

San Marcos Writing Project
July 1, 2010
Dawn Formo, dformo@csusm.edu

Heart Flutters and Flat Liners: A Language for Responding to (Student) Writing

1. Introductions
2. **Quick write:** What does “responding to student writing” mean to you? OR What is your purpose in responding to student writing?
3. WAC Goals
 - Creating a student-centered writing intensive community
 - Strengthening students’ reading, writing, and thinking skills
4. Useful/Useless Comments
5. So what does the research say? (Nancy Sommers’ Article)
 - **What do our comments typically do?**
Our comments can take students away from their own purposes as writers.
Our comments are often not text-specific but generic, rubber-stamped comments.
 - **What is our shared task?:** To craft responses that give writers “an inherent reason to revise” (Sommers 346, emphasis mine)
6. A Language for Responding
7. Sample Responses
8. Let’s Practice!
9. Q and A
10. Moving Response Online: “Responding to Writing Via E-Mail—A Low Budget OWL.”

Responding to Writing

Use "I" Statements ¹ (Let the writer know you responded)	
Helpful Things to Say	Things Not to Say
"I wanted to hear more about..."	"I think you should change..."
"I wasn't interested until you wrote..."	"I felt you did a good job with..."
"I didn't understand why..."	"I believe you should..."
"I was excited, confused, irritated (etc.) when..."	"I thought your letter/memo/e-mail was pretty good."

Ask Honest Questions: What do you really want to know that you don't already know?	
Helpful Things to Say	Things Not to Say
"Why did you mention...?"	"Don't you think it would be good to...?"
"What happened to the information from...?"	"Wouldn't it be better if you..."
"Who did you intend as the primary audience?"	"Why would anyone want to read...?"
"Where did you provide the details about...?" I must have missed that part.	"Why not cut the part about...?"

As a respondent...

1. Before you begin sharing work with a peer, get to know each other a bit as writers.
2. Discuss and agree on the "rules" that you and your peers want to use as respondents.
3. Focus on your response to the text.
4. Don't talk about the writer. Talk about **you** and how **you** responded to the piece.
5. Ask questions about things you don't understand.
6. Be specific with your comments.
7. Use examples of things in the writing that made you feel the way you do.
8. Share your feelings truthfully.
9. Have more than one thing to discuss.
10. Give the type of responses that you want to receive.

¹ Developed in consultation with Michelle Mullen from the San Dieguito Academy and the CSUSM College of Education.

Responding to (Student) Writers' Writing Using Heart Flutters, Flat-Liners, I-Statements and Questions

Option #1: A 3-Part Letter to the Writer

Read through the paper and then write a note to the writer. The note contains three (3) paragraphs, each of which focuses on one of the following topics:

1. "What I [the respondent] thought the piece was about, what ideas it conveyed to me."
2. "Thing that I remember after reading the piece and putting it aside." Actually quoting parts of the writer's text can be very encouraging for the writer, as well as showing which parts are particularly effective or otherwise memorable.
3. "A brief list of questions (1-3) to which I really do not have the answers." These need to be open-ended, non-leading questions which will actually stimulate the writer's mind, help him/her see where a reader was confused or what areas need greater development or support. *Examples of effective questions:* "What makes you believe that Huck Finn himself is an alcoholic?" *Examples of ineffective questions:* "Do you think it would be a good idea to give more details about your grandmother?" "Where on earth did you get the idea that Huck Finn is an alcoholic?"

Option #2: A Mental or Emotional Travelogue

Read through the piece, paying careful attention to how you are responding as you read. After finishing, write a mental and emotional travelogue covering your response at various stages of your reading, i.e., how you felt as you started to read (e.g., intrigued, confused, bored stupid, clever), as the piece developed (e.g., excited, disappointed, lost, enlightened, frustrated, exhilarated), when you finished reading, and now, looking back over the reading experience. Remember that you are not talking about the writing; you are reporting on *your experience* of it.

You might use metaphorical language to capture your response. You might talk about how the section moves (e.g., flies, stumbles, plods, skips), how it sounds (e.g., sings, whispers, screeches), or how it would relate to another of our senses (e.g., what color or shape it is or what picture it creates or what it might taste like). You might discuss the writing in terms of the weather (e.g., rainy, sunny, or cloudy), or even as a means of transportation (is it a forty-car freight train, a skateboard, a unicycle, a hang glider, or a space ship?)

Option #3: Heart Flutters and Flat-Liners

Read quickly over the whole paper, marking it in only two ways:

1. Put a *wavy or squiggly line* under words, phrases, or sentences that you like and/or think are effective.
2. Draw a line under things that seem weak, awkward, or confusing to you.
3. Then, write a brief "umbrella" comment that covers what you perceive as the main strength(s) and weakness(es) of the paper. Under the "umbrella," elaborate on the specifics that develop or explain your response, using ONLY I-statements and questions. Write at least two (2) I-statements about things that work for you and two (2) on things that don't, giving specific examples for each and, if possible, explaining why. Give your response, not your judgment.

Disclaimer: These options represent a few ways to give writers input about their writing. Please keep in mind that this level of response should be used only with selected pieces of writing during the year. To respond in this depth to all student writing in your class would be problematic for both the students and the teacher. Choose carefully which assignments you will respond to thoroughly.

Paper Response Symbols

A	Analyze (interpret, explain) this example
DEV	Develop the thought or paragraph; explain in greater detail or take your idea further
EX	Provide examples
TR	Add transition to connect the ideas or paragraphs
??	Meaning unclear
✓	Line contains one or more mechanical errors—spelling, punctuation, pronoun agreement, verb tense, etc.
*	Good work
**	Terrific work
	Strong writing (“wiggly is wonderful”)
	Weak, awkward, or confusing writing (“straight is sickly”)

Writing/Response Sample #1

Writer: Carmen, a sophomore in International Composition (a transition class after ESL III).
Assignment: Describe an imaginary journey.

I used to have a picture of the map of the world in my room. Everytime I Looked at the map, I though of the day, that I would have the opportunity to visit some of the places in the map, for example Espana, Asia or others cieties in my home Land, Mexico.

One day at nigh when I was doing my history homework. I had a strange feeling. I don't know how to describe the telling I had, but for a while I closed my eyes, and when I open them, I started hearing a very delicate voice. At first I did not know who where the voice was coming thru or even to who belong, but later I figured out that the voice came from the map. I took me a while to figured out, that the voice was coming from the map. I couldn't believe that the map was talking to me, but to me it was real. The first word that the map spoke to me was "Hi don't be afraid. Its me the map that is talking to you."

After he introduce himself I felt like I had knowed the map for a long time, and consider the map like one of my friends. After a while He say "Closed your eyes and I will take you to the places that you have always wanted to visit." I close my eyes for a while and as I open them I found my self in a strange place. Strange but yet beautiful. The map told me that I was in Asia. We went to explore some of the places, and he gave me a present, it was beautiful colorfull kimono.

After this I don't remember when the map brought me back home, it was very strange because I feel sleep doing my homework, and my mom wait me up and put me in bed. Next day when I wake up I open my closet to get some clothes and dress up, I figured it up that the colorfull kimono was there in that moment I figuret out that the experience that I had with my friend the map it was real. I did not told any body anything because they will might think I was crazy, But I know for shurt that it was true.

Teacher's Response to Carmen

Dear Carmen,

I enjoyed reading your paper, especially the creativity and the clear organization. I liked the way you set the scene in the first paragraph; you helped me to see where the story took place and why it was important to you. The fact that you gave specific examples (Spain, Asia, or cities in your homeland) made the story more believable. I also admired the vocabulary, especially "delicate," "consider," and "explore."

I had some problems while reading; at many times I was confused by the verb tense. I was not sure what had happened before or after other events. Since you were describing things that happened in a few different time periods, I wonder if you might use a time line to plan out the order and decide which verb tense to use at each point.

I also had a problem staying interested in some parts, especially in the second paragraph. I already knew, from the title, that the map was special and the first paragraph had reminded me of the map's importance. So, I had guessed what the second paragraph would say and I was eager to hear the story. I was disappointed not to learn more about your responses. I find this story amazing and would enjoy hearing much more about your feelings and thoughts. I need more information to understand how you "couldn't believe that the map was talking" *and*, at the same time, "it was real." Did some time pass between those two feelings? What details made you feel that the map really was talking? What specific parts of Asia did you explore? Did you have any problems with the language there? Did the map translate for you? If you answered some of these questions (or ones like them), I would know a lot more about your adventure.

I liked the ending, with the beautiful, colorful kimono being in the closet when you woke up the next morning. That part reminded me a little of the end of *The Wizard of Oz*. I think that just saying that you "know for sure that it was true" is not as strong as possible. I prefer being allowed to realize that for myself, from the details of the story. I'd like to see you give me the picture and let me decide for myself.

Blaze

(Blaze Newman, San Dieguito HS)

Writing/Response Sample #2

AP English 12 Pre-Test

Task: To give us both a benchmark against which to judge your learning this year, please complete the following task: you have 45 minutes to write this essay, which is similar to what you will encounter on the AP English Literature examination.

In the following poem, the speaker explores his relationship with this father. In a well-organized essay, briefly summarize the speaker's thought and analyze how elements such as diction, imagery, and syntax help to convey those thoughts. Feel free to mark the text if that would help you.

Those Winter Sundays
Sundays too my father got up early
And put his clothes on in the blueblack cold.
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic anger of that house.

Speaking indifferently to him,
Who had driven out the cold
And polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Robert Hayden (1913-1980)

Eric's Essay

It feels like I'm missing the intro to your argument.

"Fearing the chronic anger of that house," the narrator feared his dad but had a certain and special respect for his father. It seems like a typical father-son relationship of the early-mid 1900's. The father worked too much and didn't spend enough time with his son.

Typical based on what?

How do you know this from the text?

How do you know this from the text?

His dad was a hard worker. Woke up probably dawn everyday including Sunday. He threw his clothes on and battled mother nature to put food on the table for his loving family. He was a big, strapping man of 6'6" and filled out every inch of his size 56 jacket. His face was every bit as cold and sharp as the fierce wind that beat outside his window. He did his work without any complaining or questioning. No one ever thanked him though. He didn't receive the credit or praise he was entitled. He is one of the many unsung heroes of this nation.

Engage in words what supports this claim?

When work was done and the house was warm, dad would call all of his little ones out of bed. Promptly, the children would rise out of fear for the punishment for defiance. The narrator was very apathetic towards his father. No love was shown between them. He did however take care of his children, bring warmth, keep them in line and teach good morals. This is demonstrated in lines 10-13. Father had driven out the cold—something he was respected for—and polished his son's good shoes as well. This leads us to believe they are going to church, since it is Sunday morning and his nice shoes are polished. It's an example of father teaching good morals to his children.

what supports this claim?

The narrator felt strangely towards his father. He loved him but didn't even know him. He didn't know what love was. He had

Teacher's Response to Eric

Dear Eric,

I enjoyed much of your writing and several of your insights about the poem. I wanted a much stronger focus; what is your overall understanding of this poem? Each of your thoughts seems equally important and so I can't tell what you see as the main idea. I had difficulty seeing how your separate ideas connect to each other. Also, I needed a great deal more concrete support to convince me that your ideas are valid. Since I was quite interested by your ideas, I wanted to see which quotes or facts from the poem had stimulated those ideas. I can see that you know how to use support by the example you provide about the father "driving out the cold." I was distracted at a few points by comments that don't seem connected to analyzing this poem and seem more like your personal thoughts about fathers. I appreciated the clarity of the closing statement.

Blaze

Susan's Essay

Often times as we get older, we reflect on childhood experiences. (memories which are particularly unforgettable.) In the poem "Those Winter Sundays," Robert Hayden recalls the cold Sundays of winter, which his father warmed. By examining how the poet describes the behavior of both the father and son, as well as the sons feelings about his father, we can see how much these Sunday morning truly meant.

The description of behavior is very important to this poem. The narrator speaks of how his father "which cracked hands that ached/from labor in the weekday" built the fire. This shows the reader how devoted and loving a father he was. Not only did he work for his family, but even though he ached from his labors, he was willing to do so to make the home more comfortable. Then the narrator speaks of the families actions, or rather lack of actions. "No one ever thanked him." Here's a man who does all he can for his family and they give him nothing in return. He does, however receive love in the end, or at least he knows that in giving to his family he is giving them love and that is all the thanks he needs. The narrator looking back on these scenes realized his feelings for his father, and how his father felt this love.

On those Sunday mornings, the narrator felt "indifferent" toward his father. He also felt fear due to the "chronic angers" of the house. This fear and indifference can be interpreted in many ways, but what is most likely is that he just being a kid. It is obvious, by reading the poem, that the narrator now understands his father's actions and emotions, but looking back and understanding is quite different from understanding at the time. There is a certain age at which all children are fearful and indifferent toward there parents. It starts around the age of 13 and continues until an understanding is met. Since we don't know the anger of the narrator we can't say whether it is this stage that the child is going through or not. But it is my assertion that the boy is going through a stage, which he cannot, or doesn't want to relate to his father, and that is the root of the indifference and fear.

Childhood memories are the best lessons for adult life. Robert Hayden shows through the actions and emotions of his characters, that reflection and time can make the difference between indifference and understanding in the life of a child, and the actions of a father. Although these mornings may not have seemed special at the time, the narrator wouldn't give up "Those Winder Sundays" for anything.

