Twelve Tips for Effective Responses to Analytical Writing

1) **Prepare students to attend to and benefit from your responses**, and those of their peers by:
   
   a. Immersing them—before you ever receive papers from them—in a common vocabulary that all such responses will use—e.g. “Twelve Elements of Scholarly Writing.”
   
   b. Stating clearly and explicitly in your assignments the writing tasks (not necessarily the questions) that you expect the students to perform (i.e. close analysis, contextual analysis, use of multiple sources.
   
   c. Talking about what it means, intellectually and (for them) emotionally to take prudent risks in an essay, and to own the essay and these risks.
   
   d. Formulating roomy assignments, in response to which you could imagine multiple excellent arguments or ways of explaining.
   
   e. Having students turn in cover letters with both drafts and revisions, in which they state their thesis and/or agenda, articulate the greatest difficulties they are having on the project; say what elements they have used well; state the elements, or other features, with which they think they need most help (and why); and say two or three things they would work on most urgently in their revisions.

2) **Look for patterns.** To avoid excessive correcting (which can be both demoralizing for the student and send the wrong message about what it means to revise), focus on features that represent the essay’s larger strengths and weaknesses. Limit your criticisms in end-comments to no more than three or four substantial points.

3) **Be as precise as possible in marginal comments.** Where you are tempted to write vague comments like “vague” or “awkward,” which are unlikely to help in any practical way, say instead what your confusion is: “not sure whether you mean x or y here,” or “what do you mean by the term ‘human’ here? Can you say more specifically what you are getting at when you use it?” Or “When you use the passive voice here, you underemphasize who is perpetrating the action. Who is doing it, and what impact might that have on your argument?”

4) **Assume a respectful, even modest tone that also challenges, both in oral and written responses.** Consistent with this is the habit of asking questions rather than giving commands. Consistent with this is also the habit finding ways to restate, in your own terms, or with the use of quotation marks, the writer’s thesis and/or agenda, so that you communicate to the writer an openness and enthusiasm about the writer’s genuine intellectual endeavor.

5) **Treat drafts differently from revisions, in order to encourage revision, rather than mere editing.** In drafts, note important patterns of stylistic and mechanical problems, particularly where they are symptomatic of problems with argument or agenda, but make argument—thesis, agenda, analysis, evidence, and key terms—priority, unless argument is in fine shape already, or unless style is so problematic that it cripples argument. Some people have students read drafts out loud and comment on them orally, then make written comments on revisions.
6) **Do not avoid responding to CONTENT**, or invoking your knowledge or expertise, either in marginal or in end comments. Certainly correct data or evidence you know to be false.

7) **On the other hand, where an essay is unpersuasive or untrue**—don't just correct the argument or say what it should say, but examine the use of evidence, or **ASK what the student would say to a specific counter-argument**; make sure you discuss the in terms of the elements of writing with which you and they are familiar, and leave open the possibility of multiple approaches. Use your knowledge to ask genuine QUESTIONS, not necessarily give answers.

8) **Remember that apparent problems with structure or transitions often suggest larger problems with thesis or agenda.** Students will often suggest that all that is needed is reorganization, or better “flow” between paragraphs, or “too many complicated ideas.” Often this impression masks an overall problem with thesis, agenda, or terminology, or evidence. Where you see incoherence (particularly in a draft), look in those places first.

9) **Remember that an effective response to a polished but superficial essays usually involves agenda.** What is this essay really accomplishing for your reader? Why should your reader read it? What is the plausible counter-argument to your argument? What are you doing that might be news to an educated reader?

10) **Where an essay is hard to read, either because too complex, too simple, or otherwise problematic in syntax, students usually benefit from reading out loud.** Another interesting trick: ask the student to avoid the verb “to be” in the next draft. This helps work “syntax muscles.”

11) **Plan workshops VERY carefully, for maximum effectiveness, and so that they are interesting for the students.** I find that the workshops that are best for everyone are those in which discussions of content and discussions of writing strategy are inseparable.

12) **Do everything you can to get students to take the draft stage very seriously, while preparing them in advance for the strong possibility of starting again, for revision, on a blank page.** I try to do this by

   a. Recognizing how difficult it can to work hard on a draft, knowing that revisions may require starting again, and coming up with some ways to motivate oneself anyway, at the draft stage
   b. counting drafts and draft conferences in class participation grade, or in some other way;
   c. having students sign up for specific times for draft conferences;
   d. encouraging students to take notes in draft conferences;
   e. focusing on the larger issues of thesis, agenda, analysis, and evidence, and key terms first and discussing mechanical and grammatical problems selectively;
   f. having students read out loud: good writing often *speaks*!