EVALUATING WRITING:  
A FIRST RESPONDERS GUIDE

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TRIAGE

What elements are most crucial to the paper’s success?

- Consider the assignment. Has the student adequately addressed it?
- Prioritize the paper’s problems. Think in terms of the essay’s global, middle, and local levels—that is, its argumentation, its organization, and its style/mechanics. Failures at the global level are more dangerous than failures at the middle level; failures at the middle level are more dangerous than failures at the local level. Plan to concentrate on helping the student to alleviate the paper’s highest-level problems.

DIAGNOSE

What aspects of the paper are/are not functioning effectively?

- Acknowledge what is working, if possible.
- Describe what isn’t working, concentrating on the paper’s highest-level problems. Use the course’s terminology whenever possible. If, for example, the professor uses the term “main claim,” don’t comment on the paper’s “thesis.”

TREAT

What can be done to improve the paper now, while you’re with the student?

- Review key concepts, preferably via conversation (as opposed to lecture). If, for instance, you diagnose a troubled introduction, ask, “What do you recall from last week’s class discussion about effective introductions? What gestures do effective introductions make?” (If you’re responding to the paper in writing, simply offer a brief overview of the concepts in question.) Once you’ve reviewed the key concepts, apply them to the paper at hand: “I’m concerned that this introduction isn’t making that third gesture, which is describing the argument’s significance.”
- Revise—or, at least, help the student begin to do so. For global-level problems, revision typically involves reconception; converse with the student (or, if you’re responding to the draft in writing, jot down questions or suggestions) to help him/her reformulate the paper’s main idea, identify additional sources of support, or begin to tackle other argument-oriented trouble spots. For middle- and local-level problems, revision more often involves reworking existing text than generating new ideas. Identify patterns of error—“Notice how none of these paragraphs opens with a clear point…”—and work with the student to correct two to three instances of the same mistake.

PRESCRIBE

What can be done to improve the paper later, when the student is working alone?

- Assign a task (or tasks), keeping the essay’s highest-level problems in mind. In other words, break the whole assignment into a few smaller assignments. Rather than say, “Go finish revising,” say, “Continue to add support to your second line of reasoning by incorporating more evidence from the novel’s third chapter. Then, clarify the warrant in your third line of reasoning by answering the same series of questions that we answered together when we discussed your second line of reasoning.”
- Suggest additional tasks worth tackling once the paper’s highest-level problems have been addressed: “Once you’ve revamped your introduction—and only once you’ve done so—review your class notes [or consult a style handbook] about choosing effective verbs. I think that you’ve relied too frequently on colorless ‘be’ verbs.”