An Overview of Response Styles

Guiding principle
There is no "right" way to respond—it depends on the assignment, the goal, the course, the student, and many other factors. Teachers also shift styles. Being thoughtful about your style and its uses is what's important.

Reader-Based Response
A style in which you respond as a reader, not as a teacher; the style is less authoritative and teacherly, more "natural," and more focused on meaning and the reading experience. "I get the feeling that you're on a crusade here, Dominic" or "I'm lost, and not sure where you're taking me at this point." This type of response requires the writer to infer revisions. It also allows you, as teacher-reader, to avoid doing all the work for the student. But some students, particularly novice or struggling students, may need more direction.

Criterion-Based Response
A style in which you respond according to formal criteria for the text. This is more highly evaluative and authoritative, more "teacherly," more directive. "You need to work on the way you integrate your sources here," or "I don't think you've done an adequate job of structuring your paper into sections." This type of response often requires the writer to carry out revisions that are already identified. The teacher does more work for the student, at least in setting a course for revision. This type of response also may lead too quickly to “editing,” identifying errors instead of responding to ideas and meaning.

Question-Based Response
A style, used most often on drafts, in which you ask the writer questions that can promote revision. Such response is often accompanied by reader-based comments. "How do you think someone who disagrees might respond to this statement?" "What's a hydraulic converter?" "How does this paragraph connect with the next one?" This type of response requires the writer to answer to the questions in a revision, if necessary. But be careful; it’s easy for questions to become disingenuous (directives masking as questions): “Do you think this paragraph needs a controlling idea?”

Descriptive Response
A style that restates or describes what the reader sees the paper doing. Like a reader-based response, it does not direct the student to revise. But it is also more highly focused and can follow a template or set of lenses (such as what each paragraph does and what it says). For example, a comment could describe or restate the writer's thesis: "I believe that your thesis is located right here; it makes the point that . . . ." If there are mismatches between what the reader describes or identifies and what the writer intended, the writer can use that information to revise. This may be difficult for some developing or struggling writers. In addition to using any of these styles to respond to writing, either on drafts or on final copies, you can also train students to recognize and use them, especially when they respond in peer groups. The "default" mode for them is some version of criterion-based (they try to be "teachers"), and this often raises the

most problems in peer groups (ego, mixed ability levels, etc.). To avoid the problems associated with students playing a teacher role, you might try showing them how to use one of the other response methods, especially descriptive response.