

## The Dear Reader letter

One of the most effective methods for engaging students in a dialogue about their writing is to ask them to compose a Dear Reader letter or a writer's memo to accompany their drafts. For me, this practice, more than any other, has made responding more interesting and effective: Students are reminded that they are writing to live readers, and they are given the opportunity to ask for specific feedback. Teachers are given an easy method for shaping their responses to the student writer, not to the student's draft, and for focusing their comments as specific answers to students' questions and concerns.

Although the specific instructions for the Dear Reader letter vary from assignment to assignment, I usually ask students to begin letters by identifying the strengths of their drafts. Even if I disagree with the student's evaluation, I'm given a useful way to begin my comments:

*Yes, your draft's great strength is the passion you feel for the subject, which a reader easily recognizes. One of the challenges, though, of writing about a subject such as stem cell research is that you need to remember that those who disagree with you are equally passionate about their views. As you revise, you'll want to consider these opposing viewpoints and incorporate them into your argument.*

In writing such a comment, I'm trying to use a writer's strength—her passion for the subject—as a lens through which she might view what is missing from her argument—in this case, anticipating and acknowledging opposing arguments.

The prompts for the Dear Reader letter change depending on where students are in the writing process. When students are writing rough drafts, they need to ask questions about their work in progress. When they submit final drafts, they need to reflect on the differences between rough drafts and final drafts, and assess the strengths of their revision. A Dear Reader letter, like a portfolio cover letter, provides an opportunity for students to reflect on what they've learned about writing and how they plan to transfer their learning from the paper at hand to the next assignment.

A sample Dear Reader letter appears on page 13. The student was asked to respond to these prompts in his letter:

- What are the strengths of your rough draft? What are the problems of the draft?
- What were the challenges you encountered writing your draft?
- What is your thesis?
- If you had two more days to write this draft, where would you focus your attention?
- What questions are you asking about your draft that you want to make sure your readers answer?

## Sample Dear Reader letter

Dear Reader:

I chose to write my paper about the death of newspapers. The strength of my draft is the relevancy of this topic. The weakness of the paper is that I assume everyone cares about newspapers. I was surprised to learn from my peer group that they read news online and think of newspapers as part of the past, not the present or the future. My challenge is to persuade my peers to care about the shift from print to online news.

If I had two more days to write this draft, I would try to develop a more interesting thesis. Right now my thesis is that the death of newspapers will have a negative effect on local politics. I would like my readers to pose some counterarguments to my thesis and tell me if my examples are effective.

Sam Jacobs

Dear Reader letters provide glimpses into students' writing processes, especially with their answers to the question "If you had two more days to write this draft, where would you focus your attention?" Students' intuitions are usually right on the mark, and they usually recognize many of the problems in their drafts, even if they don't know how to solve them. Here's how I might respond to Sam's comment about his thesis:

*One way to make your thesis more interesting to readers is to state it as a resolution of a problem, you have identified or as a position you want to take in a debate. Take some time to learn more about the various debates surrounding your topic. Show your readers why they should care about the death of newspapers.*

When students take the Dear Reader letter in the spirit in which it is intended, they set the dialogue in motion, and they become active partners in a conversation about their work. Feedback is rooted in the partnership between student and teacher, and, as in any relationship, it develops its own language and meaning. The exact wording of a comment is less important than what it evokes in our students and how it resonates with something they've already sensed or observed about their writing.

## Making the most of comments

If students are to engage in a dialogue about their writing, they need opportunities to be full participants. And if teachers want students to read and use their comments, they need to show students how to make the most of them. When visiting colleges and universities to offer workshops on responding, I often ask faculty: "What do you want students to know about why and how you respond?" And when meeting with students and writing center tutors,

*From Responding to Student Writers by Nancy Sommers, Bedford St. Martins, 2013.*

I ask: "If you could give any advice to faculty about the kind of comments you and your peers want to receive, what would you tell them?" These questions always provoke spirited and passionate conversations, as if a veil had been lifted or a long-held dark secret had been released about teachers' comments. Both students and faculty have much to say to one another; they just need an opening and an invitation to explain their perspectives.

A statement—or manifesto, as the students called it—from writing center tutors at Columbus State University to their faculty appears below.

### Sample student statement about feedback

A Manifesto on Written Feedback

From the Columbus State University Writing Center Tutors

1. We would like your comments to be written to us—students. We would like you to engage us through dialogue, not through commands. We ask that you not use your comments to reinforce the hierarchy between professors and students. Instead, use comments to create a relationship with us, reader to writer, and show us that you have read our papers and care about our development as writers and thinkers.
2. We would like your comments to be specific and not generic. Point out what we've accomplished and provide specific strategies for *how* we can improve as writers. We ask that you assume that we want to become stronger writers and to learn from your comments.
3. We would like your comments to bolster our agency as writers and to deepen our thinking. We feel censored when you cross out our sentences or shut down our arguments by writing "wrong" in the margin.
4. We would like your comments to help us notice themes and patterns in our writing, rather than point out random or arbitrary mistakes.
5. We would like you to distribute rubrics with the assignment rather than at the end of the writing process. You help us improve as writers when you discuss the rubric in class, for then the rubric informs our writing process, and we can learn from it. If your rubric is formulaic and covers too many elements, it does not help us as much, for it seems to exist for you to justify your grades.

Inspired by the Columbus State writing center tutors' document, the faculty and teaching assistants in the University of Arizona Writing Program chose to craft a statement to help their students understand how to make the most of comments. The Arizona manifesto appears on page 15.

### Sample instructor statement about feedback

A Manifesto on Written Feedback

From the University of Arizona Writing Faculty to Our Students

1. We would like you to understand that our comments are part of the teaching and learning process. We write comments not just to evaluate your essay, but to help you see how the writing lessons from class emerge in your writing. One way to better understand the purpose of our comments is to actively participate in class and carefully read the rubric and assignment sheet. These are the ways we communicate with you ahead of time about what we are looking for in your writing.
2. We would like you to know that we intend our comments to be constructive. We value your ideas and want to learn from you. We hope that you will use our comments to learn from us as well.
3. We would like you to approach each essay not as an independent unit, but as a brief moment in your overall development as a writer. Our comments are meant to be useful to you in this assignment and your future writing.
4. We would like you to accept responsibility for using our comments in the revision process. We also expect you to share your strengths as a writer in commenting on your peers' papers.
5. We would like you to understand that comments are both descriptive and evaluative. Writing a letter grade is perhaps the least interesting thing we do as writing instructors. Take the time to re-read the entire essay alongside our comments to understand the grade in context. We invite you to use our comments as an opportunity to talk further about your writing.

These manifestos begin conversations between students and teachers about the important role responding plays in writing development. They allow teachers—even an entire writing program—to make these ideas public, either by including them on syllabi or by posting them on a writing program Web site, and to say to students, *Here's how we comment, and why*. And such documents provide an opportunity for students to participate in a conversation about their writing, one in which they have much to gain and much to give.