

# A HARDY PERENNIAL: Responding to Students' Drafts

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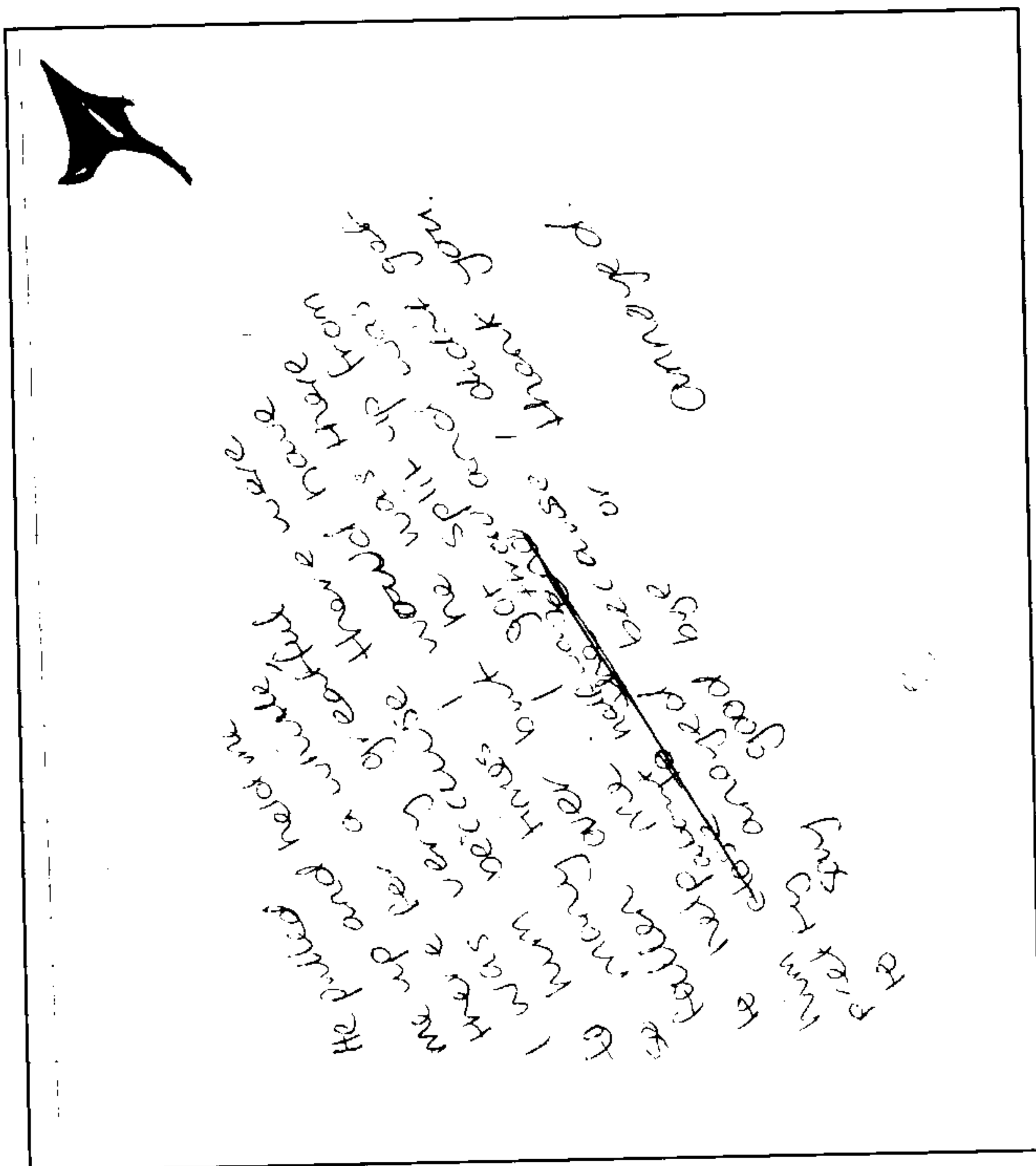
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Responding to students' drafts can be a haphazard, messy and difficult process. How do I know whether what I am saying to students or writing on their drafts will be useful to them? How can I ensure that my responses don't skew a piece of writing in a direction overly influenced by my tastes or expectations? How can I make certain that a student maintains control over a piece, but still point out problems, difficulties or necessary reworking that the student should consider? There are no fixed or conclusive answers to these questions – thoughtful teachers have wrestled with them for years. Some guidance was given by Brian Johnston in the early eighties, in an important article in *English in Australia*, No. 62, 'How Can I Usefully Respond to Students' First Drafts?', and in his book, *Assessing English* (1983). In this essay I want to explore some aspects of responding to students' drafts, revisiting Johnston's work and showing its continuing relevance. I shall do this by reflecting on my responses to successive drafts of a piece of writing by Sarah, a Year 10 student who wrote a personal narrative about the Pearl Jam concert she attended early in 1995.

I originally asked the students in my middle school class to write a narrative with a surprising, twisted or problematic ending. We had looked at a number of fictional short stories with surprising endings, where, instead of tying everything together, the narrative raised new questions or opened up new possibilities, giving the reader something to think about – for instance, 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' by Ambrose Bierce, Aidan Chambers' 'The Kissing Game', and 'The Cuckoo Bird' by Judith Clarke. We'd discussed the endings of each of these stories – how the writer prepared the reader, then sprung the surprise, what questions were left unanswered at the end – noting how the ending was not necessarily a tidy resolution of problems and situations raised in the story.

In her writing journal Sarah revealed that she had tried a number of times to write a piece with a twisted ending, but without success: 'I start them but can't finish them'. She then decided to draw on her own experiences and write about a concert she'd been to, although she remained uncertain as to whether what she had written actually met the requirements of the task : 'I started (yet another) twisted ending about a concert but I couldn't think of an ending so I just ended up telling the story of when I went to the Pearl Jam concert'.

I always require my students to keep a writer's journal; this becomes an account of the semester's work and includes reflections on texts they've read, ideas for writing, and reflections on their own writing, such as descriptions of how a piece of writing came into being, how it was developed and revised, as well as reflections on their finished (and unfinished) work. In this instance Sarah neatly captured the tension of an initial mismatch between the task set, her idea of what she had to do, and the writing that she wanted to do. Yet she wasn't really abandoning the idea of the activity; she drew on a personal experience, and her response to it, and wrote about it in a way that



(with successive drafts) was eventually appropriate to the task. This wasn't, however, a matter of Sarah obediently conforming to the requirements of the exercise that I had originally set, but the result of a process of negotiation and revision, in which I had to show considerable flexibility.

Sarah did not show me her Pearl Jam story until I asked her what she'd done. She had drafted a complete piece, so it was an important piece of writing for her, but she wasn't sure that it was a suitable response to the task I'd set. For one thing, she thought that it wasn't legitimate to draw on her own experiences; she was also concerned that her ending 'wasn't twisted enough'. The stories we'd read in class had established for her certain parameters with which she felt her writing ought to conform. Her journal shows that she had understood that the writers of the stories we'd read in class had achieved particular, striking effects with their endings, and she accordingly interpreted the task as reproducing those kinds of effects in her own story. In reflecting on her own attempts and the piece she wrote, Sarah made judgements based on her preconceptions about what she had to do. This was interesting for me because, although in one respect I had successfully conveyed the criteria I had in mind when setting this task, in another respect there was a mismatch between my intentions and Sarah's interpretation of them. What was I to make of this? I had not been conscious of stipulating that the story should be 'fiction', and, if that had originally been my unspoken intention, I now felt that to insist that Sarah meet this requirement would be to undermine her writing. It was brought home to me that there's not necessarily an absolute correspondence between what I set up as a writing task and how students interpret that task. However, given the quality of the draft which Sarah had produced, I could not interpret this mismatch negatively. When responding to students' drafts I need to be aware of this possibility, and importantly, not to see it necessarily as a 'failure' or 'mistake' (either on my part or Sarah's), but as a situation that can suggest promising new directions.

Part of my response to Sarah's first draft was to talk with her about how she had interpreted the task. Our discussion, however, soon raised other possibilities, relating both to the task itself and to this particular piece of writing. Although we discussed the requirements of the task as I'd originally set it, we also found ourselves considering alternatives that had been opened up by what she had done, apart from the question of whether the writing satisfied my original criteria. In my view, a teacher's initial reactions to a piece of writing should always draw out some of those possibilities. We should always read our students' writing with an eye to what it might become (and we should encourage our students to read their own writing in this spirit). This might mean inviting students to consider rewriting their work from beginning to end, and producing something quite different from what they – or we as teachers –

## TWIST

It was the ultimate concert, the <sup>opportunity</sup> of a lifetime. Every one ~~there~~ <sup>was</sup> there. This was the ~~best~~ <sup>best</sup> band that everyone ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> worshiped. We ~~decided~~ <sup>decided</sup> that we'd sleep out so we could be first in line. When we ~~got there~~ <sup>arrived</sup> ~~we~~ <sup>we</sup> were second in line ~~but~~ <sup>and</sup> still very close. If we hurried we could be ~~within~~ <sup>within</sup> of the main, close enough to touch them. We didn't get much sleep that night ~~at all~~ <sup>at all</sup> ~~because~~ <sup>because</sup> ~~we~~ <sup>we</sup> were just too excited.

~~When I got closer~~  
 In the afternoon ~~there~~ <sup>there</sup> were people ~~waiting~~ <sup>waiting</sup> up for miles ~~away~~ <sup>away</sup> to see ~~at~~ <sup>at</sup> the front or close to anyway. When they opened the gates everyone pushed to get to the front and a car ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> so ~~close~~ <sup>close</sup> parked ~~by~~ <sup>by</sup> the ticket was finally created and we got in. We ran as fast as we could and we were pretty close to the front but lots of people had got through before ~~so~~ <sup>so</sup> they weren't going to be on ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~stage~~ <sup>stage</sup> for another hour so they placed ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> country and western music over ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> speakers, it was so disgusting but ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> what we had waited for. When they finally came on there were people around me everywhere going ~~psyched~~ <sup>psyched</sup>.

originally had in mind. For instance, on the basis of this draft Sarah could have considered making her story into a completely fictional piece (which is what one of her friends, who had also written about a personal experience, actually did). In my discussion with her, we also reflected on the possibilities of a couple of stories within

the story, including the part about the man in the mosh pit, as well as the details she added in the form of brief notes at the end. Any one of these anecdotes could have been used as the basis for a separate piece of writing, or made part of the story of that particular day.

At this stage in my dialogue with Sarah my response was to help her map out the terrain and begin to develop the piece according to her own purpose. Johnston gestures in this direction in *Assessing English* when he writes, ‘...the teacher’s focus is on the student’s present relationship to the subject matter, not on what it “should” be’ (1983: 19). I was able to help Sarah see beyond what she thought her piece ‘should’ be, pointing out qualities and possibilities that she’d perhaps overlooked. This also entailed pointing beyond what she originally construed as my stipulations about writing a story with a ‘twist’, and entertaining possibilities which I personally had not even considered when setting this exercise. It is important for me to affirm to Sarah the qualities of her writing as a story with a ‘twist’ but also to move beyond that to indicate that it has other qualities.

Johnston’s notion of the ‘centre’ of a piece of writing (1983: 59) is still useful here, once students have completed a first draft and appear to be on their way. Johnston defined this as ‘...the key idea or centre of gravity of the piece...’, which ‘...confronts the fundamental question, “What is the point?”’. His approach was to give students relevant feedback about what he saw as the centre of a piece of writing. In the process, he sought to encourage students to eventually do this themselves, becoming ‘articulate readers’, not ‘judges’. In *Assessing English* he elaborates this by saying ‘...if students are to develop their writing, they must be able to read their work and see the need for the changes themselves. Our principal role is to show them how we and others read their work, and to teach them different ways of reading it themselves, so that they can develop as writers’ (59). This statement provides a fine guiding principle for teachers when responding to students’ writing. Johnston was interested in encouraging students to internalise this process – moving beyond merely relying upon the teacher’s comments to thinking and talking about their writing and the writing of others in a specific way.

In the context of the task I had set, the centre of Sarah’s piece was the ending, the twist – for, despite her doubts about meeting the requirements of this particular exercise, we also reached the conclusion that she was, indeed, in the process of writing an interesting story with a ‘twist’, that her story could be developed in this form if she so wished. I explained to her that I thought the twist in her story gave it an interesting and surprising ending – we originally believe that we’re going to hear about how absolutely fantastic and unforgettable the Pearl Jam concert was, but the concert slips