What to Do When You Get a Paper Back

If you're like most students, you skip to the end of the paper when the instructor returns it. You look at the grade: a B or higher, and you read through the comments happily. Anything lower than a B, and you look through them with a chip on your shoulder. And in either case, you usually ignore the comments in the margin. If you look at them at all, you may notice such things as “wrong word,” and so on. But you don't really take the time to figure them out. For your own sake (that is, to learn something), you might take a new approach to this subject. After all, the instructor must have had a reason for putting those marks there.

THE GENERAL RULE: Consider the instructor's comments to be part of a dialog and respond in writing to those comments. Respond on the paper itself, right next to the comments themselves, but if you can't tarnish your work this way, do them on a separate sheet.

Examples of Marginal Comments and What to Do with Them

- **Awkward.** Don't say to yourself, “Oh, awkward, huh? Well, that's not so bad.” Often the sentence will contain an error of some kind, in diction, or grammar, or structure. Try on the spot to rewrite the sentence or phrase. On rare occasions, it may be just that—awkward; but assume otherwise.

- **Wrong Word/Word Choice.** Try to figure out what word might have worked better, and write it down above the incorrect one.

- **Do You Mean…? Isn't This…? Why?** Such questions are attempts to get you to think about what you've said or to explain more fully. Your first response (a huffy one) may be, “No, I didn't mean that,” or “No, this isn't…” Try to write out a reply assuming at first that you need to examine the issue more thoroughly. Only after you've made this attempt, and failed, should you go to the instructor for clarification.

- **Grammar Errors.** Simply try to correct them when they occur.

Responding to marginal comments will not only help you learn the ropes, but also help you focus any questions or comments if you go over the paper with the instructor.

End Comments

Usually end comments often involve larger issues—development and organization—and do not lend themselves to making changes on the paper. You'll use them when you revise the paper. However, you can do some work with them. Examples: “In your introduction, you might do x and y.” Go ahead and try to revise the introduction. “The middle section of the paper seems confused.” Go to the middle section and outline your points to see if all related points are in the same paragraph and if the paragraphs fit together properly.

Once you've given yourself 24 hours to study and attempt to respond to the comments, you can go to the instructor with specific questions, and not as a fire-breathing beast who demands to know why this isn't a perfect paper. You'll already know how to improve.