to take more responsibility for their own prose. Other resources suggest that automated feedback--in the form of skill-building quizzes--may serve a similar function. **The best microlessons ask students to go back into their drafts and edit based on what they learn in the lesson** or respond to the instructor with a description of what they changed in their essay.

Lastly, however you decide to respond to student writing, in the first weeks of class it's important to go over with them where they can find your feedback and their grades. Laflen and Smith remind us to **create a consistent system for how feedback is delivered and consider finding ways to ensure that your students must see the written feedback in order for them to see the grade**. Spending some time going over all of the platforms used in the course is essential, as we cannot assume that all of our students have the same level of facility with or access to technology.

Bibliography

Conrad, Dianne, and Jason Openo. [*Assessment Strategies for Online Learning: Engagement and Authenticity*](#). Athabasca University Press, 2018.

This book covers a range of assessment strategies, including instructor feedback on student writing, for supporting and engaging student learning

Deane, Mary, and Teresa Guasch. [*Learning and Teaching Writing Online: Strategies for Success*](#). BRILL, 2015.

The first chapter, “Collaborative Writing Online: Unraveling the Feedback Process,” by Teresa Guasch and Anna Espasa is particularly useful in its articulation of strategies for providing feedback online, and in imagining how students can use that feedback to support their own growth as writers.

Hewett, Beth L., and Kevin Eric DePew. [*Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*](#). 2015.

This book has a useful chapter on online writing tutorials that are mostly conducted asynchronously, a process which has much in common with instructor responses to student writing.

Laflen, Angela, and Michelle Smith. [“Responding to Student Writing Online: Tracking Student Interactions with Instructor Feedback in a Learning Management System.”](#) *Assessing Writing*, vol. 31, Jan. 2017, pp. 39–52.

This article has some helpful suggestions for ensuring that students interact with instructor feedback.

Nilson, Linda B., and Ludwika A. Goodson. [*Online Teaching at Its Best: Merging Instructional Design with Teaching and Learning Research*](#). John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2017.

This book offers solid strategies for assessment and assignment design that take advantage of the affordances of online teaching tools to cultivate a warm, accessible classroom environment.

Spanbock, Benjamin. "[Responding to Student Writing Using Cloud-Based Microlessons](#)," Berkeley Center for Teaching and Learning.

This article provides a strategy for teachers who want to focus on offering dialogic comments on student papers, but still need to address mechanical issues in the students' writing. The microlessons he describes enable instructors to address grammatical and syntactic errors by requiring students to do short exercises to address any problem areas in their prose, freeing up instructor energy to offer more substantive feedback.