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## The Texts Within the Context: Examining the Influence of Contextual Documents on Students' Interpretations of Teachers' Written Feedback

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In spite of a host of scholarship pertaining to response and the contexts that surround our response practices, few have studied how everyday classroom texts may inform students' interpretations of teachers' written feedback on their writing. This article examines the results from case studies of six students across two first-year composition (FYC) classrooms and explores how these students drew upon three types of contextual factors—assignment descriptions/texts, student-teacher conferences, and grading materials—in order to articulate their interpretations of their teachers' written feedback. This article investigates the roles each of these contextual factors play in students' interpretations of their teachers' written commentary. It also discusses how classroom texts work reciprocally with one another and in conjunction with teachers' overall pedagogical practices. The article further argues for greater attention to these classroom texts in response scholarship and practice, along with recommending an approach to response that views these contextual factors and written feedback in a more pedagogically integrated fashion. The article concludes by advocating for the development of cohesive narratives about writing across the texts teachers create in their classrooms and the written commentary they provide to students.

*Keywords:* response, context, assignment descriptions, student-teacher conferences, rubrics, grades

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“Are you watching closely?” While this common question asked by magicians seems like an attempt to establish ethos, an invitation to make sure that the magician is not attempting to deceive the audience, it is, intriguingly, a ruse meant precisely to deceive the audience. By having the audience fixate on particular aspects of an illusion, magicians draw the audience’s attention away from what they do not want them to see. There is a reason magicians employ an array of theatrical elements in their performances. The more the audience’s perception is focused on these elements, the more apt the viewers are to miss what is going on peripherally. Yet there, on the edges of the spectacle, away from the theatricality and wonder, is frequently where the real trick of the illusion occurs.

A similar misdirection can occur when teachers respond to students’ writing. Teachers will “watch closely” and be attentive to the words they compose in the margins and at the end of students’ texts. However, these comments exist within a much broader context and can have a reciprocal relationship with other texts found in the classroom. These texts that exist on the periphery of the classroom are where much of the meaning-making for students may occur.

Scholarship on teacher response has indeed questioned whether exclusive focus on written commentary directs attention away from other vital elements of our response practices (e.g., Huot, 2002; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981; Mathison-Fife & O’Neill, 2001). Seemingly minor contextual nuances have been demonstrated to have a profound impact on how teachers’ written commentary is analyzed, evaluated, and even interpreted by students. These contributions are invaluable to the scholarship on response, yet there is limited research as to how everyday, seemingly mundane classroom texts influence students’ interpretations of written commentary. Texts such as assignment prompts, assignment-related activities, student-teacher conferences, grading criteria, and even assigned grades can acutely impact the manner in which students engage with—and make meaning from—teachers’ responses.

This article reflects on the findings of a study which examined how students drew upon various classroom texts—referred to during the study as (con)texts—while interpreting their teachers’ written commentary.

The article begins by reviewing the existing scholarship on context and response, focusing on theoretical endeavors as well as research that analyzes particular contextual factors. Afterwards, the methodology used will be elaborated. Then, the article will address the findings from six case studies across two first-year composition (FYC) classrooms. Discussion of the findings will then address implications of this research, especially in relation to the existing research on response practices and the contextual factors under consideration. Lastly, the article will contemplate what these contextual interpretations suggest about response practices and how teachers can improve their own response practices as a result. Overall, this article seeks to demonstrate how attentiveness to these (con)texts can provide a more nuanced analysis of written commentary and promote a more pedagogically integrated approach to response practices.

### **Background: The (Not Quite Complete) Ascendancy of Context in Response Scholarship**

Discussions of the importance of context in response scholarship are certainly not new. The most notable critiques of decontextualized approaches began emerging in the early 1980s. Knoblauch and Brannon (1981) were among the first scholars to speculate as to this potential oversight. They claimed that research into improving response practices operated under two primary, yet faulty, assumptions:

First, that the process of commenting can be isolated from the whole environment of oral and written communication between teacher and student, and, second, that categories of response can be further isolated according to the intrinsic merits of their superficial features. (p. 2)

Knoblauch and Brannon viewed response as inseparable from the classroom context and contingent on an understanding of the communicative relationship between teacher and student.

Yet, two major empirical studies that followed their work primarily focused on instructors' written comments. Connors and Lunsford (1993) used 3,000 student papers from 300 teachers to identify patterns in teachers' commentary on student writing. They discovered that although

teachers addressed more rhetorical concerns and were not as fixated on surface-level features of writing as they had been in the past, teachers' rhetorical comments were still just as formulaic and mechanical as those past grammatical corrections. Additionally, Straub and Lunsford (1995) sent 12 prominent scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition a set of 15 student essays and asked them to provide written commentary. Straub and Lunsford's extensive methodology analyzed the comments from two main perspectives: focus and mode. Straub and Lunsford then used this analysis to classify the 12 responders' styles based on a continuum, ranging from authoritative styles to interactive styles, and generated seven guiding principles for effective response. Although Straub and Lunsford provided simulated contextual parameters and acknowledged the limitations of not having authentic contexts, their analysis relied primarily on analyzing the written comments the scholars provided. Both studies framed scholarship on response and response practices in a textual, not contextual, fashion.

Mathison-Fife and O'Neill (2001), however, reasserted the need for a more context-sensitive approach to the study of response. Advocating for the central role that context should occupy in response scholarship, they claimed, "The prevailing assumption of the research has been that the problems of ineffective response and loss of student textual authority lies in the teachers' written comments; solving these problems, then, means improving and changing the written comments" (p. 302). Since the problems of response have historically been framed around the tone, style, and content of the written commentary, solutions to issues of control, student agency, and best practices in response have been textual ones. The framing of the problem thus necessitates a particular—and mainly textual—solution.

Mathison-Fife and O'Neill's article appeared at a time when a renewed emphasis on context led to a host of studies examining the influence of various contextual factors on response practices. One of the most prominent missing links in scholars' conversations was the perspective of students (Bowden, 2018; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Murphy, 2000; O'Neill & Mathison-Fife, 1999; Sommers, 2006; Straub, 1997). These studies demonstrated that students (a) prefer specific commentary that is critical

without being overly negative, (b) do not value traditional proofreading marks and vague commentary like “awkward” and “more details,” and (c) are willing to accept criticism of their writing but do not appreciate when their opinions are called into question.

Some studies have focused on instructors’ reading habits (Anson, 1999; Edgington, 2005; Huot, 2002). Such studies have indicated that teachers’ reading habits play a crucial role in response practices, frequently determining what teachers attend to and how they formulate their responses. Emotions can also influence how teachers read and respond to student writing, with teachers’ values often triggering emotions tied to teachers’ identity formation (Caswell, 2014). Furthermore, Caswell (2018), during a case study employing a think-aloud protocol, found two main emotional tensions that occur in teachers: the struggle to focus on content while feeling obligated to address local concerns and the struggle to know how to address criticism to students with whom they have close relationships. Callahan (2000) even examined personality types by applying the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (a personality test) to both herself and her students. After analyzing the personality types, she noticed that she tends to respond more favorably to the reflective writing of students who have similar personalities to her own.

The prevailing trends tend to demonstrate that teachers’ reading habits, assumptions, predispositions, and potential biases can profoundly influence how they respond to a student’s text. Other contextual factors that have garnered attention in response scholarship include teachers’ perceptions of error (Anson, 2000; Horner, 1992), reflective writing’s connection to response (Yancey, 1998), generic patterns in teachers’ end comments (Smith, 1997), and even how the medium for response (i.e., written or recorded) influences the nature of response (Anson, 1997; Sommers, 2012).

Despite the extensive work on response scholarship, the relationship between the written commentary teachers provide and the everyday texts and discourse surrounding response has not been studied extensively. Certain scholars have discussed the influence of the actual assignment description on teachers’ response practices (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Jeffrey & Selting, 1999; Phelps, 1998). These researchers have particularly observed the tendency for teachers to fixate their responses on whether

students have fulfilled the objectives of the assignment description and the teachers' own notion of what the assignment should look like. Student-teacher conferences have also garnered some attention, with Black (1998) studying these verbal forms of response extensively (but never connecting them to written response) and Ferris (2014) demonstrating the ubiquity of the practice across academia. Richardson (2000) even looked at response in relation to the deferred grading practices common in classrooms that employ portfolio pedagogy. Additionally, several scholars see grading and response as antitheses, arguing for either deferred grading or grading contracts (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Inoue, 2012; Metzger, 2008).

Assignment descriptions and other texts/activities associated with assignments, student-teacher conferences, and grading materials are rather ubiquitous classroom documents that serve to frame—and expound upon—the exigence and rhetorical situations created for students through classroom projects. Responses to students' writing frequently address how well students have responded to the situations the aforementioned documents assist in framing. Thus, presumably, these contextual documents and teacher response practices are quite interrelated. And yet, scholarship pertaining to these potential connections is quite scarce.

### Research Questions

Intrigued by these three facets of the context surrounding response, I designed a study to examine how these everyday classroom documents and practices influence students' interpretations of teachers' written commentary. The study was guided primarily by the following research question: How do students articulate the ways that assignment descriptions/texts, student-teacher conferences, and grading materials help them interpret teachers' written commentary?

I then addressed the research question via three subquestions:

- How do students articulate their interpretations of teachers' written commentary in relation to the assignment descriptions/texts provided in class? To what extent do these assignment texts help students interpret teachers' written commentary?

- How do students articulate their interpretations of teachers' written commentary in relation to student-teacher conferences? To what extent do these student-teacher conferences help students interpret teachers' written commentary?
- How do students articulate their interpretations of teachers' written commentary in relation to grading criteria and grades? To what extent do grading criteria and grades help students interpret teachers' written commentary?

## Methods

### Overview of the Study

The study was conducted during a summer semester at a large, public Research I university in the southeastern United States. I wanted to examine three text-based contextual factors that might influence response: assignment descriptions/texts (assignment descriptions as well as text-based class activities), student-teacher conferences, and grading materials (both the grading criteria and the grades assigned). Since these factors were all text-based (student-teacher conferences were transcribed), this enabled a degree of uniformity in data collection and coding as each factor was amenable to textual analysis. Due to their textual nature, as mentioned, the factors are referred to during the study as (con)texts.

The study consisted of extended case studies of six students throughout the course of an entire assignment sequence in two FYC classrooms. As Burawoy (1998) observed, extended case methods can be used “in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro’” (p. 5). The key to successfully doing this extraction, as Barata (2010) noted, is for the researcher to “observe a number of related events and actions of individuals and groups over an extended period of time” (p. 374). This method was ideal for this study since the goal was to observe students not during one initial and specific act of interpretation but instead while interpreting their instructors' written responses across an entire assignment sequence using a confluence of contextual factors. Furthermore, while definitive generalizations cannot be made as these case studies were conducted in only one particular context, the case

studies do allow for the theorization of some principles about written commentary's connection to contextual documents.

## Participants

The study included six students and two teachers. The six student participants—Peter, Rachel, Courtney, Katie, Danielle, and Emily—were all traditional-aged freshmen (17–19) in their first semester at the university. Additionally, all of the participants were native English speakers. Since each student had been accepted to this university, they were likely A- and B- earning students in the top 10% of their high school classes. The two teachers, Jill and Jack, were both graduate assistants in the college composition program. At the time of the study, Jill was entering the third year of her PhD studies. She had come to the university after completing her MA at another university. Jack was entering the second year of his PhD studies. Unlike Jill, though, Jack had completed his MA at the same university where he was doing his PhD.

## Data Collection: The (Con)texts and Structure of Each Class

For this study, the (con)texts for each class were collected (or in the case of student-teacher conferences, audio recorded and transcribed) as they were distributed or occurred and later were analyzed. I observed all classroom sessions for each class during the assignment sequence. Each classroom introduced the (con)texts at particular times. In Jill's class, students were presented with an initial assignment description in the syllabus as well as a longer, more detailed assignment description in the form of a nine-slide PowerPoint presentation when the assignment was introduced. The grading rubric was also presented at this time within the PowerPoint. The assignment texts and activities surrounding the assignment were engaged with after the assignment was introduced, but before the initial drafts were submitted. Jill provided written commentary for the students after they completed their first draft, which she then returned to them through Blackboard. She intriguingly wrote her commentary for students' third drafts during the student-teacher conference. She took detailed notes on the students' texts as they conferenced and then finished the notes later with time to reflect before emailing them to the students.

After their third drafts, students received as-is grades, which gave them an indication of where they stood if the draft was not revised for the portfolio.

Jack provided the students with an assignment description in their syllabus and introduced the assignment description in class. He did not have a formal rubric, but he did have a description in his syllabus about determining the expectations of the class through the class discourse. He also employed a hybrid grading scheme in which the students' first submitted drafts were worth 10% of their grade and their final portfolio was assessed holistically for 40% of their grade. Jack provided informal, hand-written commentary consisting of the notes he took during the student-teacher conferences, which he conducted in groups (all three participants from his class were in the same group). He later provided formal written commentary on the drafts that were submitted to him for 10% of the students' grades.

### **Interview Protocol and Analysis**

At the end of the assignment sequence, the students were interviewed using a fixed-question, open-response method. Additional questions were asked in certain instances if the students' answers were unclear or if the answers warranted further discussion. Nevertheless, the interviews were intended to be as symmetrical as possible to avoid leading the students' answers and to allow for systematic approaches to data collection and analysis. The interviews ranged between 20 and 30 minutes in duration. Appendix A provides the entire list of questions for the interviews.

The interviews were divided into two sets of questions. The initial set of questions asked the students about the responses they received from their teachers both as a whole and in regard to specific comments. During the initial stage of the interview, the (con)texts were not mentioned to the students. Then, during the second stage of the interview, the students were asked explicitly about the influence the (con)texts had or did not have on how they interpreted their teachers' written commentary. This structure was employed to avoid leading students' answers in the first portion of the interview in order to see whether they would reference the (con)texts unprompted. The second stage of the interview then allowed the students to reflect on the influence of the (con)texts in a more direct fashion.

The students' answers during the first half of the interview were coded in regard to direct and indirect references to the (con)texts. A direct reference code was given to any instance in which the student explicitly referred to the (con)text in question; an indirect reference code was given to any instance in which the student indirectly referenced elements and/or used precise language from one of the (con)texts. A coinvestigator and I coded the interviews collaboratively. Throughout the coding session, the burden of proof resided with the stronger code to ensure that the interviews were not coded favorably. If there was any discrepancy between whether a direct reference or indirect reference code should be applied, the indirect reference code was chosen unless an effective argument could be made to apply the direct reference code. In instances in which there was a discrepancy as to whether to code for an indirect reference or not code at all, the investigator wishing to apply the indirect code was required to provide textual evidence from the particular (con)text—and/or a strong rationale—in order to apply the code. Appendix B offers a detailed table depicting how the unprompted coding scheme operated.

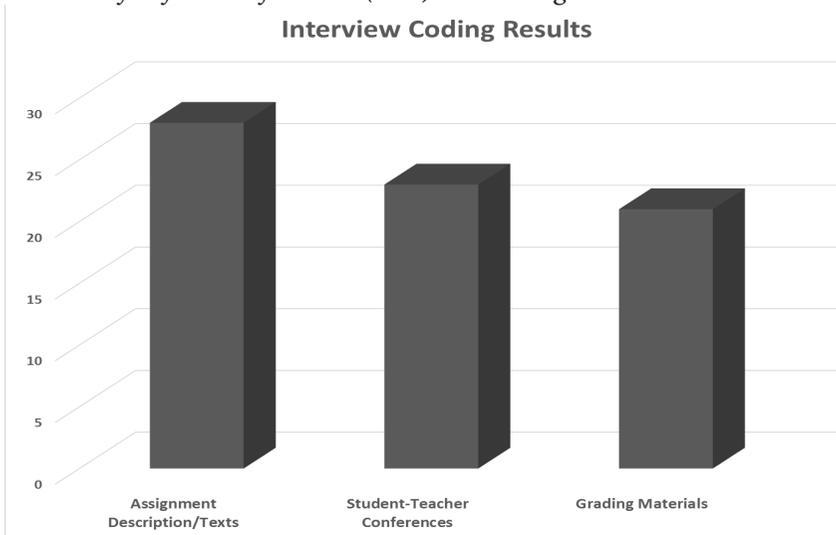
Students' answers from the second half of the interview, when they were asked directly about the (con)texts, were given attribution scores in regard to how much their answers suggested they drew upon the particular (con)text in question. We used attribution scores for this portion of the interview since students were obviously referencing the (con)texts in question. The principal investigator was less interested in whether students referenced the (con)texts and more intrigued by how useful they thought the (con)texts were for interpreting their teachers' written commentary. Thus, the attribution scores allowed for a descriptive numeric portrait of the data that—while predicated on a subjective judgment—proved reliable across researchers. The attribution scores were assigned as one (little to no attribution), two (moderate attribution), or three (strong attribution). Once again, the principal investigator and a coinvestigator coded the answers collaboratively to ensure reliability. Out of 39 answers, only two discrepancies occurred in the coding. In both instances, the disagreement was between whether to assign a two or a three as the attribution score. The two discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. Appendix C offers a detailed table depicting how the prompted coding scheme operated.

## Overall Findings

When the results of all the student interviews were factored together, there were a total of 72 references to the (con)texts throughout the unprompted portion of the six student interviews (see Figure 1). Overall, the study showed that students referenced assignment descriptions/texts the most often when interpreting their teachers' responses. There were eight direct references and 20 indirect references to these texts in the interviews. The second most referenced (con)text was student-teacher conferences, with four direct references and 19 indirect references. The least referenced (con)text was grading materials, with one direct reference and 20 indirect references. Each of the (con)texts played a discernible role in how students interpreted their teachers' written commentary, even when they were not prompted to consider the (con)texts in question.

**Figure 1**

*Number of References for Each (Con)text During the Student Interviews.*



In regard to the attribution scores for the students, student-teacher conferences received the highest overall average attribution score, with a perfect three; yet, the students also placed emphasis on assignment descriptions/texts (2.51) and grading materials (2.34) during the prompted

portion of the interviews. Each of the three (con)texts under examination received a high average attribution score. The data from the prompted portion of the interviews demonstrate that these students indeed valued these (con)texts when interpreting written commentary.

**Table 1**

*Average Attribution Scores for the Three (Con)texts*

| Question                          | Average student attribution score |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| #6: Assignment descriptions/texts | 2.51                              |
| #7: Student-teacher conferences   | 3                                 |
| #8: Grading materials             | 2.34                              |

The (con)texts played unique roles in aiding students in interpreting their teachers' responses. These roles were not always static though. At times, these roles were more universal across all six of the students; at other times, particular students drew upon these (con)texts in idiosyncratic ways. The next section will discuss each of the (con)texts and provide examples from the teachers' responses and the students' coded answers to explicate some of these trends and patterns. Trends that emerged across the (con)texts will also be addressed.

### **The Roles of Each of the (Con)texts**

#### **Assignment Descriptions/Texts**

The data showed that assignment descriptions/texts played a reciprocal role with the written commentary. Students used the assignment descriptions/texts to (a) determine how well they grasped and executed the teachers' expectations of the assignments, as well as to (b) gain a firmer understanding of what the expectations for the assignments were. The first instructor whose classroom was studied, Jill, was a conscientious teacher who took great care in designing her (con)texts and expounding upon them in her classroom lectures and discussions. As previously mentioned, her class was given a traditional assignment description (see Appendix D), a nine-slide PowerPoint detailing the assignment, and

several text-based activities that accompanied the assignment sequence. Peter, a student in her class, drew heavily on one of the assignment activities when interpreting this comment by Jill on his third draft:

This is what the genre is communicating or selling. Instead of video game, use video game genre.

When asked how he interpreted this comment, Peter replied, “Because the day before we had an exercise and only half the people said this was about genre.”

The activity in Jill’s class that Peter is referencing was one in which students were asked to highlight each other’s drafts for particular features and note what they believed the main message was. Here, Peter remarked not only on how Jill commented on his focus in her response, but connected this to his peers’ struggles to determine his paper’s focus. Both Jill’s commentary and his peers’ feedback during the assignment activity worked reciprocally to indicate to Peter that there was an obvious problem with the focus of his essay. Between his third and final draft, Peter put this commentary—viewed through the lens of the assignment activity—to use in his revisions. Both his introduction and conclusion for his final draft were more explicit about the connection to genre.

The second instructor in the study, Jack, was an engaging teacher who relied less on text-heavy (con)texts. Rather, Jack believed in the value of aiding students in determining the parameters of the rhetorical situation for themselves. Yet, Danielle’s interpretation of Jack’s end comment was focused on discerning Jack’s expectations for the assignment. In his end comment, Jack wrote:

Overall, there’s some work that needs to be done to make this a stronger, tighter project. You may want to focus your attention away from one theme (confidence) and re-focus your attention to how there may be a couple ways people branch from that central theme, and then support it with evidence (or tweets/Instagram posts, etc.).

Jack’s assignment description (see Appendix E) asked students to examine the writing that surrounds a particular hashtag of interest to them. While interpreting this comment, Danielle remarked,

So, I guess I kind of veered off from the project. I kind of maybe rambled a little bit on bigger societal issues instead of really focusing on the writing that surrounds the hashtag. I must have misunderstood the project, or maybe not the project, but how to go about the writing. Because I focused on one central theme when he wanted me to have multiple different ones.

Danielle's answer has two key points of interest. First, although this was during the unprompted portion of the interview, Danielle's answer nearly mirrors Jack's assignment description, although she did not have access to the description during the interview. In the assignment description, he noted, "Your central purpose is to question and report what you can learn about *the writing that surrounds this hashtag*" (emphasis added). Secondly, unlike other students' use of this (con)text to understand the written commentary provided, Danielle instead was drawing on the written commentary to understand the (con)text itself. That commentary provided a clearer indication as to what the assignment was asking for, which Danielle then used during revision.

The assignment descriptions/texts (con)text appears to mainly play a role of clarification. However, this clarification is not unidirectional. The students' answers made it clear that assignment descriptions/texts can clarify commentary but also that instructor commentary can clarify the assignment description itself. Since these assignment descriptions and related texts helped to establish the exigency for the assignments, they were valuable for allowing students to understand how well they had met the requirements of the particular assignment.

### **Student-Teacher Conferences**

Students oftentimes placed greater value on the provided verbal feedback (as opposed to written) as a result of the face-to-face nature of student-teacher conferences. In essence, verbal feedback was seen as more impactful than their teachers' written feedback, and it resonated significantly with the students in the study. Courtney emphasized this importance when asked about how her student-teacher conferences aided her in interpreting Jill's written commentary:

But talking face-to-face with her, she went into more detail. She gave more opinions. She sort of explained. She gave examples of what she was trying to get across to me of how to revise it.

Furthermore, Peter was quite adamant about the helpfulness of the face-to-face nature of the conference. When asked whether the conference affected his interpretations, Peter responded,

Oh, definitely. They are probably the most influential. Because it's easy to, almost, it feels bad saying, but almost disregard online comments. But when she's looking you in the eye saying, "you might want to fix this," it's a lot more meaningful.

Peter's answer actually downplayed the significance of the written commentary Jill returned to students via Blackboard, a learning management software. For Peter, the personal nature of the conference—and especially the eye contact—made the verbal feedback more profound. Such references to the face-to-face nature of these interactions abounded during the students' interviews. The ability to directly interact with the teacher and for the teacher to elaborate on their reading and critiques, was consistently valued by the students, as the perfect attribution score for this (con)text indicates. These conferences either set the stage for future written commentary or reinforced and elaborated upon written commentary already provided.

### **Grading Materials**

Strangely, the least referenced of the (con)texts in the study was grading materials. Examining the students' answers during the interviews demonstrated why this might be. To begin with, students placed disparate levels of emphasis on the grading criteria, with only one student truly fixating on this aspect of the (con)text. Additionally, one aspect of the grading materials (con)text triumphed above all else—the grade itself.

Jill's class provided an illustrative example of students drawing upon the grading criteria in disparate ways. Both Peter and Rachel placed little to no value on the rubric Jill provided (see Appendix F), with Peter going so far as to claim he barely even looked at the rubric. Peter and Rachel were both rather confident in their writing abilities though. Courtney

was less confident and frequently stayed after class to discuss issues with her writing with Jill. The rubric became a centerpiece for how Courtney interpreted Jill's commentary. When asked how she saw the comments relating to the rubric, Courtney replied,

She basically said the same thing that was in the rubric. Yes. She basically would say the same thing. But more in relation to our specific project.

Courtney viewed the commentary as expanding upon the rubric with a more precise relation to her individual project. Later, she went on to articulate a rather formulaic—and potentially detrimental—use of the rubric:

Because it basically gave us a list of things that we made sure that we needed to check off in order to get an A, a B, a C, you know, all the way down . . . to get an A, you had to do intro [*sic*], three body paragraphs, conclusion, and works cited. . . . And it was just sort of like a check the box sort of thing.

The language Courtney employed to describe her use of the rubric evokes a formulaic application that many in the field may find concerning (Caplan & Johns, 2019; Vieregge, 2017). Her fixation demonstrates that even when engaging with the same (con)texts, students may draw upon them in different manners; furthermore, the manner in which they draw upon them might not align with teachers' intentions. Courtney referred to the rubric as a "check box" while also evoking the genre of the five-paragraph theme. These are not the likely interpretations teachers have in mind when developing rubrics, but as Courtney's example illustrates, rubrics can be used in different fashions and with possible unintended results.

Nevertheless, the grade itself still stood as the most important factor for this particular (con)text. All of the students (sans Peter) placed a significant emphasis on the grade they received during their interviews. Rachel's answer provided a rather pertinent example of this trend:

For my first draft, I ended up getting a B-. And that showed me that there is stuff I can improve on. So those comments that she made . . .

[prompted] a realization about how I need to improve my draft if I want a better grade.

Moreover, Danielle connected her failure to understand the assignment directly to the grade she received from Jack during her interview, noting, “He told me that I paid too much attention to one theme” and later revealing that Jack’s commentary gave her “an idea of how to revise it to get a better grade on the portfolio.” The data on grading materials demonstrated that students can use grading criteria in surprisingly different fashions and that the overall grades significantly shape how students interpret teachers’ written commentary. Grades often serve as a lens through which students view the entirety of the teachers’ written commentary.

### **Broader Findings Across the (Con)texts**

Although findings occurred in relation to each of the (con)texts under examination, a broader view of the data suggests two other key findings. First and foremost, teachers’ written commentary can be instrumental in prompting student engagement with particular (con)texts. For instance, the language of Jill’s commentary frequently cued students to contemplate particular (con)texts, whether directly or indirectly. A great example of Jill’s more direct approach occurred when Rachel was asked to interpret this comment on her first draft:

For example, when I discussed title sequences in the sample paragraphs in class today, I didn’t just discuss title sequences in general. I used *Roseanne* as a specific example. You need something similar for this paper.

Rachel automatically made this connection when interpreting this comment:

For the fact that she says that I need to use specific examples, which [*sic*] she is correct. Because I need to relate it back to an actual genre, not be so broad like she said with the *Roseanne* clips.

Rachel and her classmates had analyzed the title sequences for popular TV shows (e.g., *Roseanne*, *Full House*, *Cheers*, etc.) in class. During this exercise, students were asked to consider some of the genre conventions

for title sequences and how these various examples both conformed to—and potentially subverted—these genre conventions. Jill used TV show title sequences as an example of how students might approach the assignment. As Rachel’s answer showed, this example provided her with a concrete way to interpret Jill’s commentary. The intent and message of this particular (con)text was reaffirmed in Jill’s commentary, allowing Rachel to draw upon more than just the three sentences Jill wrote; it evoked an entire class activity and discussion for Rachel to reference.

Jill’s commentary to Peter prompted such engagement with the (con)text of grading materials in a more indirect fashion. Peter claimed to have barely engaged with Jill’s rubric. However, Peter’s answers often drew upon the language and expectations conveyed in the rubric without explicitly mentioning it. For instance, when asked what he believed the main messages were throughout Jill’s commentary, Peter commented: “In almost every comment, I get ‘specifically’ or ‘be more specific with . . .’” Here, he draws upon the need for specificity in his argument, which was emphasized in the “Argument Organization and Structure” section of Jill’s rubric (see Appendix F). Most of Peter’s references to grading materials mirror this example. Although Peter did not engage with the rubric significantly or place much emphasis on it, the language and expectations it conveyed still influenced his interpretations as a result of the language Jill used in her comments, her (con)texts, and her classroom discourse. Peter appeared to have “absorbed” the language of the rubric without being consciously aware of it.

Furthermore, although each of the (con)texts played unique roles in helping students interpret their instructors’ written commentary, they frequently had a symbiotic relationship. The (con)texts worked reciprocally as students articulated their interpretations of the written commentary. Peter made strong connections between his student-teacher conference and various class activities; Danielle drew upon both the assignment description and her grade to make meaning from Jack’s commentary, using his commentary and grade to clarify how she failed to address the rhetorical situation the assignment description created; a total of six of Rachel’s answers made references to two or more of the (con)texts, and three of her answers referenced all three of the (con)texts. Rachel’s answers to the unprompted interview questions suggested that, more

than any of the other students in the study, she viewed the (con)texts as interrelated and reliant upon one another. From a pedagogical standpoint, these types of answers indicate that even if students cannot always directly articulate these connections, they can view teachers' written commentary as part of an integrated whole. These students interpreted the feedback they received in cohesion with the various (con)texts, with all of the elements frequently speaking to one another in profound ways.

### Discussion

While the (con)texts in this study have been discussed extensively in scholarship, they are not as commonly discussed in relation to students' interpretations of teachers' written commentary. As a result, we know about these (con)texts and their function in the classroom, yet know little about how students engage with them as they interpret the written commentary they receive. Intriguingly, response scholarship does not emphasize assignment descriptions or preparatory projects. The scholarship also fails at times to consider these assignments and descriptions from the students' perspective. Phelps (1998) pointed out that the assignments themselves are rarely addressed in research, a primary critique she had of Straub and Lunsford's (1995) work. Still, some have nodded toward the inclusion of assignment descriptions. Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) theorized that "ideal texts," which they contend teachers frequently use to evaluate students' writing against, are often based on teachers' notions of what the assignment description is asking. Furthermore, Jeffrey and Selting (1999) investigated the identity pairs teachers created through their responses to students, finding four main identity pairs that emerged. In their study, the assignment judge/assignment producer pair—which focuses on responses that call attention to how well a student has fulfilled an assignment—was the most prominent. This shows that the assignment description does carry significant weight in how teachers respond, often-times framing the written commentary they provide.

This study demonstrates that students are also quite attentive to assignment descriptions and the various textual activities that accompany the assignment. Regardless of whether the teachers in this study embraced the assignment judge/assignment producer identity pair, the

students in this study often read the commentary in this fashion. Danielle's interpretation of Jack's end comment was almost entirely focused on how his commentary was showing her she had failed to meet the expectations of the assignment. This may seem problematic at first, but in many ways, assignment descriptions create the rhetorical situations in which we ask our students to compose. Although it might not be ideal, the tendency for teachers to compose commentary in response to the assignment description, and for students to read their commentary in relation to the assignment description, is actually quite natural. In many ways, embracing this reality may be more beneficial than trying to ignore, as Bawarshi (2003) observed, the artificial pretenses by which teachers create exigencies for students. If the assignment description helps to create the rhetorical situation, then it would be helpful for teachers to respond to how well students meet the demand of the rhetorical situation presented.

The findings from this study also suggest that the relationship between verbal and written commentary appears to be a significant one. The students in this study valued the opportunity to engage with their teachers one-on-one, and—even more importantly—face-to-face. Black (1998) emphasized this, asserting, “Students have told me repeatedly that one reason conferences are so meaningful is that it's only in a conference that a student hears what's really important” (p. 152). This auditory approach, coupled with eye contact, made verbal feedback more prominent for the students in this study; it carried an extra weight—and significance—when compared to the written commentary they received. As a result, verbal feedback may have enormous potential as a mechanism for providing constructive criticism to students. We traditionally think of the process of responding to writing as a primarily *written* endeavor. Yet, many people promote using a conversational tone when providing responses (Straub, 1996) and advocate using recorded commentary to capture such a tone (Anson, 1997; Sommers, 2012). Perhaps the best way to capture this tone, though, is by having actual conversations with our students more frequently. Rather than trying to simulate various facets of conversation, we can make actual conversations a more prominent part of our pedagogical and response practices, viewing both *verbal* and *written* feedback on equal footing.

While student-teacher conferences were definitely favored by the students in this study, grading materials may have been the most intriguing (con)text of all. Much recent scholarship has sought to alleviate the influence of grading, with Metzger (2008) calling for deferring grading practices as long as possible, Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) advocating the use of grading contracts, and Inoue (2012) further expounding on the use of grading contracts by predicating them on labor. Nevertheless, grading is a reality of the classroom at most institutions, and its potential influence on response practices cannot be ignored.

Richardson (2000) took an interesting approach to this issue when she examined the relationship between portfolio pedagogy and response. Richardson found that, even in classrooms employing portfolio pedagogy, students tended to defer to teachers' opinions. Bowden (2018) also discovered that grades had a substantial impact on how students addressed comments. In the first interview of her study, when they initially addressed their teachers' commentary, students mentioned grades 61% of the time. They also discussed grades in 51% of the interviews after revision. Even when discussing their teachers' feedback and their intended revisions, grades still emerged as a prominent factor in their interpretations and applications of the feedback they received.

The findings of this study provide evidence to support these claims. Both Jill and Jack used portfolio pedagogy in their classes, but deferred grading did not alleviate students' emphasis on the grades they received. Even when teachers' commentary is not composed as "grade justifications," students can still embrace this lens for interpreting their teachers' commentary. Yet, for the students in this study, the grade did not become a source of discouragement. For Rachel, it instead operated as a motivator and encouragement to improve. Similarly, Katie commented on how the grades she received from Jack were lower than those she received in high school. His written commentary and grades indicated to her that she might need to improve her writing in spite of her impressive high school résumé. The students' answers in this study suggest that grades actually do communicate and—even more importantly—that this communication is not inherently unproductive or negative. Richardson (2000) views students' conditioned deferment to teacher authority and fixation

on grades as not necessarily negative either, commenting, “Although, as I have argued, the teacher’s authority is inescapable, that power need not be negative. The question, then, is how can we use authority productively?” (p. 138). Perhaps, rather than trying to alleviate the influence of grades altogether, we can instead be more cognizant of their influence and try to make them “speak” in more productive ways.

### **Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion**

Students in this study relied on (con)texts in order to interpret their teachers’ written commentary, which suggests that teachers can benefit from being more attentive to the ways in which these (con)texts intersect with their written commentary and more strategic about how these intersections happen. Assignment descriptions and associated activities are crucial for aiding students in understanding the rhetorical situation surrounding their writing. It is imperative for students to understand the genre, audience, and purpose of the particular context in which they are writing. Thus, being actively aware of these (con)texts while responding to students’ writing can allow teachers to draw on these (con)texts as examples to bolster their commentary while also using their commentary to provide more insight into the rhetorical situation these texts frame.

As the findings demonstrate, these documents had a reciprocal relationship with the teachers’ written commentary. For students like Rachel, Jill’s example from an assignment activity immediately made the commentary more concrete and accessible. Rachel was able to understand how she could apply the commentary right away. Jill used her commentary to connect back to one of her lessons, evoking an entire activity and class session for the student to draw upon with a brief comment on the student’s draft. Similarly, Jack’s end comment to Danielle helped her comprehend where she had veered away from the purposes of the assignment and the rhetorical situation it created.

The data from this study also reveal two potential student-teacher conference strategies that may be productive. First and foremost, since the students in this study were more inclined to be attentive to verbal over written feedback, teachers should be attentive to when student-teacher conferences occur in the feedback sequence, potentially placing

student-teacher conferences ahead of written responses. This can allow written commentary to augment and expand upon what is discussed during student-teacher conferences rather than the conference potentially supplanting the written commentary. Additionally, both of the teachers in this study wrote commentary *while* they were conferencing with students. The students in this study found this helpful, as this commentary afforded them the ability to revisit main points from the conference in order to engage with specific details from their conversation with their teachers. This fusion of verbal and written commentary is an interesting tactic to employ, as it allows students to receive feedback in two modalities simultaneously.

As far as grades are concerned, it may be more beneficial for teachers to use grading strategically and rhetorically rather than to attempt to alleviate its influence altogether. The students in this study received their grades well—even if they were not what the student desired—since there was still time to revise and improve the grade. A grade coupled with negative commentary that is critical and directive will potentially become a source of discouragement, motivate students to revise merely for a better grade, or inhibit students from learning. Conversely, if the grade is coupled with probing and encouraging commentary, as was the case for these students, it can send strategic messages to students and inspire them to hone their craft more seriously. Especially when given the opportunity to revise, the grade can be viewed less as coming from a judge and can be perceived instead as a motivational technique from a caring coach, indicating that the student is on the right track but needs to step up his or her game. The impact of grades in relation to feedback is tethered to the tone and scope of the written commentary, and that impact—whether positive or negative—is contingent on the student-teacher relationship and the context of the classroom as a whole. Grades might not be the key issue after all; instead, it could merely be a matter of the context surrounding them.

It is also important to make the connections between these (con)texts and teachers' written commentary explicit. Response tends to be viewed as an isolated facet of teachers' pedagogies, separate from other elements of the class. Thus, students may tend to initially engage with our

responses in a more textual—and less contextual—fashion. For students to engage with particular (con)texts, they need to participate in conversations, whether through our written commentary or in the classroom, that prompt them to make such connections. Jill employed a particularly useful strategy in this study. She frequently directly evoked the (con)texts in her written commentary, calling students' attention to particular (con)texts in her actual feedback. Teachers may also wish to return to these (con)texts more frequently throughout the course of the semester. Oftentimes, assignment descriptions, student-teacher conferences, rubrics, and so forth, are introduced at strategic times in the semester, never to be discussed thoroughly again. Thus, students may not take the initiative to put these documents in conversation with the written commentary they receive. However, conversing about these documents at other times—especially when written commentary is being returned—can make these connections more obvious for students and allow them to draw on these documents as they interpret teachers' commentary and revise their writing.

The final—but potentially most important—strategy teachers can employ is to make sure that their (con)texts and their written commentary share a common language. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) have promoted “the primary importance of language in conceptualizing writing, writing practices, and the transfer of writing knowledge and practice” (p. 34). The language of teachers' commentary and the way they design the (con)texts and structure their courses can influence how, and how much, students draw upon these (con)texts. This shared language exposes students to key concepts across teachers' written commentary and other important classroom documents. It is vital that these various texts create a cohesive narrative of the approaches, values, and ideologies that teachers wish to convey to their students about writing. This shared language not only provides common terminology for discussing writing, but also allows for the terminology to permeate various facets of the classroom context. In turn, this enables students to understand connections across the classroom context and its (con)texts while receiving the same messages in various forms across several different documents.

Fulkerson (1979) made a compelling argument that various philosophies of composition shape pedagogy, yet the philosophies driving

the pedagogy are often in conflict with the theory driving assessment. Fulkerson asserted that “there is something seriously wrong with classroom methodology which implies one variety of value judgment when another will actually be employed. That is modal confusion, mindlessness” (p. 347). This alignment is crucial. Teachers’ written commentary and (con)texts need to be unified in the message they convey. Teachers need to ensure that that they are cognizant and reflective of these connections; without this awareness, they run the risk that the (con)texts—and the overall classroom context—are conveying one message about writing while the written commentary is conveying another.

The findings of this study provide insight into improving pedagogy and suggest particular approaches teachers might take to be more attentive to the (con)texts they create and how they integrate those (con)texts with their written commentary. Above all else, though, the findings call for teachers to be more reflective about the manner in which their response practices operate as part of a cohesive narrative. It is this reflective nature about how response weaves throughout pedagogy that is of the utmost importance. When sitting down for a long session of reading and responding to students’ papers, teachers should remain cognizant that this solitary endeavor is not solitary in a pedagogical sense. Written commentary is just one of a variety of texts with which we ask students to engage. The written commentary speaks to these other texts as those other texts speak to it. To evoke the magician metaphor once again, rather than “watching closely,” perhaps we should be more attentive to what we have “up our sleeve.”

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

#### **General Starting Questions (asked of all students):**

1. What did your instructor want you to do for this assignment?
2. What were his/her main messages to you in the comments he/she wrote on your drafts? What leads you to believe that these were the main messages?
3. Do his/her comments remind you of anything from your experience in his/her class?
4. How did you use—or plan to use—these comments to revise for your final drafts? Why?

#### **Student-Specific Questions (asked with the specific student interviewee in mind):**

5. How do you interpret x comment? What leads you to this interpretation? (Asked of about 5–7 comments for each student.)

#### **General (Con)text Questions (asked of all students):**

6. Your instructor provided you with an assignment description when the assignment was introduced. In addition, you completed some text-based activities pertaining to the assignment. Do the assignment description and activities help you understand your instructor's comments? If so, how? Did they, or will they, influence your revisions in any way? If so, how?
7. While working on this assignment, you had the opportunity to conference with your instructor. Does anything you talked about in the conference help you understand your instructor's comments and/or her/his expectations now? If so, how? Did this conference, or will this conference, influence your revisions in any way? If so, how?
8. Your instructor provided you with grading criteria as well as a grade. Do the grading criteria or the grade help you understand your instructor's comments and/or her/his expectations? If so, how? Did they, or will they, influence your revisions in any way? If so, how?

## Appendix B

### Unprompted Questions Coding Scheme

| Code  | Description  | Example  |
|---|--|--|
| Direct reference to assignment descriptions/texts   | Applied to any instance in which the student directly addressed the assignment description and/or the assignment texts   | “When she shows us the Power Points that she makes, she basically covers all of this. But when she makes comments specifically on our papers, she sort of takes things from the PowerPoint and specifically relates it to our papers.”<br>(Courtney)   |
| Indirect reference to assignment descriptions/texts | Applied to any instance in which the student referenced aspects of the assignment description and/or the assignment texts but never directly referred to the assignment description/texts themselves | “So, I guess I kind of veered off from the project. I kind of maybe rambled a little bit on bigger societal issues instead of really focusing on the writing that surrounds the hashtag.” (Danielle)   |
| Direct reference to student-teacher conferences     | Applied to any instance in which the student directly addressed student-teacher conferences  | “Um, ‘cause we had talked especially in our conferences when we went over this, she specifically said that if you wanted to make this more about genre, literally continue adding the word genre throughout.” (Peter)  |
| Indirect reference to student-teacher conferences   | Applied to any instance in which the student referenced discussions from the student-teacher conference but did not explicitly state that this information came from those discussions               | “Now that I reread it, I should’ve put that not on the fifth page. I should’ve put it in my opening paragraph. ‘Cause it is kind of important, and it should be something that, it’s a sentence that kind of represents the whole paper as itself.”<br>(Emily; Emily and Jack discussed this during her conference.) |
| Direct reference to grading materials               | Applied to any instance in which the student directly referenced the grading criteria and/or the grade s/he received   | “Um, it kind of gives me an idea of how to revise it to get a better grade on the portfolio.”<br>(Danielle)  |
| Indirect reference to grading materials             | Applied to any instance in which the student referenced aspects of the grading criteria and/or grade without explicitly mentioning the grading criteria and/or grade                                 | “I’ll take these comments into very great consideration because she is the teacher, and she knows what she wants to see from us. That’s why she gives us these comments.”<br>(Rachel)  |

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## Appendix C

### Prompted Questions Coding Scheme

| Code                         | Description   | Example  |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| 3 = Strong attribution       | Applied to a student's answer that emphatically asserted the importance of the particular (con)textual factor being asked about   | “It basically gave us a list of things that we made sure that we needed to check off in order to get an A, a B, a C, you know, all the way down. It gave us a whole just layout of things to check off the box that gave us the minimum of that grade . . . she basically said the same thing that was in the rubric.” (Courtney)  |
| 2 = Moderate attribution     | Applied to a student's answer that asserted the importance of the particular (con)textual factor being asked about but not as emphatically as an answer that would receive a score of 3 | “Ok, so the little articles of postcards and stuff, and the stuff from the library. He wanted us to, he'd be like, ok, here's a postcard, who's the audience, what's the theme. We had to basically say, oh, we think that these are four girls writing because of handwriting . . . So, I do think that helped because when I was writing my papers, I was thinking of those things.” (Katie) |
| 1 = Little to no attribution | Applied to a student's answer that placed little to no importance on the particular (con)textual factor being asked about   | “To be completely honest, I didn't really look through that grading instructions [sic] very much. I was focused more on the paper and trying to write it as best I could.” (Peter)   |

## Appendix D

### Jill's Class Assignment Description

Our first project has three major goals: 1) to help us develop an understanding of genre; 2) to help us develop our analytical skills and 3) to help us learn more about our areas of expertise. To fulfill these goals, you will compose a genre analysis that looks at either a genre of your area of expertise or one of the genres that enthusiasts use to talk about your area of expertise. For example, if your area of expertise is pop music, you could analyze either a subgenre of pop music (one of the many genres of your area of expertise) or an album/song review (one of the genres used to talk about your area of expertise). Your genre analysis might define a specific genre or differentiate between multiple genres, discuss the ways in which a specific artifact does or does not fulfill the conventions of a genre, consider the relationship between specific genres and contexts, or analyze different substantiations of a single genre. *No matter what you choose, your project should make a claim about the use of genre in your area of expertise.* You are not required to find outside sources for this project; however, you will want to use class readings about genre and mode to inform your analysis.

## Appendix E

### Jack's Class Assignment Description

#### Project 2, Hashtag Rhetorical Analysis

Hashtags are a way for the ordinary and extraordinary person to categorize his or her content into particular conversations (at least, that's traditionally how they've been used). Hashtags can often rally people together, bring attention to otherwise 'invisible' content, or even offer sarcastic meta-commentary. However, through the constant participation among regular people using a hashtag, the meaning behind it can be constantly in flux—at times, hashtags, like any word, can have competing meanings (for example, the meaning of "bad" can also mean a good thing ever since Michael Jackson). Hashtags, then, offer a glimpse into a complex network of discourse that centers on a particular topic or idea.

Your task is to pick one hashtag that you have an interest in—it could be a topical hashtag from the present or past, a regularly occurring hashtag, or a hashtag from a local event, local community, or just your group of friends. Once you've chosen a hashtag, you will look across the content that the hashtag links to in any platform (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, etc.) and explore the patterns that you are noticing. Your central purpose is to question and report what you can learn about the writing that surrounds this hashtag, and ultimately, the difference this might make to our understanding of writing.

Logistically, each person in the class will claim a unique hashtag before starting this project (depending on the hashtag, I may allow two people to do one hashtag—ask me). The project will be approximately 2,000 words in length (or approx. 6–7 pages worth of written content), MLA format, double-spaced, 12-point font, Times New Roman. Include a screenshot of any digital posts (from Twitter, Instagram, etc.) that you will be talking about.

## Appendix F

### Jill's Rubric

| Category   | D, F  | C  | B  | A  |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| Argument<br>Organization &<br>Structure<br>(thesis,<br>structure,<br>organization<br>etc.)<br><br>Worth 30%  | There is no thesis statement. Structure of argument is unclear or nonexistent. There are no, or vague, topic sentences. Argument is disorganized. | Thesis statement is too general. Topic sentences mention topic but do not indicate focus. Organization is logical but retains some repetition.           | Argument is clear and organized, and thesis statement is specific. Topic sentences indicate the content and focus of paragraph. Organization aids the development of the argument and avoids repetition. | Argument is structured, specific, and engaging. Thesis statement succinctly states argument. Topic sentences are precise. Organization facilitates the argument.                             |
| Quality of<br>Argument &<br>Analysis (sup-<br>porting details,<br>connections<br>between ideas,<br>development of<br>ideas, etc.)<br><br>Worth 30% | Ideas are not developed or connections are not made between ideas. Transitions are missing. Analysis relies almost exclusively on summary.        | Ideas are developed shallowly. Connections and transitions are attempted but unclear. Analysis is developed but contains more summary than is necessary. | Ideas are developed, and connections between ideas are clear. Transitions facilitate flow of ideas. Analysis uses appropriate amount of summary.   | Ideas are expanded on and connections are complex. Sophisticated integration of transitions. Analysis avoids summary where possible.   |
| Quality &<br>Integration of<br>Support (use of<br>examples)<br><br>Worth 30%   | Claims are not supported by examples from the primary source.   | Claims are supported by limited examples from the primary source. Attempt is made to connect the example to the claim.                                   | Claims are supported by examples from the primary source. The examples are integrated into the text, and a connection is made between claim and example.   | Claims are well supported by examples from the primary source. The examples are smoothly integrated into the text. The argument is advanced by a clear connection between claim and example. |

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| Category  | D, F   | C   | B   | A   |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| MLA Formatting and Editing (format of paper, citation of sources, editing of sentence-level errors, etc.) | Major errors in multiple areas (margins, in-text citations, font, header, etc.) Paper contains multiple sentence-level errors that interfere with clarity. | Attempt is made at formatting, but there are limited major and minor errors. Paper contains limited sentence-level errors that do not interfere with clarity. | Minor formatting errors in one or two areas. Paper contains minor sentence-level errors that do not interfere with clarity. | No errors in formatting. Paper contains a few sentence-level errors that do not interfere with clarity. |
| Worth 10%   |  |   |   |   |

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