

Letter from the Wits Writing Programme

Responses to writing: the gift of the listening eye.¹

Dear tutors,

During this time of disconnection, anxiety, and turmoil large numbers of tutors are doing their best to maintain connection with students, and the connection of students with their studies. This is not to say that sustained deep engagement is easy, or even always fully possible, but it is necessary for meaningful learning.

The Wits Writing Programme (WWP) offers a cross-faculty suite of Writing Intensive (WI) courses which have been adapted to use writing to learn to think and to communicate within a discipline. The WWP is growing across the university. Creative teaching and learning is happening within courses as WI lecturers and their Writing Fellow (WF) tutors find ways to encourage students to think for themselves, to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes, to find out what they want to know and, critically, to chart their own learning journey.

Letters are crucial to this connection and engagement. They are written in response to student drafts, as a way to listen to students, to understand the students' starting points and their consequent best reasoned line of enquiry. Through the tutor's active listening and following of the student's thinking, the aim is for students to see their own thoughts,² and so consider their choices and different ways of strengthening their argument. The successful writing respondent is, as Donald Murray famously termed, a 'listening eye', whose purpose is to make the student's voice more effective, and, in the end, to become unnecessary, because the student has internalized the responses of a reader to their work.

Cultivating this enabling response through letters is itself an art which avoids prematurely closing the student's thinking, misinterpretation, or the imposition of ideas. The "listener" seeks to encourage confidence in the students and the equilibrium necessary to take a step back and think about their thoughts, their own reasons for their enquiry, and their implicit possible trajectories. This type of attention and reflection is elusive if we are caught in the net of social media or are sitting through endless Teams or Zoom meetings. How do we cultivate that imaginative space which shuts out unnecessary noise and allows an inward journey to converse with ourselves or the text or texts which we are reading? How do we

¹ See the classic essay by Murray, Donald (1979) "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference." <http://mjreiff.com/uploads/2/9/1/7/2917319/murraylisteningeye.pdf> (Accessed 24/03/2021).

² I am indebted to my WWC colleague Mr. Lerato Seohatse for this excellent phrase.

promote “deep literacy”³ or the pleasure of “enfolded thought,”⁴ in the time of click bait and mosquito brain?

How do we translate the listening eye into email letters?

We have found that *thoughtful* letter writing does not happen automatically, but that it can be coaxed into happening, if the respondent sets a slow pace, shows a genuine interest, draws out the thinking of the student for self-reflection, and models an increasingly scholarly response.

In a recent (March 16) Wits Writing Centre staff meeting, on a WhatsApp group, WWC consultants thought through how they have given feedback to student writing via letters.

Barbara Adair, a published novelist and short story writer, commented that she enjoys the challenge of translating informal conversation into written words. She suggested imagining a conversation before writing it, then the use of open questions and the framing of response as an honest reading rather than an instruction. If this approach is successful, a series of letters follows, a regular channel of communication is established, and the students become more comfortable thinking about their thinking.

Barbara wrote:

My view is that before you sit and write anything, speak it as if you are talking to the person. Anticipate their response. Then write. In this way you capture the conversation.

[...] I begin to respond in the form of questions, personal perceptions as a reader and open ended possibilities.

[...] I feel often the positive progress in the student’ responses and often they send the next draft back. Then the engagement becomes real.

Kgaogelo Lekota observed that the tutor’s response to a draft should not evaluate, but rather prompt the student to think further:

Key that it is a conversation, not an evaluation.

Perhaps also be realistic and practical about what we can and cannot do, or influence.

Another consultant noted that in these anxious times, respondents can inadvertently adopt an unhelpful tone. Karabo Kgoleng notes that she is

³ See Garfinkle, Adam. “The Erosion of Deep Literacy”. *National Affairs*. Spring 2020.

<https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-erosion-of-deep-literacy> (Accessed 22/03/2021).

⁴ See Elbow, Peter. “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience”. *College English*. 1987.

https://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/52/ (Accessed 22/03/2021).

Anxious about asking questions in an interrogative tone... constantly thinking about register – hence I don't interact with the writer's work if I'm tired, hungry or angry...

Rutendo Chigudu added that she does her best to listen to the mind behind the words, and to what is in the process of surfacing.

I tend to try and 'hear' the unsaid in the work and that's what I ask the writer.
Rutendo

Responses to drafts should be constructive, aware of the stage of the writing and the needs of the writer, in other words, responses should be **developmental**. The student also needs to situate their writing, and to understand the discipline-specific, **rhetorical** position of the text. All texts necessarily have an implied audience, purpose, and function.

In the initial contact with a student, try to understand how the text is positioned, its intended audience, its purpose, and its genre. At the WWC, the cover letter which accompanies the draft, includes an initial identification of rhetorical position, see below.

Cover letter



University of the Witwatersrand
Wartenweiler Library, ground floor
Currently operating online

Cover letter.

Please complete the following questions.

1. Your name, discipline and the degree for which you are registered:

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.....

2. The working title of text that you are working with or a description of the writing task assigned:

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.....

3. Who is the intended **audience** for this text?

.....
.....

(Your answer will help us understand what your audience already knows, their expectations, and what needs to be explained or defended)

4. What is the **purpose** of this text?

.....
.....

(What is the function of this text, e.g., to argue, to explain, or to prove knowledge acquisition?)

5. What is the **genre** of this text?

.....
.....

(For example, a lab report, a critical essay, or a literature review. Identifying the genre of your text, will help us understand what kind of writing it is, and if there are specific rules involved.)

Please write to the consultant below to explain your writing concerns with this draft

Dear WWC consultant,

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.....

Sign below

I understand that the WWC is not an editing service and that it has no influence on essay marks. It is a peer review service, designed to aid revision, and to develop and consolidate life-long habits of writing. (By continuing with this cover letter, I am recording my understanding and acceptance of this service.)

Signed:

Date:

And finally email your cover letter and draft to Professor Nichols, Pamela.Nichols@wits.ac.za, who will then forward your letter and draft to a WWC consultant. Allow at least three days for us to get back to you.

Response template

The cover letter and draft is then read by the respondent, who makes strategic annotations on the draft and writes back to the writer following the template below. Key to a successful response is to begin with higher order concerns, such as asking about the choice of argument, or why the student is responding to the assignment in this way. Addressing lower

order concerns first, such as mistakes in grammar or usage, can make the student feel self-conscious and hence prone to mistakes. Rather the focus is on respecting the individual, and find out first the meanings that they have in mind. As you listen, the student might find the words necessary to explain to you.

Set out below is the WWC response template, which can be adapted for responding to the drafts of your students.



Consultant response sheet.

Please answer the questions below, and send the student selected in-text comments where it is useful to point to particular parts of the text. Alternatively write a letter covering the points below.

Author of draft:

Title:

1. Is this an early stage or late stage draft, and what are the specific concerns of the writer?
2. What are your observations on a structural level (argument, organization)?
3. Identify one or two specific issues that you think it might be useful for the writer to address, and offer suggestions for how to address them.
4. Where is the draft succeeding?
5. Are there recurring surface errors (for example, in language choice, paragraphing, referencing, or sentence construction) which you can usefully identify for the writer, correct once, and then ask them to continue the corrections themselves?
6. Summative comments or letter to the writer, in response to their initial concerns and your sense of their best way forward.

You could try this template on yourself. If you were a reader of your own work, how might you answer these questions?

The respondent's comments should progressively model the way that scholars read each other. They should not seek to be exhaustive but rather they should be strategic comments

and interventions, not an editing but a coaching, towards writing like a scholar in the field. The hope is that through the letters you 'talk' to the student in writing and that the student begins to 'talk' back, and that this informal, written conversation begins to craft their formal writing.

Wishing you all the best with your crucial work,
Pamela

Professor Pamela Nichols
Head: Wits Writing Programme