

How to Respond to Student Writing

A “Write Place” Faculty Workshop

Tuesday, January 14, 2020

Workshop Overview

- Helping students become deep readers
- Designing our courses to reward deep reading
- Understanding the link between writing and thinking
- Designing writing assignments that prompt critical thinking
- Using class time and pre-assignments to help students with the process
- Using rubrics to make clear your expectations and to focus your attention when you grade
- Making sure our comments support rather than stunt students' growth

What do We Want?

Describe your ideal student



ROME WASN'T BUILT IN A DAY!



We will be frustrated if we set unreasonable expectations for ourselves, or our students

WRITING IS A PROCESS...

- Not a product
- We often place our focus on the end result, not appreciating the path that it takes to get there
- Each student is at a different point on the path towards academic literacy—which includes writing, but is not limited to it!

Are we Doing Our Part?

- We must cultivate learning environments and avoid perpetuating a school culture of pseudo-learning
- We do our students an injustice by letting them slide through with mediocre skills
- But we must also set realistic expectations
- Depth may be more important than breadth
- Intellectual growth takes time that will extend beyond us, beyond the semester and beyond their matriculation

It's bigger than us

- We should focus on providing them with tools that will transcend these four walls
- Parents...you can't teach your children every lesson they will need in order to succeed in life.
- The best that professors or parents can do is give students the tools and help them to practice using them

So, what can we do to equip them for what comes next?

3 Steps to Start Down the Write Path!

1. Recognize the value of writing
2. Help students learn how to be deep readers
3. Create assignments that force critical thinking

You Don't Have to be a Writing Teacher

- Becoming a strong writer begins with becoming a critical thinker
- You can use writing to promote deep thinking about any subject
- Writing doesn't have to be graded to be effective

Tomorrow's workshop will talk more about writing and thinking!

DEEP READING

What do we Mean by Deep Reading?

1. The opposite of skimming chapters for information that will be on the test (short-term)
2. Reading and re-reading to understand author's purpose & perspective
3. Adjusting reading strategy based on task & genre
4. Recognizing that the reader is in “conversation” with the author
5. Understanding vocabulary & syntax

We Can Help Them!

- Deep learning begins with deep reading
- If you want students to read carefully, design assignments that reward it:
 - i.e. require reading for meaning
 - increase homework that demands deep reading

Yeah, it's Hard...So?

The reality:

- Some of the assigned readings are intended for a different audience, those who have background knowledge & expertise on the subject
- Thus, it may be harder—but not impossible--for them to understand
- They need not feel stupid...
- Better for them to say “I had trouble with this text because I’m an outsider than to say “I had trouble with this text because I’m a poor reader”

Share your Own Strategies

- How do you read difficult texts?
- How do you determine when to skim and when to read slowly?
- When do you take notes?
- When do you read skeptically?

This Doesn't Work...

- Not quizzes! “Quizzes encourage students to extract ‘right answers’ from a text rather than to engage with the text’s ideas and they don’t invite students to bring their own critical thinking to bear on a text’s argument... or enter into conversation with a text’s author”
- Don’t lecture! “Lecturing over readings initiates the vicious reading cycle...where teachers explain readings...because student are poor readers; students read poorly because teachers explain readings in class”

Bean, p. 168

Strategies to Help Students Read

See Handout...

Bean, p.181

WRITING EXPECTATIONS

THE VALUE OF RUBRICS



- What do teachers want when they ask students to write?
- Writing, like the assessment of art, involves subjective judgments
- The potential for wide disagreement about what constitutes good writing is a factor with which both students and teachers must contend.

HOWEVER...

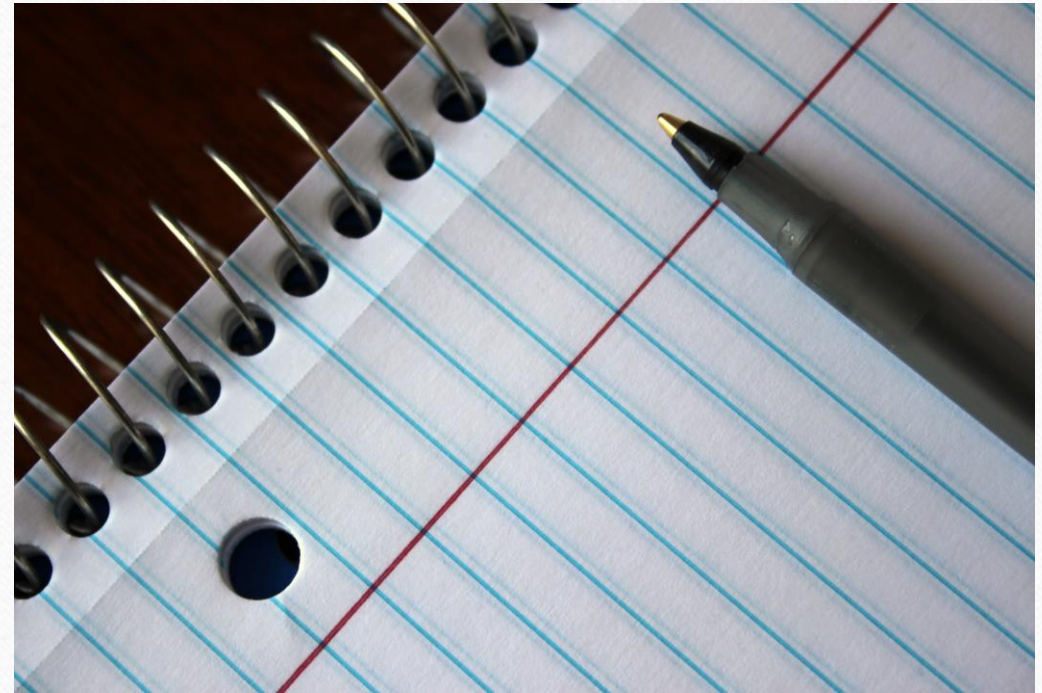
- By identifying distinct categories and setting descriptions for high, middle and low achievement it is possible to decrease confusion & discrepancies

THERE ARE NO ABSOLUTES

We would like to think that there is a clear, uncontradictable standard for “good writing” but the reality is that much of what we consider “good” is based on an unspoken standard which is relative to:

- The assignment
- The field
- Our preferences

And not just what is “right or wrong”





Rubrics help you to make transparent the sometimes invisible standard that you are using to assess

“The powerful rhetorical effect of the rubric grid and its neat categories pushes us toward pretending an objectivity that does not match the complex mixture of likes and dislikes we feel toward any particular paper”
(Bean 279)

However, you can modify your rubric so that it reflects what you prioritize and provide students with meaningful assessment.

SAMPLE RUBRICS



Time-saving Strategies



- Get students on the right track early in the writing process
- Take advantage of closed-form thesis-governed writing
- Enlist Writing Center consultants as first readers of early drafts
- Make efficient use of student conferences
- Develop timesaving methods for grading

Assignment Design

- Consider using behind-the-scenes exploratory writing
- Create the last assignment first, then work backwards
- Assign one or two short papers rather than one long one
- Replace generic “research papers” for compact research assignments that teach disciplinary research methods



Give your students a Raft...and a Tip!



R.A.F.T.

Role (or purpose)
Audience
Format (or genre)
Task

T.I.P

Task as
Intriguing
Problem

“providing a rhetorical context helps students develop transferable rhetorical skills that are essential to any writing situation”



- Give students the rubric when you give the assignment as well as a model essay from a previous class
- Divide the class into small groups and let them “grade” a paper from a previous class according to your rubric
- This allows for discussion and clarity about your expectations
- Have students submit rough drafts/notes along with final paper to preclude plagiarism

Use Class Time to Invigorate Students' Thinking!

Let small groups of students discuss problematic questions and come up with reasons for or against particular points of view



- Lead a discussion about the kinds of evidence and argumentation needed to support the arguments presented
- Let students pair up just before or after an early draft is due and give them interview questions that prompt deeper thinking about the topic

NO OUTLINES!

- “Although teachers have traditionally required students to submit outlines in advance, both research and theory show that requiring outlines is not as effective as teachers imagine...it distorts the composing process of many writers who discover and clarify their ideas in the act of writing...undervalues drafting as a discovery process”
- “Outlines work for informative papers which take a large topic and break it down into smaller parts, but a thesis-governed paper requires complex meanings that can only be worked out through composing and revising”



OUTLINES ARE BETTER AT THE END

- Not all outlines are bad—only when they’re assigned too soon
- Forcing students to do an outline before a first draft is like forcing them to make bricks with no straw!
- However, later in the process, once they’ve thought through their argument and the support, an outline can help them focus their attention on what’s most important
- Additionally, a reverse outline of a nearly finished draft helps writers identify gaps in logic and organizational issues (see Write Place “Student Resources” for handout)

Example of good early assignments...



- Prospectus: students describe problem and direction
- Two sentences: problem & thesis
- Abstracts of the draft

Writing assessment

Student/Teacher conference

- Ask probing questions
- Show them how to organize ideas using mind map
- Focus on one or two paragraphs for grammatical errors
- Have small groups of students come together if they have similar issues



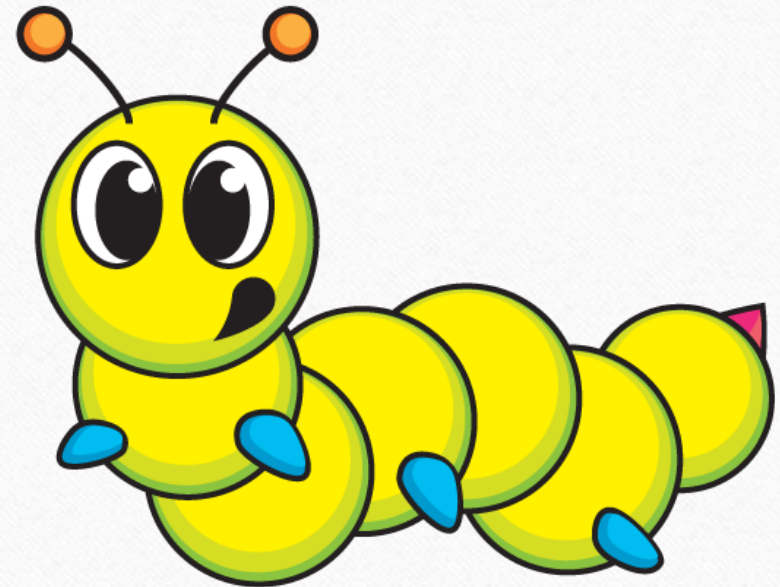
Be a Coach, not a Critic!



- When we comment on papers, the role we should play is that of a coach providing guidance for revision, for it is in the act of revising that our students learn most deeply what they want to say and what their readers need for ease of comprehension.”
- Revision means—rethinking, re-conceptualizing—seeing again
- It is through the hard work of revising that students learn how experienced writers really compose (Bean 321)

“A draft is to a finished product as
a caterpillar is to a butterfly: all
that’s missing is the
metamorphosis”

(John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*)



“try to imagine the butterfly while critiquing the caterpillar. The purpose of the end comment is not to justify the current grade but to help writers make the kinds of revisions that will move the draft toward excellence.”

Template for Commentary:

1. Strengths
2. Summary of limited # of problems
3. Recommendations for revision





All of us as teachers, late at night, having read whole stacks of student essays, sometimes forget the human being who wrote the words that currently frustrate us.

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- We become harsh or sarcastic. We let our irritation show on the page. Even though we know how we ourselves feel when we ask a colleague to read one of our drafts (apologetic and vulnerable), we sometimes forget these feelings when we comment on students' papers...we don't treat students' work in progress with the same sensitivity that we bring to our colleagues' work"



- I liken it to parenting...how many of you have experienced the incessant and annoying questioning stage of your children...
- but we're their first teacher! if we don't tell them, how else will they know?
- Perhaps you think, yes, but these are adults, not children...

-
- consider, though, that they may or may not have received the proper instruction before landing here.
 - So, in a sense, it's up to you to tell them what they don't know, not judge them for not knowing.

George is learning tennis

- [Example, p. 318]
- Our comments are rhetorical—we can't just focus on what we mean, we have to also consider how they will be read it
- What does the red ink say?

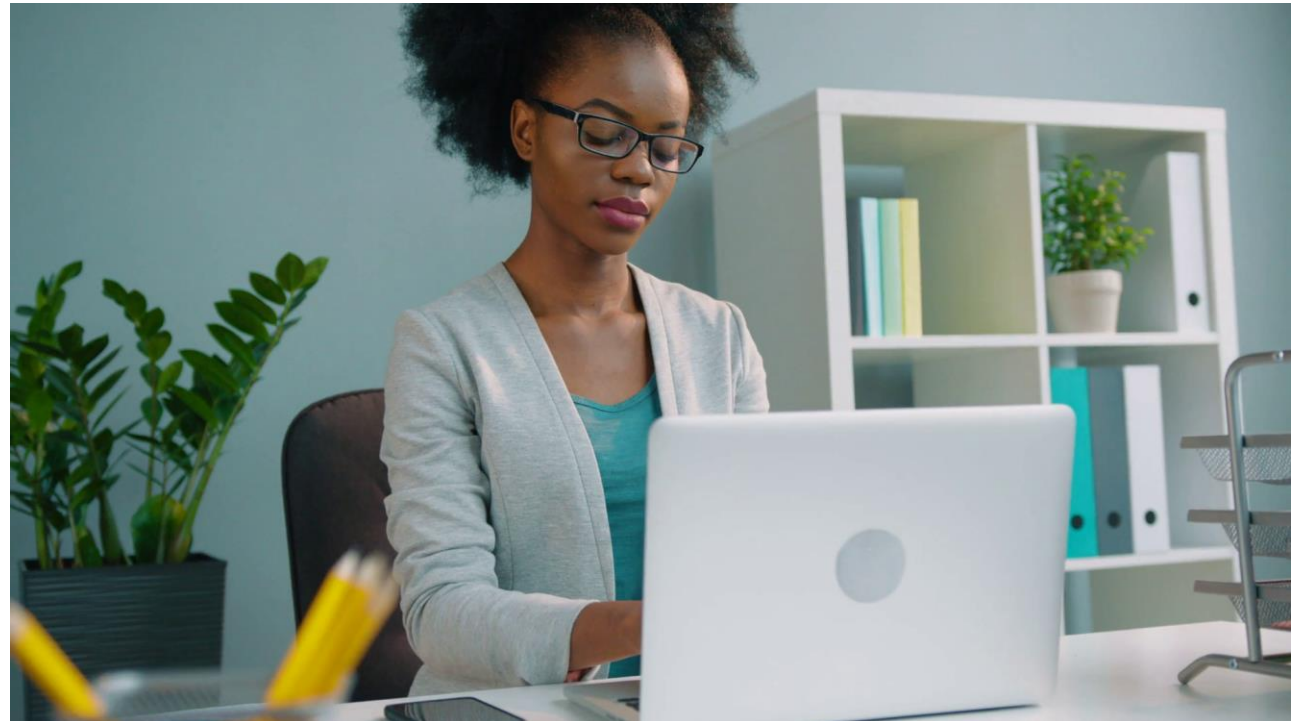


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- The point of comments should be to stimulate revision, not to justify a grade
 - Comment on drafts, not final copy
 - Or allow re-writes—then comment on final drafts, but allow them to re-submit for higher grade (you will need to be very specific about what constitutes revision)



COMMENTS

- Don't comment on everything, just the main thing(s)
- Comment in order of importance—global to local
- Grade without comments, then discuss a model paper in class





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- Approach comments with the same attitude that you would approach an employee review
 - You want the employee to continue doing what he/she's doing well and discontinue what he/she's doing poorly
 - So, you begin with the praise
 - Then move to the “areas of improvement”



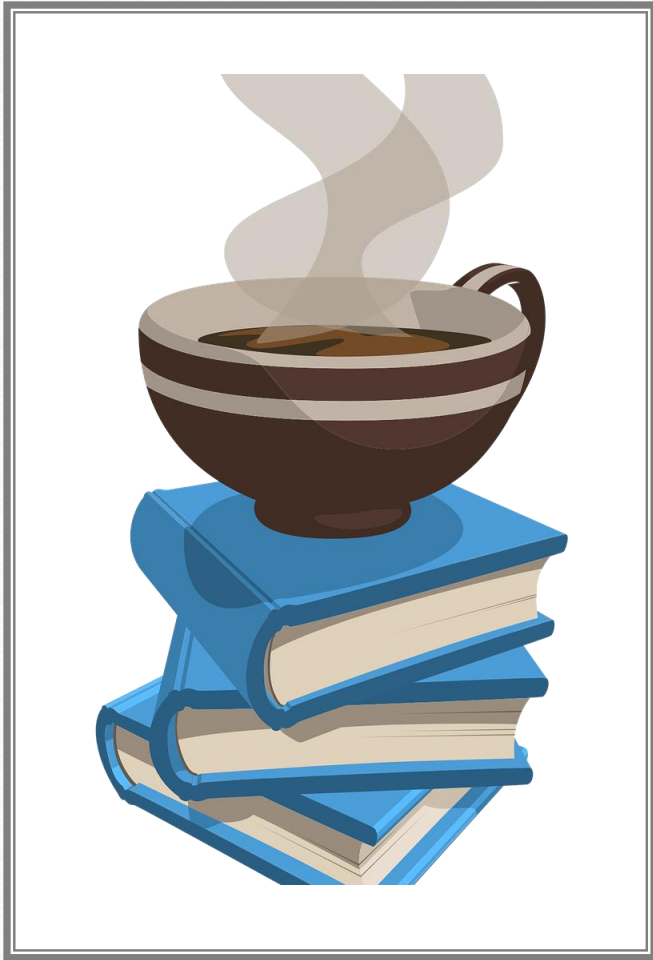
- You can empower students rather than defeat them by leveraging their strengths to address their weaknesses
- The reality is, you can't make them a better writer, they have to take up the challenge to improve themselves.
- If you beat them up with all that they're doing wrong, they're likely to stop trying

Commenting Hierarchy

Global

- Does the draft follow the assignment?
- Does the draft address a problem/question?
- Is there a thesis?
- What is the overall quality of the argument?





Organization

- Does the structure make sense?
- Are paragraphs in the right order?
- Is there too much or too little paragraphing?

COMMENT EXAMPLES





Style/Grammar

When we think about student writing, we often think about grammar first. We are annoyed by all the grammatical mistakes and we send them to the Writing Center with fury—the message they hear is “You’re broken, go let them fix you!”

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- My hope is that today's presentation demonstrates that there's so much more to "good writing" than "good grammar"
 - It's not to say that grammar isn't important, but if a student doesn't know what he/she's talking about
 - Or if he/she is able to write and speak without thought or reflection
 - Will improving his grammar really help him?



Grammar



Grammatical issues can be more easily addressed in the context of a student's writing.

We focus on helping him/her figure out what they mean with a given utterance, then show them how the rules of mechanics and punctuation help them to say what they mean.

This is much more effective than drills and exercises that are disconnected to any meaningful language use.

Let's Grade a Paper!

SAMPLE STUDENT PAPER

Garit Harden and Peter Singer have both written essays that are thought provoking. Hardin has the strongest argument, on the other hand, Singer has some good things to say too but his arguements arent as strong as Hardins because he is to idealistic. Meaning he believes people will give up things like color TV and stereos to thrid world people even though they (the rich people) will have earned these things (TV and stereos) through their own hard work. This is what I don't like about Singer. Hardin believes in private property and I do too.

Another weakness of Singer is...

DID YOU
MARK IT
LIKE THIS?

EXHIBIT 5.2

Editing-Oriented Commenting Strategy

Spell author's name correctly!

Garit Hardin and Peter Singer have both
written essays that are thought provoking.
Hardin has the strongest argument, on the
other hand, Singer has some good things to say
too but his arguments aren't as strong as
Hardin's because he is too idealistic. Meaning
he believes people will give up things like
color TV and stereos to thrid world poor
people even though they (the rich people) will
have earned these things (TV and stereos)
through their own hard work. This is what I
don't like about Singer. Hardin believes in
private property and I do too.

Look up to,
too, two

frag.

Don't put
antecedents
of pronouns in
parentheses
after the
pronoun.

Another weakness of Singer is . . .

HT 5.3

sion-Oriented Commenting Strategy

Garit Harden and Peter Singer have both written essays that are thought provoking. Hardin has the strongest argument, on the other hand, Singer has some good things to say too but his arguments arent as strong as Hardins because he is to idealistic. Meaning he believes people will give up things like color TV and stereos to thrid world poor people even though they (the rich people) will have earned these things (TV and stereos) through their own hard work. This is what I don't like about Singer. Hardin believes in private property and I do too.

➔ Another weakness of Singer is . . .

Good transition but implies that previous paragraph was about a "first weakness"—e.g., Singer's idealism?

In your next revision break the weaknesses of Singer into separate chunks and develop each. Also edit for sentence error!

Is this your first point about Singer — "A first weakness of Singer is that he is too idealistic" (?) Expand and explain

Excellent insight here—different attitudes about private property are at the heart of their differences — but you raise the point and then drop it without development

OR LIKE THIS?

KEEP AN EYE ON OUR GOALS

“By emphasizing ideas and organization and making students find and fix their own errors, instructors will be doing the best we can hope for in light of our current knowledge about language competence.”

It may not be what you want to hear, but I believe that “it is the best way to achieve the goal of helping students produce intelligent, graceful, well-argued, and largely error-free essays.”