7 Responding, correcting, and guiding

A man who has committed a mistake and doesn't correct it is committing another mistake.
Confucius

- **Ways of reacting to students' writing**
- **Ways of correcting students' work**
- **Ways of responding to students' work**
- **Peer review**
- **Training students to self-edit and self-correct**
- **Making homework successful**

Ways of reacting to students' writing

In previous chapters it has been suggested that, at various stages in a writing activity, teachers should intervene with editorial comment, motivating suggestions, or language advice. Students, indeed, expect feedback on what they are doing or what they have done.

The ways we react to students' work will depend not only on the kind of task the students are given, but also on what we want to achieve at any one point. There are a number of ways of reacting (as we shall see) but these generally fall within one of two broad categories: responding or correcting.

Responding and correcting

When **responding** to our students' work we are not only concerned with the accuracy of their performance but also – and this is crucial – with the content and design of their writing. We might respond, for example, to the order in which they have made their points ('Why did you start with the story about the bus that was late? You could have begun, instead, with the problem of public transport in general.'). We might respond by saying how much we enjoyed reading their work – and then recommend that the student have a look at a book or website which has more information about the same topic. When responding, we are entering into a kind of affective dialogue with the students. That is, we are discussing their writing rather than judging it.

Correcting, on the other hand, is the stage at which we indicate when something is not right. We correct mistakes in the students' written performance on issues such as **syntax** (word order), **concord** (grammatical

agreement between subjects and verbs), **collocation** (words which live together), or word choice.

In a 'process-writing' sequence, where the teacher's intervention is designed to help students edit and move forward to a new draft, responding is often more appropriate than correcting. Our task is not to say what is unequivocally right or wrong, but to ask questions, make suggestions, and indicate where improvements might be made to both the content of the writing and the manner in which it is expressed. Feedback of this kind becomes more and more appropriate as the students' level improves and they can take advantage of such help. However, when students hand in a piece of homework we may mark it to show how correct the writing has been. This will often be the case with 'writing-for-learning' activities (see Chapter 3) and 'nuts and bolts' tasks (see Chapter 4).

The roles of the teacher

When teachers give feedback on students' written performance, they are called on to play a number of different roles. Chris Tribble suggests that at one extreme they will be seen by students as the **examiner**. Almost all teachers will set class tests or mark practice papers for the public exams their students are taking. The students will justifiably expect some kind of an objective evaluation of their performance. This role contrasts strongly with the teacher's potential as the **audience**, responding to the ideas and perceptions that the students have written about. Between these two extremes the teacher may act as an **assistant** (helping the student along), a **resource** (being available when students need information or guidance), an **evaluator** (saying how well things are going so far), or an **editor** (helping to select and rearrange pieces of writing for some kind of publication – whether in or beyond the classroom).

Students are often inclined to see the teacher as an examiner more than anything else. This is hardly surprising since it is generally teachers who mark tests and make decisions about final grades. It is therefore important to show that this is not the only role we can fulfil, especially when students are engaged in a 'writing-for-writing' activity (see page 34).

Who responds?

The previous discussion has assumed that it is always the teacher who gives feedback by responding or correcting. But this is not the case. We can also encourage students to look at each other's work and give advice and make suggestions about how it could be improved. Students become, in effect, their colleagues' audience and, sometimes, their evaluators. Such **peer review** is, as we shall see, an important element in writing activities.

What students do

Responding to students' work – and correcting it – only becomes useful if the students can do something with this feedback. This may just be the encouragement they receive from an enthusiastic teacher or from their peers – encouragement that spurs them on. But where suggestions have been

made, we expect students to at least consider their work in the light of these suggestions – and maybe act on the advice which is given.

When teachers return corrected work to their students, they should ensure that the students do not immediately put it to one side, with only a cursory glance at the grade and some of the mistakes. Good correction methods include ensuring that the students understand what the mistakes are and how they can be corrected – if possible, there and then.

As teachers it is our task to make sure students derive as much benefit as possible from our and others' reactions to their writing. However, we need to bear in mind that not all students – indeed not all writers – are as good at editing as others. Not all students are good at letting their mistakes work for them. In the end it is, to an extent, up to them to decide how much they want to (or can) take from what we or their peers suggest.

Ways of correcting students' work

Perhaps the most common way of correcting students' work has been to return it to students with a great deal of underlining, crossings-out, question marks, and the occasional tick. There may be a place for such correction, especially in test marking for example, but this kind of intensive correction can be counter-productive. There are a number of more effective ways of making correction a positive and useful experience.

Selective correction

A way of avoiding the proliferation of red ink all over a student's work is through selective correction. In other words, we do not have to correct everything. We could correct only verb tenses or only punctuation, or focus instead exclusively on word order. We might only correct paragraph organisation or the use of appropriate levels of formality. We might only correct two of the paragraphs in a composition, or only highlight mistakes in the layout of a letter.

If we are going to employ a selective approach, students need to know about it. When we tell them that this time we are only going to be looking at punctuation, they will then concentrate on that aspect of writing especially, something that otherwise they might not do. Selective correction is a good learning tool, in other words.

A way of making selective correction really effective is to discuss with students what the teacher should be looking out for. If they are part of the decision-making process, they are likely to approach the task with more commitment and enthusiasm than usual, and they will pay a great deal of attention to the area earmarked for the teacher's correction.

Using marking scales

Many teachers use a range of different marking scales when correcting written work and written tests. This means that though students may fall down on, say, grammar, they can still perhaps do well in the way they answer a task or in their use of vocabulary.

Teachers may want to give marks out of 10 for each category they have chosen for students (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, coherence, or cohesion). Together with indications of mistakes (where they occur), such marking

scales will help students to focus on the particular areas they need to work at.

Using correction symbols

In order to avoid an overabundance of red ink, many teachers use correction symbols. These also have the advantage of encouraging students to think about what the mistake is, so that they can correct it themselves. Many coursebooks include correction symbols in their writing training too.

There is no set list of symbols. Different teachers and coursebooks have their own ways of expressing different concepts. However, the following symbols are frequently used:

Symbol	Meaning	Example error
S	A spelling error	*The asnwer is obvius.*
WO	A mistake in word order	*I like very much it.*
G	A grammar mistake	*I am going to buy some furnitures.*
T	Wrong verb tense	*I have seen him yesterday.*
C	Concord mistake (e.g. subject and verb agreement)	*People is angry.*
^	Something has been left out.	*He told ^ that he was sorry.*
WW	Wrong word	*I am interested on jazz music.*
{ }	Something is not necessary.	*He was not {too} strong enough.*
?M	The meaning is unclear.	*That is a very excited photograph.*
P	A punctuation mistake	*Do you like London,*
F/I	Too formal or informal	*Hi Mr Franklin, Thank you for your letter ...*

Correction symbols

The teacher writes the symbol above or next to the place in the student's writing where the problem occurs. The student, knowing what it means, makes the necessary adjustment to his or her writing.

In order for students to benefit from the use of symbols such as these, they need to be trained in their use, as we shall see on pages 118–119.

Reformulation

Reformulation is a way of showing students how they could write something more correctly. Instead of asking them to find the mistake and correct it, the teacher shows how he or she would write the incorrect sentence. The student then learns by comparing correct and incorrect versions. Reformulation is extremely useful during drafting and re-drafting.

Referring students to a dictionary or a grammar book

Sometimes teachers indicate that a mistake has been made and then tell students to go and look the problem up in a dictionary or a grammar book. If, for example, the student writes *I am not interested about sailing*, the teacher can say 'Have a look at *interested* in your dictionary'. In the same way we can suggest that students consult a grammar book if they are having tense, grammar, or word order problems. (For an example of material for training students to use a dictionary successfully in this way, see page 120.)

The advantage of referring students to books in this way is that it encourages them to look at the information with a purpose in mind. They will learn as they correct.

Ask me

Sometimes it is difficult to explain a mistake on paper, or it is impossible to understand exactly what it was the student wanted to write. In such cases teachers can ask students to talk to them so that they can sort out the problem face-to-face.

Remedial teaching

When teachers read students' written work and they come across mistakes which many people in the same class are making, remedial teaching will then be necessary. In such cases, correction can be effected by showing the whole class sentences produced by the students that exemplify the mistake and asking them to help to put them right. It is a good idea for the example mistakes to be anonymous so that no individual student feels held up to ridicule.

Ways of responding to students' work

All the examples in the previous section have been concerned with the correct use of language. Correction has been applied to issues of grammar and lexis rather than to text design or issues of content.

Many students value this kind of correction extremely highly and feel uncomfortable when other kinds of feedback are offered. Yet, if we want to respond to written work as an assistant or a guide (rather than as an evaluator or judge), for example, a focus on only lexical and grammatical mistakes will not be appropriate. Responding to our students' work is about reacting to their ideas and to how they put them across.

Responding to work-in-progress

When students are involved in a writing task in class – especially where this is part of a process sequence – teachers will often 'visit' students and talk to them about what they are writing. We may ask what a certain sentence means, or wonder why they have started a composition in a particular way, or suggest that they re-check some information they have made notes about.

When, as teachers, we are involved with work-in-progress we have to think carefully about the way we give advice or make suggestions. It is very easy to say 'I wouldn't do it like that, I would do it like this', which, because it comes from the teacher, is taken by the student to be more or less a

command. Sometimes there may be good reasons for this, and students may be very happy to receive such comments. Nevertheless, it is sometimes preferable to ask questions such as 'Why have you done it this way?' (asked as neutrally as possible) or 'What do you want the reader to understand here?', so that students have to come to their own decisions about how to revise and edit their work.

Students often get tremendous benefit from this kind of personal attention from teachers. For our part, we need to approach the task with great sensitivity, doing our best to draw decisions from the students themselves rather than telling them what to do.

However, not all students appreciate a teacher's intervention at any stage of the writing process. Sometimes, therefore, students should be allowed to leave a sign on their desk indicating whether or not they wish the teacher to help them. A piece of paper with a cross, the words *no, thanks*, or some other symbol will tell the teacher that for the moment the student wants to work on their own. A tick or *yes, please* obviously means the opposite.

If the class is taking place in a computer lab – where students are writing individually or in pairs – the teacher can look at their work on his or her screen, and either speak to the student (using a microphone and headset), or use an editing tool such as 'Track Changes' (see page 114).

Responding by written comment

Sometimes our response is delivered in written form when students hand us a draft of what they are working on. In such circumstances, it is always a good idea to write down what we think is good in the students' work. No one appreciates empty compliments, but encouragement is extremely important at this stage.

If students have written compositions about their childhood memories (see Example 4 on page 98), we may ask to see a draft version before they produce a final essay. Here it will be vital to be encouraging and helpful rather than judgmental. The teacher might write comments such as these:

I enjoyed your draft composition very much. I liked the description of your grandparents. They sound like interesting people. In some ways they are the most interesting part of your story.

I have one or two suggestions to make:

- How about starting the composition with that description of your grandparents' house? It would be a good way in to the topic.
- I wouldn't include the bit about your sister and the dog. It gets in the way of your story.
- Be careful with your use of past tense verbs. Check whether you should use the past simple (I ran) or the past continuous (I was running).

Written responses to a student's work

Such advice can be extremely useful and should help students to avoid mistakes in their final version. It will almost certainly be constructed more effectively than it would have been without the teacher's intervention. Nevertheless, as with feedback on work-in-progress, these statements from the teacher may look more like commands and may close down the students' thinking rather than encouraging it. We could instead put most of our comments in question form to overcome this, for example: 'Which part of your story would be the best way to begin your composition, do you think? How important is the incident with your sister and the dog?'

Post-task statements

At the end of a writing sequence, however long or short, teachers usually end up giving final comments. While working at a Japanese university James Muncie wondered how to make this feedback situation useful in the development of his students' writing ability, instead of being only a final evaluation. His solution is to have students write 'future' statements based on the teacher's feedback and the processes which the drafting has gone through. At the end of each assignment, therefore, they write about 'how I can improve in future writing assignments', thus taking the experience forward into forthcoming writing tasks and activities.

Taped comments

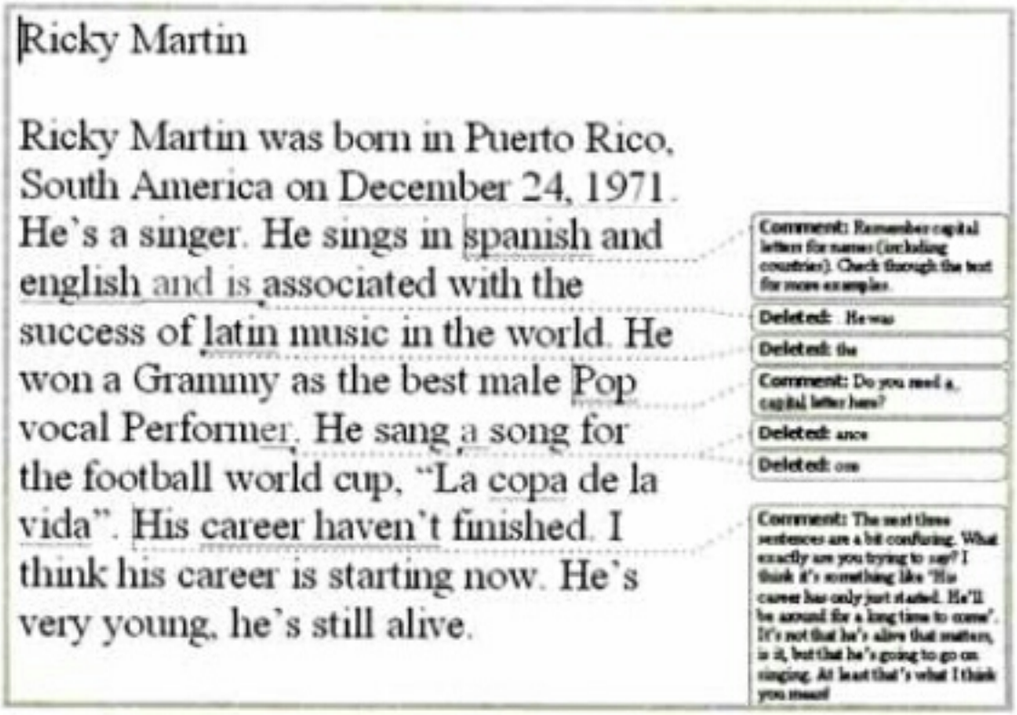
If teachers cannot give face-to-face feedback they might well consider taping their comments about a piece of student writing on tapes provided by the students. This has the advantage (for some) of allowing them to be more expansive than written responses sometimes are. Students may well enjoy getting reactions in this format since it is both more personal and more immediate than written comments at the end of a paper.

Electronic comments

A lot of feedback can now be given electronically, either via e-mail or through text editing programmes. For the growing number of students who have access to computers and do their writing via a keyboard, feedback of this kind is extremely useful.

E-mailing comments to students is an ideal way of responding to their work as it goes through various drafts, since as students work at their computers they can incorporate the comments that their tutor is making, or reply to questions that are being asked. However, teachers need to lay down guidelines here, since, without them, there is the danger that students will e-mail them every time they have a new idea, and their lives could be completely taken over by such e-mail traffic.

Text editing packages, such as the 'Track Changes' tool that comes with Microsoft's Word application, allow teachers or other responders to make amendments and corrections, and also to leave notes and questions on a word-processed document which the student can react to at the same time as they edit that document on the screen. Once 'Track Changes' is engaged, students can either accept or reject the amendments that the teacher or



fellow student has suggested, and look, too, at the notes that have been attached to the document (see above).

A problem with this approach is that it can easily lead to the kind of over-marking we criticised on page 110. But if the relationship between teacher and student is one of sufficient trust, then the level of intrusion shown above should be acceptable.

As with all responding and correcting, teachers need to think carefully about what it is they want their students to understand as a result of the teacher's intervention. In the case of correction, we may just want to draw their attention, for example, to the fact that a tense has been misused, but at other times we may want to suggest that they should think a bit more carefully about what it is they want to say and how best to say it (as where the student above says *he's still alive*). We may want to tell them that while what they have said is perfectly correct, it doesn't express what they mean, or is said too inelegantly or idiosyncratically.

However, electronic comment and correction of this type differs from handwritten marking in one significant way – namely that it can be acted on instantly without the student having to find a fresh sheet of paper, rub things out, or make clean copies, etc. A click of the mouse accepts or rejects the changes. Typing is immediately 'clean', and a piece of correct writing can emerge within a very short space of time.

Peer review

Peer review is a valuable element in the writing process. It has the advantage of encouraging students to work collaboratively, something which, in a group, we want to foster. It also gets round the problem of students reacting too passively to teacher responses. As we have seen, it is sometimes difficult for students to see such responses from their teacher as anything other than commands which have to be obeyed. This reduces their self-reliance in the editing process. Although there are occasions where teacher correction and feedback may be extremely useful, still we want to develop our students' ability to edit and revise when they are on their own.