



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## Responding to Student Writing

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Our students need to be good writers, not only to communicate their thoughts effectively, but to formulate and develop ideas, to analyze and synthesize information, and to persuade readers that what they have to say is of interest and significance. Before they can hope to become these skillful writers, most college students need a good deal of practice in the kinds of writing we expect them to undertake at college. Ideally, then, faculty in every discipline would undertake to assign and to teach students writing.

While each academic discipline requires of students a different kind of writing or a different discourse, some general principles, we hope, will offer new teachers some guidelines in assigning and responding to student writing.

Discuss the assignment with your student. Be as specific as possible about the kind of essay you are assigning and the purpose of the essay, as well as the particular requirements for citation and for the format of the essay. It can also be helpful to have students postulate a specific audience for the essay and to consider the rhetorical effect they want to achieve. Imagining this audience helps writers decide how much information they need to provide, for example, and often leads to their speaking in a livelier and more confident voice.

Explicitly stating the purpose of an assignment helps students see the assignment as a real intellectual endeavor, not just as an exercise. You might briefly list the skills you expect them to practice and the question that they will be able to answer by writing the essay. It is often helpful to hand out an assignment, rather than to dictate it. Give students a few minutes to read through the assignment, and then encourage questions. Does everyone in the class know what you mean by "interpret" or "analyze"? Finally, let your students know that grammatically correct, idiomatic English is essential to their ability to communicate to readers, and that they must proofread carefully for spelling and punctuation errors. Decide on a system for those students who need to work on persistent sentence-level errors. Simply to tell students that they have left a "dangling modifier" in a sentence may not do the trick, since many students will not take the trouble to consult a writing handbook. Some teachers ask students to hand in revisions of sentences exhibiting the most troublesome or persistent of errors.

## The Writing Process

We can help our students to become good writers and good time managers by getting them started thinking about their essays well before they are due. Having students turn in a first draft of an essay, a thesis statement or an outline sends the message that good writing results from our shaping and reshaping of ideas over a period of weeks or months, not from the herculean efforts of a long weekend or a single

evening. We can pave the way for a set of student papers that will be stronger (not to mention faster and easier to read) if we help students revise weak thesis statements or reshape an inadequate bibliography.

Here are efficient ways to evaluate students' "prewriting" and to help them early in the process. Have students turn in on an index card:

- a carefully framed research question or a thesis statement and several statements of supporting claims;
- a list of sources in correct bibliographic format;
- a paragraph explaining what a reasonable person might object to in the position they take;
- a paragraph describing a different theoretical approach to the subjects from the one they plan to take.<sup>1</sup>

We can also ask students to turn in fully conceived first drafts of shorter essays. Comments on drafts can be succinct, focusing entirely on two or three suggestions for evidence to be supplied, reconception of an argument, or reorganization of material.

### Peer Groups

Drafts may also be read by a peer group composed of three or four students in the class. Using peer groups to critique student writing will cut down on the amount of time that the teacher spends reading student papers, but students must be trained to respond to one another's writing constructively. Peer groups can be helpful if you have discussed and practiced the writing elements you expect students to learn, and if you direct their commentary on the drafts. Have the students read the draft to be discussed before class, and ask them to focus on just a few important aspects of the essay by framing the specific critical questions you want them to consider:

- "Does the thesis advance a clear and specific argument that the writer will need evidence to

support?"

-- "Is the author's use of evidence and examples effective and convincing? Refer to specific instances, and explain why or why not."

-- "Discuss the conclusion of the essay. Does the author return to his main idea? What is the difference between the main idea as it is expressed in the conclusion of the essay and as it is stated in the thesis paragraph?"

### Commenting on Student Writing

The function of comments to the student are:

- to communicate to the student what she has accomplished and what she has failed to grasp or still needs work on;
- to motivate the student to improve her writing--to push forward in her thinking and to put into practice the principles of good sentence and paragraph writing.

When you are commenting on student essays and if time allows, it is best to supplement the comment you write at the end of the essay with local comments pointing out how you are responding to individual sentences and paragraphs in the essay. Before you begin to comment, however, try to assess which two or three difficulties seem most pressing or central. Some teachers give essays a quick initial reading without any comments in order to direct comments more purposefully during a second reading. If you fill the margins with queries, suggestions, reprimands, or chidings, the student may feel that the task of improving is an overwhelming one. Moreover, some local problems in the essay may be a function of a more fundamental weakness. If you are reading a draft that the student will revise, these will probably disappear when the student has resolved the larger problem. For example, uncertain or arbitrary paragraph structure may be a function of a vaguely conceived thesis. If the student rewrites a thesis statement so that it more fully articulates a sense of subordinate parts of the main idea, he will be supplying himself with a map of his argument that will

enable him and the reader to predict what smaller units of argument will be the basis of individual paragraphs in the essay.

Your comment at the end of a student essay may usefully

- focus on the two or three things that will help the student improve his next essay;
- address the writer with respect and treat his essay as a real intellectual project;
- acknowledge and praise the strengths of the essay.

Local comments ought to be explanatory and their tone encouraging. If we ask students to revise work, or, at the very least, if we want to motivate them to improve their writing skills, then it is not enough to tell a student that a sentence is awkward or that a line of argument is logically fallacious; within reason, we must help the student to see what makes the sentence awkward and why the line of argument is flawed. A good way to achieve this goal is to relate a problem to the writer's purpose or to the difficulty it causes the reader: "How are the ideas in paragraph three related to those in paragraph two? Without a transitional sentence explaining the connection, the reader loses the train of your thought." If we can frame our comments in a way that will enable students to see the function of devices like "transition," "parallel construction," or use of active constructions, and not just to remember that these are elements of good writing, then we can train them to put these concepts into practice and to recognize potential problems in their own writing.

For the same reason, it is not a good idea to edit students' writing. Moreover, if we hope to motivate students to revise their own writing, then we must be careful not to convey the impression that the student should learn to imitate the teacher's phrasing or diction. In some instances, of course, suggesting a clearer or more appropriate word or phrase may be the

most effective way to indicate to the student that you are uncertain of what she meant to say or that another choice might have been more suited for her purpose.

### Criteria for Grading

Students sometimes seem more interested in the grade than the comments on it, and instructors sometimes find themselves using the final comment on the paper to justify the grade. To avoid these tendencies, consider commenting on some assignments without affixing a letter grade to them, but to tell your students specifically which assignments you will grade and how much weight each of them will carry in the final grade. It's a good idea to spell out specifically, both for yourself and your students, what qualities characterize your "A," "B," "C," "D," and "F" papers. This will help you to maintain some consistency in evaluating a set of papers and will reassure your students that grading papers is not a matter of the moment's whimsy. You may find useful the following criteria, adapted from those outlined by Harold Edmund Shaw<sup>2</sup>:

The "A" essay demonstrates a detailed understanding of the topic or advances a particularly insightful reading of a text; it has something interesting to say and supports it fully; it exhibits few or no mechanical mistakes; its sentences are not only clear but lively; the essay may very well evince unusual flexibility or inventiveness with words or structures that result in an individual style or are used for particular rhetorical effects.

The "B" essay is competent but not striking: the writer has a clear thesis and a good sense of audience; the writer is in control of the direction of the essay and uses a reasonable principle of organization to develop her ideas; the writer's ideas are reasonable, and she uses appropriate evidence to support her ideas; there are no major mechanical errors.

The "C" essay has a weak or fuzzy thesis; there may be some disjunction between the announced thesis and the discussion which follows; the writer may rely on the readily apparent or the cliché; examples and evidence may be offered to prove that the writer has researched her topic or has read the text, not to advance an argument; the essay has no clear organizational principle or may adopt the same one used in the text; the essay may contain many mechanical errors.

The "D" essay has no clear thesis; the student reveals serious misunderstandings of the subject or misreads the text; the student may resort to plot summaries or paraphrases of class discussion or offer comments for no apparent purpose; the essay may fail to support its claims with examples or evidence; the writer remains within realm of the superficial, either from the inability or an unwillingness to tackle the assignment; the essay is often shorter than the required length; the writer displays inability to choose appropriate words, sentence structures or punctuation.

The "F" paper displays misconceptions or weaknesses even more serious or pervasive than a "D" paper; or the essay has been plagiarized in part or as a whole.