Distinguished Research Professor Stephen Kern finds it challenging to balance time between his scholarly writing and teaching. However, he recently told a group of new GAs in History 595: Seminar in Teaching History that he never compromises on one thing: the writing conferences he holds with his students.

Kern discovered the value of writing conferences when he worked closely with his dissertation mentor. The mentor spent hours going over Kern's drafts with him. The immediate feedback and the close attention to the quality of his writing and development of his ideas transformed Kern's understanding of how to integrate writing into his own classes.

Kern provides students with a sheet of 24 items that commonly trip up writers when drafting and editing. He jokes that the first words he utters in class are: “You will learn how to use pronouns.” However, Kern really means that students will learn to replace vague thinking with precise language—and he sets aside at least an hour every semester for each student, just for the conferences. He helps students go over their prose style, their ideas, their organization, their critical grasp of reading, and other “high-order concerns.”

Kern doesn’t assign research papers, but prefers detailed reading responses in essay form. He feels that the reading/writing connection is crucial to students’ development. Students must gain a knowledge base before they can write knowledgeably. His dedication to this teaching approach underscores how faculty can make a powerful difference in students’ lives.

Even 5 to 10-minute conferences help students write better—writing is a dialogue.

Writing Center Supports Faculty by Providing Supplemental Response to Students’ Writing

The Writing Center at Reavis 306A has aggressively increased its outreach. Tutors are spreading the message to faculty that students can get extra feedback on their work.

The Writing Center operates on the principle that writers need to have honest, specific response about where their work succeeds as well as where it requires improvement. Writing Center tutors don’t “remediate”—they help students communicate. They draw students’ attention to a draft’s development, organization, rhetorical proficiency, disciplinary styles, and grammar. They encourage and show students how to take responsibility for revising thoroughly.

Faculty may tell students to call 815-753-6636 for appointments. Students can also get online to email drafts at:

http://www.engl.niu.edu/writing_center/
A Procedure for Responding to Papers (adapted from John Bean’s Engaging Ideas)

You can develop a system for responding to students’ work.

The paper itself:
1. Read the whole paper quickly & check or underline parts that catch your attention.
2. Go through the draft again. If the essay lacks focus or a thesis statement and a plan for supporting its development, address that issue first, and don’t overcomment on paragraphs or sentence structure.
3. Whenever possible, identify strong points & praise them.
4. Praise good titles, subheadings, thesis statements, transitions, and so forth.
5. Use marginal comments to indicate where organization becomes confusing.
6. Note sentence-level problems that cause genuine unclarity with marginal comments, e.g. “tangled sentence,” or “This passage is garbled.”
7. Identify inappropriate or inaccurate use of key words, and compliment where the writer shows good command of terms or concepts.
8. Resist the urge to circle every stylistic problem, misspelling or punctuation error.

The end comment:
Provide a comment at the end of the paper that follows this formula: strengths—major problems—recommendations.

E.g. Fine draft, Sandy. The problem your thesis addresses is not clear yet, but I indicated where you present some interesting ideas. I especially liked the section on Maplethorpe. I marked other places where you lost me. For the next draft:
—Rewrite the introduction so you more clearly identify the problem you’re discussing.
—Work on organization. I eventually found your thesis, but many of your paragraphs aren’t clearly linked to it. As I noted in margins, you need to develop some of your ideas.
—Rethink what you said about Sontag. I think you misread her argument, especially in paragraph 2, p. 3.

Commenting on Style and Grammar

Style involves rhetorical choices— matters of effectiveness and grace rather than right or wrong. E.g. wordiness, choppiness, excessive use of passive voice, indicatives (It is... There are...), ambiguous pronoun reference (This proves that...). Identify 2 or 3 instances of stylistic choices that bother you, and ask for revisions.

E.g. Ching, on p. 2 paragraph 4, you say “There are four points I want discuss in relation to this problem.” Here’s an improvement: “I want to discuss four causes of poverty.” Please find other place where you begin a sentence with “it is” or “there are” and revise. Do you also see how more specific language helps?

Grammar involves errors that are rule-based. E.g. correct use of their, there, they’re; it/it’s; spelling; punctuation, subject/verb agreement, pronoun/antecedent. Help students find error patterns—maybe even line-edit a paragraph—but require them to edit thoroughly.

E.g. Stuart, you have many grammatical errors here, but I see three types that you repeat often:
1. apostrophes with plurals rather than possessives; 2. “of” instead of “have” with conditional verbs such as “could” or “would”; 3. incorrect past perfect (e.g. “have went”) instead of (“have gone”). Make corrections for a better grade.

A Criteria Sheet Can Clarify Expectations

Identify no more than 5 to 8 criteria, and attach the criteria sheet to the draft. You can combine this sheet with your end comments. Indicate “S”= strong, “OK,” “W”= weak, or “NC”= no credit, or assign point values. For example:

1. You do what the assignment asks. _____ OK
2. You state a thesis problem or question and show how you will organize your discussion. _____ NC
3. You use key terms and concepts accurately. _____ W
4. You cite, critique, and document your sources appropriately. _____ OK
5. You defend your own ideas and explain how you have arrived at them. _____ S
6. You address other views, explaining their strengths and weaknesses. _____ W
7. You provide a convincing conclusion or recommendation. _____ W
8. You edit for style and correct grammar. _____ OK