

Dr. Wetherbee's Hierarchy of Writing

Sept. 2019

First, a few philosophical propositions about responding to writing:

1. We can't "fix" writing like we can a bicycle or leaky faucet. Writing is a communicative act, and its grammatical "correctness" matters less than its communicative success. The best we can do is attempt to understand the writer's rhetorical purposes and help that writer meet those purposes.
2. Writing – even that by beleaguered students who say they hate their own work – is personal, and it's always the writer's own intellectual property. We can't try to make others' writing our own. Rather, we need to help clients realize their own writerly goals.
3. When we talk about style and grammar, it's better to teach the rule than be the client's copyeditor. (Watch how I rewrite this comma splice; you do the next ...)
4. Writing is hard. We need to be kind.
5. The "tiers" below establish general guidelines and priorities, but writing isn't a science and neither is responding to writing. You're all here because you're smart and good at this; when in doubt, follow your own intuition.

Tier 1: Thesis, Organization, Audience – Primary "Big Picture" Stuff

Is the writer's argument clear, specific, and well-defined? Can you articulate the essay's thesis after reading it? Is the thesis novel and specific, or is it merely reiterating commonplace generalities?

Is the essay's organization logical? Does the evidence support the argument? Does the essay anticipate diversity of perspectives about its argument? (If appropriate, does it integrate counterargument and concession?)

Does the writer seem to understand *who* s/he is writing *for*? (If it's just the professor, that's sometimes fine, but not always!)

This one's important: Is there an assignment prompt? Does the essay meet the assignment?

Tier 2: Research, Genre – Secondary "Big Picture" Stuff

Does the author *philosophically* understand the role of citation and integrating sources? (That is, does the paper use research to locate itself in a pertinent scholarly conversation?) Does the essay attribute outside language and ideas to their sources? Is the essay using outside sources effectively vis-à-vis its own argument?

Does the essay suit the genre conventions dictated by its discipline? Does it, for example, need an abstract? Should it have section headers? If this is a sociology paper, does it *feel* like a sociology paper?

Tier 2.5 (Bonus Tier!): Inside Baseball Stuff

Do *you* have any specialized knowledge about the assignment, class, or professor in question that might help the author? (“Wetherbee will jump down your throat if you don’t narrow your thesis.” “When I had to write this same paper a year ago, here’s what worked well for me.” “Rees will actually set you on fire if your MLA is jacked up.”)

Tier 3: Source-Integration, Transitions, Style – Paragraph- and Sentence-Level Stuff

Does the author integrate quotes and other outside research gracefully, meshing outside ideas with the writer’s own argument? Does the author avoid “quote bombs” (i.e., uncontextualized, unattributed quotes that explode under the reader’s feet)? When writing in MLA or Chicago style, does the author effectively introduce outside authors when it makes sense to do so? (“As literary scholar John Bruce argues ...”)

Does the author effectively steer the reader’s attention between ideas at the sentence and paragraph levels? Do any sentences seem “chunky” or conceptually isolated?

Does the author’s prose read with a pleasing “rhythm” – that is, does the author vary sentence length/structure and avoid awkward repetition? Does the prose avoid convoluted syntax, excessive preposition phrasing, and overuse of the passive voice? (Compare: “The difference between the types of classes in the story is brought to light by a perspective drawing from Marxist ideas,” versus, “A Marxist perspective highlights class disparity in the story.”)

Tier 4: Grammar, Formatting, Citation Technicalities – “Correctness” Stuff

Any recurring grammar mistakes? (Comma splices, sentence fragments, etc.)

Are citations formatted correctly in-text and on Works Cited and References pages?

Should I show you how to do a hanging indent on your Works Cited list?

Margins look good? Should you have a page number there?

Why is this one paragraph set in 14-point Helvetica?