
RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

Jane Ledwell-Brown and Carolyn Pittenger,
McGill University

When teachers read students' writing, in draft stages or as finished products, our reactions carry great weight. Our response (or lack of response) can shape a student's image of himself or herself as a writer, sometimes even as a person. Our comments, suggestions, and corrections affect the student's ability to use writing for personal growth, for communication with others, and for career success.

We often measure student writing against an imaginary, absolute standard of "good writing," far removed from meaningful contexts. Instead of asking ourselves whether the student is achieving a purpose he or she has set or whether the student is reaching an audience, we play copy editor with the text. On the other hand, we give some texts no more than a cursory response: "O.K.," "Well done," "Needs work." Any of these reactions—a river of red ink or a global comment (often accompanied by a grade)—stills the voice behind the prose and ignores the self being expressed. Since studies have repeatedly shown that literate, well-educated adults have great difficulty agreeing upon what good writing is, what messages are we sending when we glibly label student writing for good or not good?

In order to understand our students' experiences with writing assessment, the feedback they have received, and their responses to that feedback, we collected information from students in management programs at McGill University. Our inquiry focused on the feedback they have received from teachers, peers, and supervisors in both academic and nonacademic settings. We presented the results of our study and discussed the implications of this information for the composition classroom.