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Time Management: Writing
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An Introduction

Draw vs. Detriment

One of the greatest pleasures associated with teaching writing in the classroom can also be one of the biggest frustrations: how to manage time. Because most writing classrooms are capped at smaller numbers, there is an opportunity for faculty and students to get to know one another, and for faculty to become familiar with an individual student's work on a deeper level. All of these are standard arguments for the benefit of writing in the classroom, however, as a faculty member, how does one balance time management in the classroom, as well as outside of the classroom?

Time Management for Writing Faculty

The key issues for faculty teaching courses that either are writing-intensive or include writing are as follows:

- Takes time away from content
- Feeling qualified to teach writing
- Grading
- In-class writing taking too long
- ESL

Each of these issues are important but can be dealt with easily if instructors begin to think of writing as a learning tool rather than as a separate aspect of the learning process.

Possible Solutions

Rethink in-class writing activities

- Examples given in the "Writing Activity Suggestion Packet" (please email me for a copy)

Utilize your strengths

- As academics we are expected to be communicative in a variety of genres, and as painful as it can be, writing is one of them. Take time to think about your own process—your strengths, the things you still struggle with, etc.—and if you feel comfortable, share it with your students.

You don't have to be an expert!!

- The Center for Academic Success Writing Center

The Logistics

Grading student papers for a course in any discipline presents a series of challenges different from grading other kinds of assignments. Typically, a wide range of responses will be acceptable, and every paper (unless it is plagiarized) will have some merit. Consequently, grading essays demands a teacher's close attention to insure that each paper is judged by the

same standards. A method for evaluating essays that breaks the grading process into parts can help an instructor work more consistently and efficiently. By assessing papers based upon the three general categories of ideas, argument, and mechanics and style, categories easily adapted for each discipline and assignment, an instructor can more easily recognize and comment on an essay's strengths and weaknesses and so face that daunting pile of twenty, forty, or even one hundred essays with less trepidation. Furthermore, if teachers make clear to students how this method works, fewer students will be confused about their grades or apt to charge that papers are graded in an arbitrary or purely subjective way.

Before applying the three categories for evaluation, think through what it is you want an assignment to accomplish. Grades should reflect the most significant strengths and weaknesses of an essay, so a teacher should carefully consider ahead of time what expectations he or she has for a paper and especially what he or she most wants students to do for a particular assignment. For example,

- Do the instructions to students require specific tasks, such as agreeing or disagreeing with an author, outlining a book's argument for review, or analyzing a particular section of a work?
- What is it that students should show they understood?
- More generally, a teacher may also consider the following:
  - Has the student presented ideas in a logical order?
  - Is the essay written in clear, grammatically correct prose?
  - Has the student offered explanation or examples to support generalizations?

For any given assignment, your criteria for success may vary in the details; whatever they are, make a list of them. Ideally, students would receive a copy of this list before they begin writing their essays.

The problem with such a list of criteria, however, is that it can quickly grow unwieldy. While we need some specific questions as a checklist for student writing success, we can benefit from a streamlined evaluation system. The ideas/argument/mechanics and style format is a simple way to group criteria, both for yourself and your students. Once you have a set of criteria for an essay to succeed, you can decide how these questions fit under the three headings. A general breakdown of these questions might look like this:

- IDEAS
  - Does the student understand the accompanying reading or the principles behind the experiment, etc.?
  - Does the student offer original interpretations?
  - Do the student's explanations of terms, ideas, and examples demonstrate an ability to grasp the main points, paraphrase them, and apply them?
  - Does the student answer the question(s) assigned?
  - Does the essay demonstrate an understanding of a subject, or does it wander from one subject to the next without offering more than superficial remarks?

- ARGUMENT

- o Can we easily determine what the author's main point is?
- o Does the essay provide a series of points that add up to an argument supporting the main point (thesis)?
- o Does the essay proceed logically from point to point?
- o Does the student provide examples and explanations to support his or her generalizations?
- o Does the essay contain contradictions? Is the paragraph structure logical?

- MECHANICS AND STYLE
  - o Is it clear what the student's point of view is?
  - o Does the student control tone? Is the essay free of grammatical errors?
  - o Is the essay punctuated appropriately?
  - o Do citations and bibliography follow the correct format?
  - o Is the prose clear or do you puzzle over individual sentences?
  - o Are words spelled correctly?

What I am suggesting is essentially adapted from the methods of two English professors, Charlene Sedgwick and Steve Cushman. Sedgwick's "ENWR Handbook" offers guidelines for evaluating freshman composition papers by assessing focus, organization, style, and mechanics; Cushman has in the past recommended that graders for his upper-level literature courses weigh mechanics and style (together) as one-third of a grade, and ideas and argument as the other two-thirds. Though instructors for non-English courses may want less emphasis on writing skills per se in an essay grade, I would argue that papers for all courses should be evaluated at least in part for their grammar, punctuation, and prose style because these fundamentals of writing are everywhere necessary for readers to understand writers. And a teacher in any discipline can easily tailor the three categories of ideas/argument/mechanics and style to the conventions of the course and its academic discipline.

Simplified (and Platonized) then, these three categories translate into the following grade scale:

- essays with good ideas that are logically organized into an argument and written in clear and mechanically clean prose receive an A;
- essays lacking in one category (e.g., have poor organization) receive a B;
- essays weak in two categories receive a C;
- and essays that manage none the three general criteria garner a D or fail.

What constitutes an "A" within any given category will also depend upon the course level and the assignment, but in a very general way, if a student's essay can answer "yes" to all of your questions for a category, then the student should have an "A" for that portion of the grade.

However much we simplify the process, grading essays will never be as simple as marking multiple-choice exams. Most student essays are some combination of good ideas and slight misunderstanding, clear argument and less clear argument: they don't neatly divide into three parts. Typically the problems in an essay are closely related: for example, a misunderstanding of content can lead to a logical flaw in the argument and to prose that is full of short sentences because the author is not certain which ideas should be subordinated to others. Because of this

system of logical relations, it is all the more important to include a final comment with a grade. Rubrics can be very helpful in this regard as well.

Writing final comments may indeed slow grading, but the pedagogical benefits of comments far outweigh the few minutes per paper needed to write them. Students continue to learn from an assignment if they understand what their work accomplished and what it didn't. More importantly, final comments can help students write more fully conceived and better executed papers on the next assignment.

One way to organize an end comment is to write at least one sentence pertaining to each of the three categories of ideas, argument, and style and mechanics. Breaking an essay into these three components can help us comment on an essay's strengths and weaknesses more quickly than if we had no set criteria or if we had too many. A particularly successful comment will explain to a student how ideas, argument, style, and even grammar work together. Final comments also serve as a check on ourselves, especially if we tie our general end comments to specific examples within the paper. For example, when I finish reading Student A's essay, I may sense that he didn't offer proof in support of assertions. But when I look for an example of an unsupported assertion, I find there are passages that might serve as supporting evidence; however, he has not explained very carefully how the examples work, so my impression has been that his essay lacks proof. Even when we are sure that we have avoided bias and inconsistency, comments pointing to examples will better illustrate to students what they can improve. Above all, comments should not be mere justifications for grades, though they may coincidentally deter students from seeking explanations as to why the received a "B" instead of an "A."

A Series of Methods

Grading writing assignments can be very time consuming. Some teachers even avoid writing assignments and essays altogether. Thus, it is critical to use procedures which give students writing practice while saving time and not overburdening the teacher with grading. Try some of the following grading suggestions, keeping in mind that students' writing skills improve with practice and with the use of rubrics to grade each other's writing.

1. **Use Peer Evaluation**
   a. Distribute rubrics to students asking each to read and score three of his or her peers' essays in a specific amount of time. After grading an essay, they should staple the rubric to the back of it so as not to influence the next evaluator. If necessary, check off students who have completed the required number of evaluations; however, I have found that students do this willingly. Collect the essays, check off that they were completed on time, and return them to be revised.
2. **Grade Holistically**
   a. Use a single letter or number based on a rubric such as the one used with The Florida Writes Program. To do this, put your pen down and simply read and sort assignments into piles according to score. When finished with a class, check each pile to see if they are consistent in quality, then write the score at the top. This allows you to grade a large number of papers quickly. It is best used with final drafts after students have used a rubric to grade one another's writing and made improvements.

3. **Use Portfolios**
    a. Have students create a portfolio of checked-off writing assignments from which they select the best to be graded. An alternative approach is to have the student select one of three consecutive essay assignments to be graded.
4. **Grade Only a Few from a Class Set - Roll the Die!**
    a. Use a roll of a die to match numbers selected by students in order to select from eight to ten essays that you will be grading in-depth, checking off the others.
5. **Grade Only a Few from a Class Set - Keep them Guessing!**
    a. Tell students you will make an in-depth evaluation of a few essays from each class set and check off the others. Students will not know when theirs will be graded in-depth.
6. **Grade Only Part of the Assignment**
    a. Grade only one paragraph of each essay in depth. Don't tell students ahead of time which paragraph it will be though.
7. **Grade Only One or Two Elements**
    a. Have students write at the top of their papers, "Evaluation for (element) " followed by a line for your grade for that element. It is helpful to also write "My estimate _____ " and fill in their estimate their grade for that element.
8. **Have Students Write in Journals Which Are Not Graded**
    a. Require only that they write either for a specified amount of time, that they fill a specified amount of space, or that they write a specified number of words.
9. **Use Two Highlighters**
    a. Grade writing assignments using only two colored highlighters with one color for strengths, and the other for errors. If a paper has many errors, mark only a couple you think the student should work on first so that you don't cause the student to give up.
10. **Use a Checklist**