Nothing we do as composition teachers is more important than responding to our students' writing. Nothing. And nothing is more important to our development as teachers than learning to talk with students—in writing, on tape, or in person—about their work as writers. As new teachers our first impulse is to respond as we think we are supposed to respond to student writing. We approach the writing as evaluators, critics, editors, or judges, assume a teacherly voice, and launch a barrage of criticisms, corrections, and directives. We do in our comments what has been done unto us as students and writers. It is what we know. Sometimes we consciously balk against this habit and instead strike the pose of the friend, the ever-encouraging facilitator, or the laid-back teacher, the nice guy. Everything in the paper is great or interesting or really working well, or at least it’s not bad. Whatever isn't already good or good enough can easily be made A-okay with a little revision, then onto the next paper. These are the default modes of response. They are familiar and sanctioned. They define simple roles for us as responders, they don't get into complexities, and they don’t take much time to put into practice.

What’s really hard-and what I think we’re called to do -- is to find a way to create a responding voice that matches, or somehow goes with, the voice and character you are constructing in the class. Optimally, to develop a commenting style that lies somewhere in between traditional, authoritarian response and minimalist hands-off response. To focus your comments on certain features of writing at certain times, and tie those comments to your day-to-day instruction. To make comments that reflect the way you experience the text, to play back one reader's reading. To lead students to see their writing as an inquiry into the subject, a way of learning, an act of communication, and an opportunity to learn to write better. To use your comments to teach and to push students to expect more of their writing and more of themselves as writers. Teacher comments, when they are done well, continue, extend, and deepen the conversation of the class. They give local habitation and a name to the key concepts of the course and help students see these concepts in terms of their own writing. They point out strengths and areas for improvement. They engage the writer in substantive revision. They address the needs of the individual student. They encourage and challenge students to write more and work on their writing.

There are a lot of good ways to develop your responding style. You can learn a lot just by looking at samples of effective teachers' comments. You can study principles of response and try to put them into practice. You can reflect on your own style and goals, look to create a broader repertoire of comments, and figure out your own favorite strategies. Learning to respond well takes time and a lot of effort. And the work you put into it will bear fruit. Never mind claims that teacher commentary doesn't make a difference. Never mind the easy skepticism that students don't even read the comments, that all they're interested in is the grade. Give students sincere, well-designed comments,
comments that provide thoughtful feedback about what they have to say (not just how they say it or whether it's correct) and how they might work on their writing, in a classroom that is charged with a belief that writing matters, and students will read the comments, appreciate them, and get something out of them—if not on the next draft, then on the next paper or the one after that, or perhaps when they write again next semester. If they do not immediately improve their writing, they will benefit from them in the long run as learning writers.

**Statements to Consider**

*Varieties of Response*

There is no single best way to respond to student writing. Different teachers, with different styles and goals, may respond in dramatically different ways, all of them very effective.

There are some ways of responding that are bound to be ineffective: comments that rely heavily on terse, abbreviated comments and overly technical language; comments that inundate the student with changes across the full range of possible focuses; comments that make no more than one or two short general observations; comments that are overly critical, harsh, or sarcastic.

In theory, the best comments are those that are tied to the work of the class and geared to the needs of the individual student.

In practice, the best comments are those that lead students to look back on their writing, make (substantive) revisions, and develop their practical understanding as writers.

*Responding and the “Big Picture”*

Response should deal not only with the individual text in isolation but also with the text in relation to the student's earlier texts and her overall work in the class.

The primary purpose of response should be to help the student writer improve over time, not simply lead to the improvement of a given text.

Response is related to, but must be distinguished from, evaluation and grading. Evaluation is the act of interpreting and assessing writing; it logically precedes response. Response is the act of communicating with students about their writing. Grading is the act of rating the quality of the writing. Evaluation is necessarily a part of all response; grading is not integral to response; it may, in fact, work against response.
Effective response implements a set of evaluative criteria—even a set of priorities—that is consistent with the work and goals of the course and that is made clear to students. Although teachers should be careful not to read student writing rigidly in terms of a single procrustean ideal (the “ideal text”), they should read with a clear sense of priorities and goals. Reading with certain exemplary texts in mind is a valuable and useful practice if it does not lead to the teacher’s overlooking the writer’s particular subject matter, focus, and purpose.

*Higher-Order Concerns vs. Lower-Order Concerns*

Comments would best focus first on large matters of content, context, purpose, and organization, and only later, as the writing achieves an overall shape and focus, on matters of sentence structure, wording, and correctness.

Teachers would do well to concentrate on certain priorities at certain times across a course and not deal every week or on every draft or on every paper with a full set of concerns. Response is most effective when it is focused on one or two or three priorities at a time.

*Word Choice in Response*

Individual comments that are specific and written out in full statements are—plain and simple—better than comments that are not.

Teachers would do well to develop a full repertoire of commenting strategies so that they may deal more productively with individual students in different situations.

As a rule, teacher comments should include liberal use of comments that play back the teacher’s reading of the text, offer genuine praise, and explain key comments.

Teachers should make an effort to expand their vocabulary of praise. When they make positive evaluations, they should also look to make good use of that praise by explaining what exactly they are seeing as good or effective.

*Roles of Readers*

In some approaches, it is important to read the student’s writing in terms of her background as a writer, her intentions for the writing, and her concerns about the paper and revision. In other approaches, it is more important to read the student writer implied in the student’s writing (namely, in the student’s ongoing “text” across the course) than to know the history or concerns of the real student behind the text.

There is no single best reader role for teachers to assume when they read student writing.
Often, teachers usefully assume more than a single role as they read and respond to a given paper: the individual reader, the implied reader or target audience, the general or common reader, the teacher, the evaluator, the editor, the academic gatekeeper.

It would be best to have students take up the responsibility for commenting on one another's writing only after the class as a whole has had the opportunity to discuss and negotiate the criteria and purposes of the writing they will do—and even after they have had a chance to see the teacher model a preferred responding style.

**Responding and Class Structure**

Just how much the writing is read in terms of the assignment or the individual student depends on the nature and purposes of the course.

What we can accomplish in a set of comments or in responding to a batch of papers is limited by the very practical and pressing matter of time. We simply cannot do everything we might do as responders on every paper or on every set of papers across the term. Teachers, then, need to set priorities and establish a system for dealing with their responses from paper to paper. They have to find ways to limit the time they spend on a given paper and yet provide responses that show students that they are taking the writing seriously and lead students to reenvision their writing.

Computer technology and the world wide web will transform the ways we deliver response to student writing in the next decade and affect the ways we respond, but they will not essentially change the nature of response.