

Composition Weekly



March 27, 2012

Marginal Comments vs. End Comments in Student Papers

My apologies for the inconsistencies in the newsletter these past weeks. I have been having difficulties coming up with newsletter ideas having been so far removed from teaching composition this year. Thanks to Terry Reilly for passing this article along to me, and please, I welcome any and all suggestions for newsletters. Do not hesitate to share! I would like to do several student profiles over the remaining weeks of the semester, the first of which will be coming out this Friday about an English 111 student who wrote a full-length script and had it performed and produced.

Anyways - the issue between marginal comments and end comments - or is there one? I suppose this is a question I'm posing in this newsletter, as the article Terry handed to me was short and sweet, comparing "Lines from *The Princess Bride* that Double as Comments on Freshman Composition Papers." The article was written by Jennifer Simonson. Simonson's article follows:

"You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

"At a time like this that's all you can think to say?"

"Nonsense. You're only saying that because no one ever has."

"I don't think I'm quite familiar with that phrase."

"I would not say such things if I were you!"

"I do not suppose you could speed things up?"

"Skip to the end!"

"That is the sound of ultimate suffering."

"Inconceivable!"

When I took English 685, we read the article "The Genre of the End Comment: Conventions in Teacher Responses to Student Writing" by Summer Smith, which came to mind when I went over Simonson's article, as she was clearly referring to marginal comments due to their responsive nature. While Smith's article addressed the different genres of the end comment, she was mostly trying to negotiate the most effective way of getting through to students in these comments. Our concern: students do not take the time to read these comments on

their final drafts - or, perhaps they only browse through the marginal comments in search of their grade. My question: by using such blanketed comments (as seen in the lines Simonson picked out from *The Princess Bride*), are we deterring students from reading our end comments or feeding their curiosity, inviting them to read on?

In a conversation I had with Christie VanLaningham the other day, we discussed how we went about reading the comments we've received from instructors in the past - and it reflected this issue quite nicely. I noticed how much I rely on marginal comments that continuously challenge me before my interest in the end comment is piqued. Comments such as the ones Simonson picked out would have no affect on me - mostly because of their vague nature. This made me think about how I comment on student papers, which consists of heavily marginalized comments and an end comment in the form of a letter addressing the paper as a whole. I don't know if this was an effective feedback style for my students (or if I just exhausted them), but I'd be curious to ask students in the future how they like to receive feedback to see if there are noticeable changes in their following papers.

I don't think there is one style that will be useful to all students, and I realize the difficulty in catering different feedback mechanisms for twenty-five students. However, I think it's important to think about these things, and to consider the ways in which we like to receive criticism on our own work. I'm interested to hear from other teachers' about their experiences with comments - either as a student, as a professional submitting work, or as a teacher - and whether or not that has influenced the teaching we do on papers. Please come share on Write Alaska on the teaching forum page. Is there a right way? Does it matter?