Integrating Writing into Any Course: Starting Points

Kate Kiefer
Colorado State University
➤ Contact Information

As teachers in all disciplines think about how to integrate writing into their courses, they often get stumped right at the beginning. Where to start? Fortunately, after teachers articulate their goals for incorporating writing into the courses, working backwards from the goals to specific assignments can be relatively straightforward. And moving from the writing to evaluating need not be as daunting as it sounds.

State your goals for the course in general

To get started integrating writing, state your goals for the course as specifically as possible. Although teachers are sometimes tempted to settle for general statements such as, "cover the material clearly," being more specific will help you see how writing can support your discipline-specific goals in the course. For example, if your introductory course should help students learn the ways that experts in your field pose questions and problems, you can easily work in writing activities that reinforce this goal. If one of your course goals is to introduce students to the range of current issues in your field, paired reading and writing tasks can help you meet this goal.

In other words, if you think about writing tasks as an "add-on" to the course material, students are likely to perceive the writing as busy-work unconnected to the central goals of the course. If you think about writing as another way to have students learn the course material, they are much more likely to see the connections and value the writing assignments. (As I'll explain later, when students see the value in writing assignments, your evaluation task becomes much more straightforward as well.)

Move from goals to specific writing tasks

After you've stated your goals as precisely as possible, start thinking about the kinds of writing that will help students meet the course goals. Don't limit yourself at this point to the standard formats that students typically write in college (research papers and lab reports). What kinds of writing do you produce as a working professional in the field? Might any of these kinds of tasks be appropriate for students to write? Think, too, about the various readers professionals in your field typically write to. If you or your colleagues need to communicate in writing with audiences totally unfamiliar with "insider" or advanced knowledge in your field, then you might consider assigning writing that could appear in brochures, newsletters, or popular magazines. Thinking about a wide range of formal and informal writing may help you restate your goals, and thus lead you to assignments that better fulfill your course goals.

You might, at this point, also find it helpful to note specific goals for the writing assignments. For example, if you are only concerned that students understand the range of current controversial issues in your discipline, then you might not want to have students write a formal, carefully edited paper. But if one of your goals is to help students use the professional language conventions of your discipline, then a more formal paper is a much more appropriate option.

In the next section, I'll cover briefly a range of writing tasks and some reasons for assigning these various kinds of writing.

A common writing task: The research paper

One of the most commonly assigned papers in college courses is the research paper. Teachers often want students to read widely on topics pertinent to course materials, and the research paper spurs students to learn and use library and other sources of information on these topics. But a research paper isn't always the best assignment:

- Students often see research papers as formulaic and thus they may not think through the material as carefully as you'd like them to.
- Even at the upper division, students don't consistently synthesize material they read when they write about it.
- One big paper can get put off until students don't have the time to do more than superficial work.

But if your course goals-and your goals for assigning writing-are best met by a research paper, consider these ways to improve both the learning and the final papers you'll receive:

- Write out a prompt that calls for critical thinking skills as opposed to a prompt that emphasizes the format of the final paper. In other words, if you tell students, "for this class you'll write a research paper," students are most likely to think of the task in limited ways, often as they first learned the task in high school. If you give students a question to answer or, even better, a set of target readers and a reason for writing to those readers, students are more likely to approach the task in a fresh way.
- Set up intermediate products and deadlines. An easy way to guarantee a high percentage of disappointing papers is to walk into class and announce that "a research paper is due in the last week of classes." Students will put off the reading and writing until the last minute when they are likely to be busiest with other papers and exam preparation. If you can break the large paper into smaller chunks, you can have students show you the parts well before the final product is due. Even if you can't break the entire project into parts, set deadlines well before the final due date. For example, a proposal and research plan could be due a week or due after you give the overall assignment. A review of key sources could be required two weeks after that. A complete rough draft can be due two weeks before the final due date so that students can complete a peer review sheet for each other. Such intermediate deadlines help keep students on track and assure that you won't get papers written (and often not reread) the day or two before the final due date.
- Give out sample papers that show what kinds of skills you see the task emphasizing and what kinds of skills students often have trouble with. Even if you don't have other samples from your own students, ask colleagues or check online sources for typical papers like the one you're assigning. (You local writing center might have samples that will work for your assignment.) Or use professional models if you don't have student samples, and be sure to show students how they can approximate what the professionals have done in their writing.

Another option: Writing-to-learn tasks

Teachers often set up writing tasks that emphasize learning the content of their courses. These can range from two-minute impromptu jottings in class to a learning log that students write in regularly. You can also use these kinds of tasks in multiple combinations. The examples below suggest the range of possibilities outlined in much fuller detail in the FAQ about WAC on the CSU Online Writing Center (writing.colostate.edu/references/teaching/wac-faq/page2.htm).

- Impromptu in-class writing to check understanding - At the end of class, ask "what's the most important idea we talked about today?" At the beginning of class, ask "what confuses you most about what we covered in class last session?" or "if the person sitting next to you missed class last time, how would you summarize what we talked about?" (Tip: you don't have to read all of these. You can ask students to exchange and have volunteers read the clearest recaps of the class. Or you can ask students to turn them in and skim all but respond only to a few that seem to focus on a common problem or misunderstanding.)
- Impromptu in-class writing to create links in your course material - As you begin a new chunk of the course, ask students to write briefly about how they can imagine the preceding chunk relating to the new chunk. Or you might ask students to reflect on two laboratory assignments or two readings to show relationships between the content/concepts in the two. (This task can also be assigned as a fuller out-of-class writing task.)
- Writing to find out on what students already know - Before you begin a new chunk of your course, ask students to jot down everything they already know about the topic. Sometimes you flush out misconceptions; more often you reassure students that they aren't heading into absolutely foreign territory. Again, this can be a short in-class, impromptu task or a fuller, out-of-class assignment.
- Writing about reading (two-column log) - I use these with students ranging from freshmen to grad students. I

ask students to keep a log-on the computer or in a loose-leaf notebook-that has a summary of each assigned reading on one side of the page (left side or top half) and their reactions to the readings on the other side or half. Occasionally, I specifically assign tasks that require re-reading and connecting their reactions or synthesizing material.

One more option: Writing-in-the-discipline tasks

Certain kinds of writing tasks, often more formally prepared, emphasize learning disciplinary writing conventions. Most teachers use these in upper-division classes with students majoring in the field. Again, you can read much more about these tasks and others that promote similar kinds of skills on the CSU's Online Writing Center (writing.colostate.edu/references/teaching/wac-faq/page2.htm).

First, try to define a range of possible audiences within your discipline and gear the writing to one or more of those audiences. (Having students write to a "general" audience is least effective because they think they know what's involved in writing for Newsweek and they are usually mistaken.) If you don't specify target audiences, students are most likely to write to you, and that can catch them in a different set of snares. Try to make the task as realistic as possible.

Then think about formats:

- Management plan
- Issue paper
- Professional article
- Concept paper
- Poster session
- Empirical research article
- Field notes

Give out or point them to real samples in professional journals, in casebooks, in corporate archives. Samples are especially valuable for these kinds of writing tasks because one of the most effective ways to learn about organization and style concerns in a field is to read many samples written by working professionals in the field.

Yet another option: Combining writing-to-learn with writing-in-the-discipline

Writing tasks can emphasize both learning course material and writing for disciplinary contexts. Teachers have successfully used these formats to help students learn both content and conventions:

- Letter to client/patient
- Brochures or other public-relations materials
- Poster session for more general audience
- Web pages

A few tips on evaluating students' writing

How you evaluate and comment will depend on the formality of your final "paper." Teachers in most disciplines feel uncomfortable editing student papers for grammatical and stylistic issues. Doing so is not a good use of your time anyway, particularly in terms of what students will learn from your commentary. Instead, focus on your goals for the writing tasks and comment about how well students seem to have met those goals.

You might also want to consider some of the following ideas for giving students feedback without taking up inordinate amounts of time:

- If the writing tasks are informal-writing-to-learn, for example-have students swap and comment. You can

simply use a 3for completion or color-coded "swipes."
- If the writing tasks are more formal, consider posting them on a class bulletin board for responses from students in the class.
- Or simply write a short note pointing out key strengths and weaknesses (especially helpful if you are scaffolding assignments that lead from one to the next).
- Consider an e mail exchange about strengths and weaknesses.
- Ask for a reflective piece from students and comment briefly on what they identify as most important.
- Only if you feel compulsive about mechanics should you mark them on a formal, writing-in-the-disciplines paper. (If the paper is unreadable, just hand it back. Students quickly get the message that editing and proofreading are important, and they'll seek out help through your campus writing center.)

Writing does help students learn

Writing about course material can help students clarify and deepen their thinking about the material, and it can help them remember the material more fully. Integrating writing into courses, thus, is worth the time and energy, and the whole process need not be so daunting even for teachers using writing-to-learn or writing-in-the-disciplines tasks for the first time. Moreover, most universities have local experts in a WAC program or writing center who can offer advice, and more and more Web-based advice is freely available.

Contact Information:
Kate Kiefer's Email: Kate.Kiefer@ColoState.edu

Tools for Teaching
Barbara Gross Davis — **University of California, Berkeley**

Helping Students Write Better
in All Courses

[From the hard copy book *Tools for Teaching* by Barbara Gross Davis; Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, 1993. Linking to this book chapter from other websites is permissible. However, the contents of this chapter may not be copied, printed, or distributed in hard copy form without permission.]

Few faculty would deny the importance of writing in their academic discipline or the role writing plays in mastering material, shaping ideas, and developing critical thinking skills. Writing helps students learn the subject matter: they understand and retain course material much better when they write about it.

You don't have to be a writing specialist - or even an accomplished writer - to improve your students' writing skills, and you don't have to sacrifice hours of class time or grading time. The ideas that follow are designed to make writing more integral to your courses and less onerous to you and your students.

General Strategies

View the improvement of students' writing as your responsibility. Many faculty erroneously believe that teaching writing is the job of the English department or composition program alone. Not true! Writing is an essential tool for learning a discipline. Helping students improve their writing skills is therefore the responsibility of all faculty.

Let students know that you value good writing. Stress the importance of clear, thoughtful writing. As Elbow (1987) has noted, you can require competent writing without knowing how to teach composition. In general, faculty who tell students that good writing will be rewarded and poor writing will be penalized receive better essays than instructors who don't make such demands. In the syllabus, on the first day of class, and throughout the term, remind students that they must make their best efforts in expressing themselves on paper. Back up your statements with comments on early assignments that show you really mean it, and students will respond. (Source: Elbow, 1987)

Regularly assign brief writing exercises in your classes. Writing is a complex set of skills that requires continuous practice. You need not assign weekly papers to give students experience in writing. To vary the pace of a lecture course, ask students to write for a few minutes during class. Some mixture of in-class writing, outside writing assignments, and exams with open-ended questions will give students the practice they need to improve their skills. (Source: Tollefson, 1988)

Provide guidance throughout the writing process. After you have made an assignment, discuss the value of outlines and notes, explain how to select and narrow a topic, and critique first drafts. Define plagiarism as well; see "Preventing Academic Dishonesty." (Source: Tollefson, 1988)

Don't feel as though you have to read and grade every piece of your students' writing. Since students are writing primarily to learn a subject, it is better to have

them write than not write, even if you cannot evaluate each piece of writing. Ask students to analyze each other's work during class, or ask them to critique their work in small groups. Or simply have students write for their own purposes, without any feedback. Students will learn that they are writing in order to think more clearly, not to obtain a grade. Keep in mind, too, that you can collect students' papers and skim their work. (Source: Watkins, 1990)

Find other faculty members who are trying to use writing more effectively in their courses. Share the writing assignments you have developed and discuss how students did on the assignments. Pool ideas about ways in which writing can help students learn more about the subject matter. See if there is sufficient interest to warrant drawing up writing guidelines for your discipline. Students welcome handouts that give them specific instructions on how to write papers for a particular course or in a particular subject area.

Teaching Writing When You Are Not an English Teacher

Remind students that writing is a process that helps us clarify ideas. Tell them that writing is a way of learning, not an end in itself. Let students know that none of us knows exactly what we think about a topic or issue until we put our views on paper. Also let students know that writing is a complicated, messy, nonlinear process filled with false starts. Help them identify the writer's key activities:

- Developing ideas
- Finding a focus and a thesis
- Composing a draft
- Getting feedback and comments from others
- Revising the draft by expanding ideas, clarifying meaning, reorganizing
- Editing
- Presenting the finished work to readers

Explain that writing is hard work. Share with your class your own struggles in grappling with difficult topics. If they know that writing takes effort, they won't be discouraged by their pace or progress. One faculty member shares with students a notebook that contains the chronology of one of his published articles: first ideas, successive drafts, submitted manuscript, reviewers' suggested changes, revised version, galley proofs, and published article (Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education, 1989).

Give students opportunities to talk about their writing. Students need to talk about papers in progress so that they can formulate their thoughts, generate ideas, and focus their topics. It is also important for students to hear what their peers have written. Take five or ten minutes of class time for students to read their writing to each other in small groups or pairs or to talk about what they plan to write.

Encourage students to revise their work. Provide formal steps for revision. For example, ask students to submit first drafts of papers for your review or for peer critique. Or give students the option of revising and rewriting one assignment during the term for a higher grade. Faculty who extend this invitation to their students report that 10 to 40 percent of the students take advantage of it. (Source: Lowman, 1984)

Explain thesis statements. A thesis statement makes an assertion about some issue: "The savings and loan crisis resulted from the relaxation of government regulations." A common student problem is to write papers that have a diffuse thesis statement ("The savings and loan crisis has caused major problems") or papers that present overviews of facts with no thesis statement.

Stress clarity and specificity. Let students know that the more abstract and difficult the topic, the more concrete their language should be (Tollefson, 1988). Tell students

that inflated language and academic jargon camouflage rather than clarify their point.

Explain the importance of grammar and sentence structure, as well as content. Don't let students fall back on the rationalization that only English teachers should be judges of grammar and style. Tell students you will be looking at both the quality of their writing and the content.

Distribute bibliographies and tip sheets on good writing practices. Check with your English department, composition program, or writing center to identify materials that can easily be distributed to students. Consider giving students a bibliography of writing guides, for example:

Crews, F. C. *Random House Handbook.* (6th ed.) New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992. A classic comprehensive textbook for college students. Well written and well worth reading.

Lanham, R. A. *Revising Prose.* (3rd ed.) New York: Scribner's, 1991. Techniques for eliminating bureaucratese and restoring energy to tired prose.

Tollefson, S. *K. Grammar Grams* and *Grammar Grams II.* New York: HarperCollins, 1989, 1992. Two short, witty guides that answer common questions about grammar, style, and usage. Both are fun to read.

Discipline-specific guides may also be useful. Petersen (1982) has a dated but good bibliography on writing in particular content areas. Other publications follow.

Science and Engineering

Barrass, R. *Scientists Must Write.* New York: Chapman and Hall, 1978.

Biddle, A. W., and Bean, D. J. *Writer's Guide: Life Sciences.* Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1987.

Connolly, P., and Vilvardi, T. (eds.). *Writing to Learn Mathematics and Science.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1989.

Day, R. A. *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper.* (3rd ed.) Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1988.

Maimon, E. P., and others. *Writing in the Arts and Sciences.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1981.

Michaelson, R. *How to Write and Publish Engineering Papers and Reports.* Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1990.

Arts and Humanities

Barnet, S. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1989. Biddle, A. W., Steffens, H. J., Dickerson, M. J., and Fulwiler, *T. Writer's Guide: History.* Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1987.

Goldman, B. *Reading and Writing in the Arts.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978.

Social Sciences

Biddle, A. W., Fulwiler, 1, and Holland, K. M. *Writer's Guide: Psychology.* Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1987.

Biddle, A. W., Holland, K. M., and Fulwiler, T. *Writer's Guide: Political Science.* Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1987.

Lanham, R. A. *Revising Business Prose.* (3rd ed.) New York: Scribner's, 1991.

McCloskey, D. N. *The Writing of Economics.* New York: Macmillan, 1987. Steward, J. S., and Smelstor, M. *Writing in the Social Sciences.* Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1984.

Tallent, N. *Psychological Report Writing.* (4th ed.) Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1992.

Ask a composition instructor to give a presentation to your students. Invite a guest speaker to talk to your class about effective writing and common writing problems. Faculty who have invited experts from composition departments or student learning centers report that such presentations reinforce the values of the importance of writing.

Let students know about available tutoring services. Most campuses offer individual or group tutoring in writing. Distribute brochures or ask someone from the tutoring center to give a demonstration in your class.

Use computers to help students write better. Faculty are beginning to use commercially available and locally developed software to help students plan, write, and revise their written work. Some software lets instructors monitor students' work in progress and lets students collaborate with their classmates. Holdstein and Selfe (1990) and Hawisher and Selfe (1989) discuss computers and composition.

Assigning In-Class Writing Activities

Ask students to write what they know about a topic before you discuss it. Before discussing a topic or lecturing on it, ask students to write a brief account of what they already know about the subject or what opinions they hold. You need not collect these; the purpose is to focus students' attention. (Source: Tollefson, 1988)

Ask students to respond in writing to questions you pose during class. For example, at the beginning of a class, list two or three short-answer questions on the board and ask students to write their responses. The questions might call for a review of material previously covered or test student's recall of the assigned readings. Asking students to write down their responses also helps generate more lively discussion because students will have a chance to think about the material. (Source: Tollefson, 1988)

Ask students to write from a pro or con position. When an argument has been presented in class, stop for a few minutes and ask students to write down all the reasons and evidence they can think of that supports one side or the other. Use these statements as the basis for discussion. (Source: Walvoord, 1986)

During class, pause for a three-minute write. Periodically ask students to write for three minutes on a specific question or topic. Tell students to write freely, whatever pops into their minds without worrying about grammar, spelling, phrasing, or organization. Writing experts believe that this kind of free writing helps students synthesize diverse ideas and identify points they don't understand. You need not collect these exercises. (Source: Tollefson, 1988)

Have students write a brief summary at the end of class. Give students two or three minutes to jot down the key themes, major points, or general principles of the day's discussion. If you give students index cards to write on, you can easily collect and review them to see whether your class understood the discussion.

Have one student keep minutes to be read at the next class meeting. Taking minutes gives students a chance to develop their listening, synthesizing, and writing skills. Boris (1983) suggests the following procedure:

- Prepare your students by having everyone in class take careful notes for a period, rework them at home as minutes, and hand them in for comments. Leave it to students' discretion whether the minutes are in outline or narrative form.
- Select one or two good models to read or distribute to the class.
- At the start of each of the following classes, assign one student to take the minutes for the day.
- Give the person who takes the minutes a piece of carbon paper so that you can have a carbon copy of the rough minutes. This person then takes home the original and revises it in time to read it aloud at the next class meeting.
- After the student has read the minutes, ask the class to comment on their accuracy and quality. The student then revises the minutes, if necessary, and turns in two copies, one for grading and one for your files.

Structure small group discussion around a writing task. For example, ask each student to pick three words of major importance to the day's session. Then ask the class to write freely for two or three minutes on one of the words. Next, give the students five to ten minutes to meet in groups of three, sharing what they have written and generating questions to ask in class.

Use peer response groups. Divide the class into groups of three or four students, no larger. Tell your students to bring to class enough copies of a rough draft of a paper for each member of their group. Give students guidelines for critiquing the drafts. The most important step in any response task is for the reader to note the part of the paper that is the strongest and describe to the writer why it worked well. Readers can also be given the following instructions (adapted from Walvoord, 1986, p. 113):

- State the main point of the paper in a single sentence.
- List the major subtopics.
- Identify confusing sections of the paper.
- Decide whether each section of the paper has enough detail, evidence, and information.
- Indicate whether the paper's points follow one another in sequence.
- Judge the appropriateness of the opening and concluding paragraphs.
- Identify the strengths of the paper.

The critiques may be done during class time, but written critiques done as homework are likely to be more thoughtful. Use class time for the groups to discuss each paper and critique. Students then revise their drafts for submission.

Use read-around groups. Read-around groups allow everyone to read everyone else's paper. The technique works best for short assignments (two to four pages). Divide the class into groups of four students, no larger, and divide the papers (coded for anonymity) into as many sets as there are groups. Give each group a set and ask students to read each paper silently and select the best paper in the set. Each group discusses their choices and comes to consensus on the best paper. The paper's code number is recorded by the group, and the process is repeated with a new set of papers. After all the sets have been read by all the groups, someone from each group writes on the board the code number of the best paper in each set. Recurring numbers are circled. Typically, one to three papers stand out. (Source: Pytlik, 1989)

Ask students to identify the characteristics of effective writing. After students have completed the read-around activity, ask them to reconsider those papers voted as excellent by the entire class and to jot down features that made each paper outstanding. Record their comments on the board, asking for elaboration and probing vague generalities (for example, "The paper was interesting." "What made the paper interesting?"). In pairs, students discuss the comments on the board and try to place them in categories such as organization, awareness of audience, thoroughness of detail, and so on. You may need to help the students arrange the characteristics into meaningful categories. (Source: Pytlik, 1989)

References

Boris, E. Z. "Classroom Minutes: A Valuable Teaching Device." *Improving College and University Teaching,* 1983, 31(2), 70-73.

Elbow, P. "Using Writing to Teach Something Else." Unpublished paper, 1987.

Hawisher, G. E., and Selfe, C. L. (eds.). *Critical Perspectives on Computers and Composition Instruction.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1989.

Holdstein, D. H., and Selfe, C. L. (eds.). *Computers and Writing: Theory, Research, Practice.* New York: Modern Language Association, 1990.

Lowman, J. *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984.

Petersen, B. T. "Additional Resources in the Practice of Writing Across the Disciplines." In C. W. Griffin (ed.), *Teaching Writing in All Disciplines.* New Directions in Teaching and Learning, no. 12. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982.

Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education. *Bright Idea Network,* 1989. (For information contact David Graf, Iowa State University, Ames.)

Pytlik, B. P. "Teaching Teachers of Writing: Workshops on Writing as a Collaborative Process." *College Teaching,* 1989, 37(l), 12-14.

Tollefson, S. K. *Encouraging Student Writing.* Berkeley: Office of Educational Development, University of California, 1988.

Walvoord, B. F. *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers in All Disciplines.* (2nd ed.) New York: Modern Language Association, 1986.

Watkins, B. T. "More and More Professors in Many Academic Disciplines Routinely Require Students to Do Extensive Writing." *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 1990, 36(44), pp. A13-14, A16.

Publications and Teaching Tips | Office of Educational Development | UC Berkeley

Last Updated 4/11/02
Questions or Comments? Contact us.

Writing for Learning--
Not Just for Demonstrating Learning

Peter Elbow
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

- Subscribe to NTLF

- Library

- Reference Materials

It is helpful to distinguish between two very different goals for writing. The normal and conventional goal is writing to demonstrate learning: for this goal the writing should be good--it should be clear and, well . . . right. It is high stakes writing. We all know and value this kind of writing so I don't need to argue for it here, but let me give one more reason why it's important: if we don't ask students to demonstrate their learning in essays and essay exams, we are likely to grade unfairly because of being misled about how much they have learned in our course. For students often seem to know things on short-answer or multiple-choice tests that they don't really understand.

But there is another important kind of writing that is less commonly used and valued, and so I want to stress it here: writing for learning. This is low stakes writing. The goal isn't so much good writing as coming to learn, understand, remember and figure out what you don't yet know. Even though low stakes writing-to-learn is not always good as writing, it is particularly effective at promoting learning and involvement in course material, and it is much easier on teachers--especially those who aren't writing teachers.

OCCASIONS AND KINDS OF WRITING

In-class writing:

- 8 minutes of writing at the start of class to help students bring to mind their homework reading or lab work or previous lectures.
- 8 minutes in mid class when things go dead--or to get students to think about an important question that has come up.
- 8 minutes at the end of class or lecture to get them to think about what's been discussed.
- 5 minutes at the end of class to write to us about what they learned that day: what was the main idea for them, what was going on for them during that class. Not only will this help them integrate and internalize the course material; it helps our teaching by showing us what's getting through and what isn't.

We can treat this kind of writing as entirely private or as a spot quiz--or anything in between. I find it important to collect these pieces for a while at the beginning of a course, and I often have students share them quickly with a partner or small group. I don't grade them or comment, but I insist that students use the writing to try to think the material through on paper. After a number of sessions like this, they discover the usefulness of this kind of low stakes writing, and I can let these pieces be entirely private--or just have them share with others but not me. That is, I can spare myself having to read them--and students still benefit.

However we handle it, this kind of writing helps students get more out of discussions and lectures. In a lecture or discussion, there are often only one or two minds at work in the room; when I ask students to write, most minds are at work.

Journal writing.

Many teachers enhance learning by requiring students to keep reading journals, thinking journals, or lecture journals. The goal is to get students to connect what they are studying with the rest of their experience, thoughts, and feelings. Teachers handle journals in various ways: exhortation alone, periodic inspection but no reading, fast browsing, full reading, responding, grading. It is also productive to get students to trade journals weekly with a peer for a response.

Think pieces.

This is the name I give to writing that is a bit more thought out and worked over--but not yet an essay: exploratory but not merely freewriting. I tell students to think of these pieces as thoughtful letters to an interested friend. Teachers often assign weekly think pieces about the reading or homework or the issues they want students to consider more carefully. They make it a simple, regular, matter-of-fact requirement--"no big deal"--but they enforce it by making substantial credit depend on doing them all. One can read think pieces quickly and just check that students have engaged the task, or else read them carefully--depending on the size of the class.

Think pieces are a productive and nonpunitive way to make students do the reading on time and come to class. When students have done the reading and thought about it before class, they get much more out of discussions or lectures or labs. Think pieces provide a way to specify an intellectual task for students to engage in before class: e.g., compare two concepts from the reading; compare a concept from the reading to some experience from their lives; work out a definition. I often take 5-10 minutes at the start of class for students to read them outloud in pairs or in small groups. Suddenly they know a great deal more than they did.

Essays that count--to demonstrate learning.

These are not just "writing to learn"--fruitful explorations or wrestlings as above--but genuine essays that must be well revised: clearly written, coherently organized, carefully copy-edited, and typed. I often invite students to build an essay from a previous think piece, but I stress that these essays are different in kind--much more demanding. Re-thinking is needed, not just cosmetic touching up. Otherwise some students assume, from the exercises in low stakes writing, that I am always completely casual about writing. It makes sense to evaluate these essays strictly and perhaps comment on them (more on these matters below).

When students understand that they are being asked for two very different kinds of writing in the course, their essays get better because of their extensive practice with low stakes think pieces, and their low stakes writing gets more thoughtful when they experience it as practice for the high stakes essays (and relief from them too).

Term papers.

I find term papers involve maximum work and minimum learning. I call them "terminal papers." Students often pad them. Students seldom learn from our comments since the course is over before they pick up their papers--if they pick them up. I find it more productive to use several shorter essays--even (perhaps especially) for high stakes writing.

Portfolios.

Students usually get much more out of a course when they are asked to go through all their writing and other projects and make a portfolio out of the best and most interesting pieces. (I always ask for a few selections from private or journal writing, some think pieces, and some essays. I want a range of types. I always ask for an "interesting failure.") The most important part of the portfolio is an essay that introduces, explores, and explains the pieces in the portfolio and talks about what the student has learned from these pieces of work. This self-reflexive writing provides a kind of meta- discourse that leads to new understanding and enriches fragile, incipient insights.

DEGREES OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

No Response: private writing.

I find it a good use of my authority to require private writing. Private writing gives students the safety to learn fluency in writing--to learn how to put down words on paper as easily and naturally as we speak. Private writing also helps students learn one of the highest goals of education: how to carry on a dialogue with oneself. Adolescents in particular need this ability since they feel so much pressure from peer groups only to think what is acceptable. And of course private writing is easy on us: students get warmed up and their writing improves while we don't have to see it. Students learn more from writing than from our responses to their writing.

But I sometimes hold off completely private writing for a week or two and collect all the low stakes writing and read it quickly--till students learn how to use low stakes, ungraded writing for focused thinking.

Sharing but no feedback.

Sharing puts more pressure on students to make sense and not look ridiculous, yet it still gives them considerable safety to enjoy writing and think adventurously. Like private writing, it helps students learn to write about the subject matter of the course without stiffness and jargon, and often leads to good insights. The lack of any response or grade keeps the stakes low, yet they get the enormous benefit of being heard.

Students take their own thinking more seriously when they have to read their writing outloud and listen to that of others. It takes only five minutes for students to share their writing in pairs; ten minutes in small groups. This can be writing they have done in class or at home. They can simply read or else go on to discuss the ideas (perhaps about the homework reading). This takes no time away from course material--

indeed it puts more course material in students' heads for the discussion or lecture to follow. Speaking and hearing their words also helps them learn to write much more clearly and naturally--without any instruction or even feedback at all.

I find it helpful to be this kind of audience too. That is, I regularly assign writing that I just collect and read--and make no response. (Or I'll scrawl "Thanks" at the bottom.) Most of our discomfort with student writing comes from having to comment and grade. Yet students benefit--and my teaching benefits--when I just read.

Publication is a striking and effective way to share think-pieces and short essays (or stories). You can just ask students to bring ten or fifteen copies of their essays and then assemble class magazines on the spot. (A four page double-spaced essay fits on one sheet--single-spaced and back-to-back. Get someone to volunteer to make a cover.) If there are more than fifteen people in the class, not all magazines will be the same. At UMass Amherst, we collect a lab fee and publish a class magazine four times a semester--using a college copying facility. Unless you have used publications seriously (they become one of the texts for the course), you may not realize how powerfully they can help students learn material and take their own and each others' writing seriously.

Peer feedback or student response groups.
Students can learn to give interesting and helpful feedback to each other's writing: in pairs or in small groups, in class or at home, orally or in writing. Students are most valuable to each other not as diagnosticians or advice givers but as audience--as readers who can reply with their reactions and thoughts about the topic. Thus, we needn't think of peer feedback as "time taken away from biology and given to writing," for we can direct their feedback to matters primarily of biology (especially with response sheets or other guides).

Some important points to keep in mind about peer responding: students need some training and guidance at it; it takes substantial time if done in class (less if they work in pairs), but we can assign for homework the task of giving oral or written feedback to each other. In short, peer feedback may be more trouble and take more "management"; but it's easy to move slowly into it by starting with lots of sharing and little or no feedback. After all, the sharing process itself produces much of the learning, and sharing itself is the best preparation for peer responding.

About Teacher Responses or Comments.
Commenting is not so onerous when students have already done lots of writing that we haven't had to see and that we've read but not commented on. They are then much more skilled when they do higher stakes writing to demonstrate their learning. And the main thing to keep in mind is that if you are not teaching a writing course, there is no law that says you have to comment. If it's high stakes writing-to-demonstrate-learning, your only real obligation is to assess whether the learning has been demonstrated and give grade of some sort. But if you want to give some comments, here are some suggestions.

There's a quick and easy form of "proto-commenting" that is

remarkably effective--especially appropriate perhaps for think pieces: putting straight lines alongside or underneath strong passages, wavy lines alongside or underneath problem passages, and X's next to things that seem plainly wrong. I can do this almost as fast as I can read, and it gives remarkably useful feedback to students: it conveys the presence and reactions of a reader.

Non-English teachers sometimes argue about whether they should comment on "style." I would defend both sides in this dispute. On the one hand, it is obviously quicker and easier to restrict our comments to the content--to the places where the student is demonstrably wrong or right about biology. That doesn't mean acceding to garbage; it just means acceding to ungainly or awkward writing that nevertheless really does say what needs to be said--that really does manage to communicate the thought. In short, even if we don't "grade on style," there is no need to give passing grades for COIK writing (Clear Only If Known already): writing that only makes sense to readers who already understand what the student is trying to say. Grading down for COIK writing is not grading on style, it's grading on content. That is, unless students can explain the material unambiguously--not just throwing around key words and phrases--they probably don't understand it.

But on the other hand it's important to realize that non-English teachers can usefully and easily grade and comment on style. That is, grading on style doesn't mean you have to make "English teacher comments." There's no need to explain why something is poorly written or how to fix it in order to count down for the problem. It's best to comment in everyday terms or in whatever language people in your field might use (e.g., "This is wordy / roundabout / awkward / naive"). Plain talk by non-English teachers is often more effective with students. That is, it's better to say, "Don't sound so pompous" than to say, "Don't use so many passives and nominalized constructions." Most of all, you have a great advantage over us English teachers: when you say, "This is unacceptable writing in our field," students tend to believe you; when we English teachers complain about style or clarity, students tend to dismiss it as just our occupational hang-up.

Two-fers: I sometimes wait till I have two pieces by each student before reading and commenting. For example, I might comment on two think pieces (and perhaps even ask for an essay on a subsequent week that builds on the better of the two). With this approach I make just one comment that's not much longer than a comment on only one paper-- but it applies to both papers. It's easier to say, "This one is stronger than that one for the following reasons," than to figure out what to say about just one paper--especially if it is problematic or bland. These comparative comments are usually better at helping students improve because I can point to what worked rather than what didn't.

I sometimes give feedback to essays on a cassette tape: I ask students to hand in a cassette with their paper. I can just talk as I read.

ABOUT GRADING

It simplifies things simply to use fewer categories: e.g., pass/fail or

ok/unsatisfactory or / +/ - or ok/strong/weak-- especially for more informal pieces and think pieces--sometimes even for graded essays. This means fewer distinctions to make and saves time and agonizing and student complaints over small distinctions.

About think-pieces: I give an ok if they engage the task; I don't look for elegant writing or good organization (and I take them handwritten); I don't mind if they reflect perplexity or change their position in mid-course like good letters often do; I don't even mind if they come out dead wrong--as long as the student wrestles with the material. In short, what I insist on for an ok are those features which--if necessary--I can identify in 15 seconds of skimming.

I read think pieces a bit more carefully (and perhaps give check pluses and minuses) if the class is small enough and I want to push students more. Any system works if you are clear about your standards. I care more about getting students to work through intellectual tasks than about giving them fine-grained evaluations of their work.

But I am not arguing against hard grading. The most efficient way to get good work from students is to expect it and demand it. Since lots of casual ungraded writing can give students a sense that we are not interested in high quality work, there is something to be said for having a graded essay relatively early in the term and grading it with demanding standards--so that they can feel the true dialectic or schizophrenic relationship between writing to learn and writing to demonstrate learning.

In short, if you insist on strong writing on serious essays, students will usually provide it if that's the only way they can get a good grade--and if you give them lots of practice writings to warm up. This doesn't mean you have to teach writing. (Do you have to teach typing to insist on typed papers?) There is no greater service you can provide to us writing teachers or to a Writing Center than to make students angry by demanding good writing yet not stopping to teach it. What writing teachers need most is for students to need us.

ABOUT SURFACE CORRECTNESS: SPELLING, GRAMMAR, TYPING

I don't penalize for mistakes on in-class writing since students have no time to revise with fresh eyes and have no access to help. For exploratory think pieces done out of class, I require what would be appropriate in an informal letter to me: some mistakes are no problem, but the pieces can't be riddled with errors, nor sloppy, nor hard to read. A few students can just go back over a first draft of a think piece and correct obvious errors; other have to recopy and correct. (But some teachers insist on typing and good copy-editing even on think pieces.)

For genuine essays, it's important to demand not only clear well-organized writing but also typing and good copy-editing. I require essays to be "virtually free of mistakes." Many students can't achieve this without the help of a friend (or paid typist). This is appropriate; this is how most writers operate; it's how I operate. When they are writing

for other situations, they don't usually need to know how to get rid of all mistakes; they need to know to get the help they need to get rid of all mistakes. The main thing I'm trying to teach students about spelling and grammar is, again, schizophrenic: they are not important for exploratory writing, but they are crucial on final drafts.
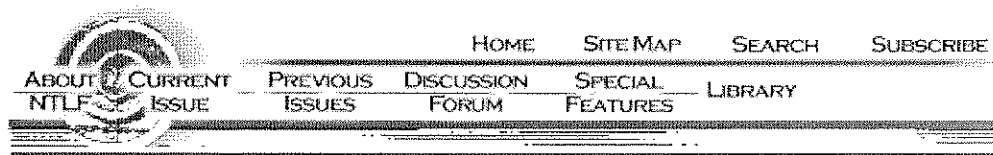
PREVENTING PLAGIARISM

I can't catch all plagiarism--and I start to go blind and insane when I try. But when I catch it, I feel I should make the consequences weighty. We need trustworthy evidence, however: it's no fair saying, "This is too good for you." Most students are capable of astonishingly good work. The best approach is to prevent plagiarism. Here are some ways:

- Collect lots of informal writing so students know that you know their style or voice.
- Assign specific or idiosyncratic topics for high stakes writing where someone might be tempted to cheat--so they can't lift things from books or other courses. (Examples: "Apply this theory to that data"; "Describe your reactions to X and then go on to . . ."; "Write an essay in which you reflect on what so-and-so says on page 134"; "Write a short story that illustrates the principles we've studied this week.")
- If it's a large course with different section leaders, have those leaders make up different assignments for think-pieces and essays-- so students are less tempted to share work between sections.

SOME PREMISES

- Students understand and retain course material much better when they write copiously about it. We tend to think of learning as input and writing as output, but it also works the other way around. Learning is increased by "putting out"; writing causes input.
- Students won't take writing seriously till all faculty demand it.
- Writing needn't take any time away from course material.
- We can demand good writing without teaching it. The demand itself teaches much.
- Students won't write enough unless we assign more writing than we can comment on--or even read. There is no law against not reading what we make them write.
- Writing can have a powerful communal or social dimension; it doesn't have to feel solitary.

Elbow, P. (1994). *Writing for learning--not just for demonstrating learning.* University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1-4.

| ABOUT NTLF | CURRENT ISSUE | HOME | SITE MAP | SEARCH | SUBSCRIBE |
| PREVIOUS ISSUES | DISCUSSION FORUM | SPECIAL FEATURES | LIBRARY | | |

[Home] [Site Map] [Search] [Subscribe] [About NTLF] [Current Issue] [Previous Issues] [Discussion Forum] [Special Features] [Library] [Sweepstakes]

Richard H. Haswell

Minimal Marking

It is a disturbing fact of the profession that many teachers still look toward the marking of a set of compositions with distaste and discouragement. Reasons are obvious, not the least being the intuition that hours must be put in with little return in terms of effect on the students or on their writing. C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon's recent survey of the research on the effect of marking unfortunately supports this intuition. Positive results of teacher intervention through written commentary simply have not yet been found ("Teacher Commentary on Student Writing," *Freshman English News,* 10 [1981], 1-4). The problem is analogous to that of the teaching of grammar in composition courses—hundreds of thousands of hours spent, and being spent right now, on a task of little proven benefit. Fortunately, however, Knoblauch and Brannon balance their description of unfruitful paths with a model of paths still promising. Otherwise, an essentially useful method that is easily discredited because easily disliked might seem finally unprofitable.

Whether Knoblauch and Brannon's model of beneficial written commentary can be verified by research remains to be seen, but I would like to provide evidence here that suggests it will be. In essence they propose commentary that 1) facilitates rather than judges, 2) emphasizes performance rather than finished product, 3) provides double feedback, before and after revision, and 4) helps bridge successive drafts by requiring immediate revision. All these requirements are met by a method of marking surface errors in writing that I have been using for several years and recommending for use by teaching assistants. Admittedly errors of this sort—misspelling, mispunctuation, etc.—constitute a nonessential element of writing, or at least one I do not wish to spend much time on at any level of instruction. But the method by which I comment on these errors, besides conforming to Knoblauch and Brannon's criteria, brings measurable improvements and serves as a paradigm for a scheme of written commentary that may be transferable to more central aspects of writing, especially aspects not amenable to peer evaluation.

The method itself is by no means solely my own, no doubt having undergone autogenesis time and again. I developed it for my own use six or seven years ago; a retired colleague of mine said he knew of a teacher at Vassar who used it

Richard H. Haswell has recently stepped down as director of the composition program at Washington State University, where he remains a member of the faculty of the Department of English. He is working on a study comparing the writing of students during the first two years of college with that of adults who write on their jobs.

in the early 1940s; recently Sheila Ann Lisman has described it as her "X system" ("The Best of All Possible Worlds: Where X Replaces AWK," in Gene Stanford, et al., eds., *Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1979-1980: How to Handle the Paper Load* [Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979], pp. 103-105). My own application is as follows. All surface mistakes in a student's paper are left totally unmarked within the text. These are unquestionable errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar (including pronoun antecedence). Each of these mistakes is indicated only with a check in the margin by the line in which it occurs. A line with two checks by it, for instance, means the presence of two errors, no more, within the boundary of that line. The sum of checks is recorded at the end of the paper and in the gradebook. Papers, with checks and other commentary, are then returned fifteen minutes before the end of class. Students have time to search for, circle, and correct the errors. As papers are returned to me I review the corrections, mending those errors left undiscovered, miscorrected, or newly generated. Where I feel it is useful, mistakes are explained or handbooks cited. Within those fifteen minutes I can return about one third of the papers in a class of twenty-five, and the rest I return the next session. Until a student attempts to correct checked errors, the grade on the essay remains unrecorded.

The simplicity of this method belies its benefit. First, it shortens, gladdens, and improves the act of marking papers. Because the teacher responds to a surface mistake only with a check in the margin, attention can be maintained on more substantial problems. The method perhaps goes a long way toward dimming the halo effect of surface mistakes on evaluation, since much of this negative influence may arise from the irritation that comes from correcting and explaining common errors (*its* and *it's!*) over and over. On the second reading the teacher does not lose the time gained initially, for according to my count students will correct on their own sixty to seventy percent of their errors. (Lisman reports her "least capable students" are able to find sixty percent of their errors.) Conservatively, I would say the method saves me about four minutes a paper. That is nearly two hours saved with a set of twenty-five essays.

Second, the method forces students to act in a number of ways that have current pedagogic sanction. In reducing the amount of teacher comment on the page, it helps to avoid the mental dazzle of information overload. It shows the student that the teacher initially assumed that carelessness and not stupidity was the source of error. It forces the student, not the teacher, to answer the question. It challenges students with a puzzle (where is the mistake in this line?) and reinforces learning with a high rate of successful solutions. It engages students in an activity that comes much nearer to the very activity they need to learn, namely editing—not the abstract understanding of a mistake someone else has discovered, but the detection and correction of errors on one's own. Finally, improvement is self-motivated. The fewer mistakes students submit originally, the sooner they leave other students still struggling in the classroom with checks by every third line. Progress during the semester is also easily seen, if not by checks on individual papers at least by totals in the gradebook shared with a student during conference.

Third, this method will help teachers analyze the nature and sources of error in ways that lately have proved so insightful among composition specialists.[1] Consider the following breakdown of the corrections that twenty-four freshmen in one of my recent classes made on their first inclass essay (without recourse to a dictionary).

Category of Error	Number of Errors Checked in Margin by Teacher	Number of Errors Correctly Emended by Students	Percent Corrected by Students
Semantic Signalling (capitalization, underlining, quotation marks, apostrophes)	97	74	76.3%
Syntactic Punctuation	142	81	57.0%
Spelling (including hyphenation)	132	74	56.1%
Grammar (including tense change, omission of word, pronoun disagreement)	30	16	53.3%
All Errors	401	245	61.1%

Crude as this breakdown is, a useful fact immediately emerges. Students are able to find and correct different kinds of errors at about the same rate. In short, more than half of the surface errors students make, *regardless of type*, occupy a kind of halfway house between purely conceptual and purely performance-based (only a few seem truly slips of the pen). They are threshold errors, standing on the edge of competence in an unstable posture of disjunction ("I know it is either *conceive* or *concieve*") or of half-discarded fossilization ("I don't know why I capitalized 'Fraternities.' I *know* that's wrong."). It is good for the teacher to be reminded that, after all, the majority of errors—all kinds of errors, and differently for different students—"mark stages," in David Bartholomae's words, "on route to mastery" ("The Study of Error," p. 257). Further, the method isolates, for each individual student, those errors of deeper etiology. It is re-

---

1. See especially Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford, 1977); Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer, "Error-Analysis and the Teaching of Composition," *College Composition and Communication*, 29 (1978), 242-248; and David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," *CCC*, 31 (1980), 253-269.

markable how often the method winnows away a heterogeneous clutter of threshold errors to leave just a few conceptual errors—errors, though again idiosyncratic and multiplied by repetition, now accessible for focused treatment. So the method is an ideal first step in the pedagogical attack on error recommended by Paul B. Diederich, Beth Newman, Ellen W. Nold, and others: keep records, isolate a few serious errors, individualize instruction.[2]

Even for teachers who have less time than they would like for individual instruction, there will be progress if this method of marginal checking is maintained during the entire course. At least there has been in my classes. Using inclass, fifty-minute, impromptu essays written the first and last week of the semester, with two switched topics to eliminate influence of topic, I have calculated change in error rate in three regular freshman composition sections. Overall, the drop was from 4.6 errors per 100 words to 2.2 (52%). This rate of decline was consistent despite different semesters and different topics and considerably different course plans (52%, 53%, 50%). Further, nearly all students participated in the improvement; only four of the sixty-nine did not register a decline in rate. This improvement in error rate, it should be noted, was not acquired at the expense of fluency, for final essays were 23% longer than first essays. Pearson product-moment correlation between initial and final error rates is high (.79), suggesting little connection between initial verbal skill and subsequent gain. Even though, given the above figures, it was nearly superfluous, I calculated a correlated t-test for significance of pre/post change in rate, largely to relish (at least once in my life) a truly giant t-value ($t = 25.43, p < .001$). Of course what other factors influenced this gain must remain conjectural. I devoted a small amount of class time to three or four common errors of punctuation, worked occasionally in conference with individual problems, and reminded students to save five minutes at the end of an inclass essay to proofread. I have not had the heart to set up a control group to isolate this marking technique; it has been valuable enough for me that I prefer to sell it rather than to deprive any students of it deliberately.

The ultimate value of this method for me is that it relegates what I consider a minor aspect of the course to a minor role in time spent on marking and in class, while at least maintaining and probably increasing the rate of improvement in that aspect. Crudely put, less work for the teacher, more gain for the student. But the gain may be compounded in ways more complex than this suggests. Knoblauch and Brannon rightly point out that commenting must be evaluated in terms of the "full teacher-student dialogue." Now too much commenting can harm this dialogue in at least two ways. It will embitter the teacher with the

---

2. Diederich, *Measuring Growth in English* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974), pp. 21-22; Newman, *Teaching Students to Write* (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1980). pp. 292-297, 398; Nold, "Alternatives to Mad-Hatterism," in Donald McQuade, ed., *Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition* (Conway, AK: L&S Books, 1980), pp. 103-117. See also Shaughnessy, Kroll and Schafer, and Bartholomae above. Marginal checking isolates deep errors in a way parallel, but not identical, to Bartholomae's method of "oral reconstruction" ("Study of Error," pp. 259-268). The two methods may prove to have different, though overlapping, diagnostic values.

knowledge that the time and energy spent on it is incommensurate with the subject and the results. And it will frustrate both teacher and student because judgmental commentary unbalances the teacher-student equilibrium in an authentic learning situation, that is, where the student is doing most of the work. Long ago Comenius put it best: the more the teacher teaches, the less the student learns. (The more you teach, one of our older teaching assistants said to me mournfully, the more you quote that maxim.) In terms of Elaine O. Lee's useful scale ("Evaluating Student Writing," *CCC*, 30 [1979], 370-374), this marking technique postpones correcting, emoting, and describing—where the teacher does all of the work—and instead suggests, questions, reminds, and assigns. Because students do most of the work, the discouragement of which I first spoke subsides, and a certain freshness and candor return to the dialogue. (Lisman's article describes this renewed energy well.)

Can this method be transferred to other aspects of writing? I think so, although right now I must speculate. Certainly problems of writing that lend themselves to spot improvement could well be marked with marginal checks: injudicious diction, needed transitions, unsupported generalities. Larger, structural problems such as stumbling introductions and disordered paragraphs might be signalled with marginal lines. More interestingly, so might fallacies and other lapses in thinking. In each case the effort would be to find the minimal functional mark. The best mark is that which allows students to correct the most on their own with the least help. An obvious pedagogical truth—but one that runs counter to the still established tradition of full correction.

Nancy Sommers

Responding to Student Writing

More than any other enterprise in the teaching of writing, responding to and commenting on student writing consumes the largest proportion of our time. Most teachers estimate that it takes them at least 20 to 40 minutes to comment on an individual student paper, and those 20 to 40 minutes times 20 students per class, times 8 papers, more or less, during the course of a semester add up to an enormous amount of time. With so much time and energy directed to a single activity, it is important for us to understand the nature of the enterprise. For it seems, paradoxically enough, that although commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student writing, it is the least understood. We do not know in any definitive way what constitutes thoughtful commentary or what effect, if any, our comments have on helping our students become more effective writers.

Theoretically, at least, we know that we comment on our students' writing for the same reasons professional editors comment on the work of professional writers or for the same reasons we ask our colleagues to read and respond to our own writing. As writers we need and want thoughtful commentary to show us when we have communicated our ideas and when not, raising questions from a reader's point of view that may not have occurred to us as writers. We want to know if our writing has communicated our intended meaning and, if not, what questions or discrepancies our reader sees that we, as writers, are blind to.

In commenting on our students' writing, however, we have an additional pedagogical purpose. As teachers, we know that most students find it difficult to imagine a reader's response in advance, and to use such responses as a guide in composing. Thus, we comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because, ultimately, we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing.[1]

Even more specifically, however, we comment on student writing because we believe that it is necessary for us to offer assistance to student writers when they are in the process of composing a text, rather than after the text has been completed. Comments create the motive for doing something different in the next draft; thoughtful comments create the motive for revising. Without comments from their teachers or from their peers, student writers will revise in a consistently narrow and predictable way. Without comments from readers, students assume that their writing has communicated their meaning and perceive no need for revising the substance of their text.[2]

Yet as much as we as informed professionals believe in the soundness of this approach to responding to student writing, we also realize that we don't know how our theory squares with teachers' actual practice—do teachers comment and students revise as the theory predicts they should? For the past year my colleagues Lil Brannon, Cyril Knoblauch, and I have been researching this problem, attempting to discover not only what messages teachers give their students through their comments, but also what determines which of these comments the students choose to use or to ignore when revising. Our research has been entirely focused on comments teachers write to motivate revisions. We have studied the commenting styles of thirty-five teachers at New York University and the University of Oklahoma, studying the comments these teachers wrote on first and second drafts, and interviewing a representative number of these teachers and their students. All teachers also commented on the same set of three student essays. As an additional reference point one of the student essays was typed into the computer that had been programmed with the "Writer's Workbench," a package of twenty-three programs developed by Bell Laboratories to help computers and writers work together to improve a text rapidly. Within a few minutes, the computer delivered editorial comments on the student's text, identifying all spelling and punctuation errors, isolating problems with wordy or misused phrases, and suggesting alternatives, offering stylistic analysis of sentence types, sentence beginnings, and sentence lengths, and finally, giving our freshman essay a Kincaid readability score of eighth-grade which, as the computer program informed us, "is a low score for this type of document." The sharp contrast between the teachers' comments and those of the computer highlighted how arbitrary and idiosyncratic most of our teachers' comments are. Besides, the calm, reasonable language of the computer provided quite a contrast to the hostility and mean-spiritedness of most of the teachers' comments.

The first finding from our research on styles of commenting is that *teachers' comments can take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers' purpose in commenting.* The teacher appropriates the text from the student by confusing the student's purpose in writing the text with her own purpose in commenting. Students make the changes the teacher wants rather than those that the student perceives are necessary, since the teachers' concerns imposed on the text create the reasons for the subsequent changes. We have all heard our perplexed students say to us when confused by our comments: "I don't understand how you want me to change this" or "Tell me what you want me to do." In the beginning of the process there was the writer, her words, and her desire to communicate her ideas. But after the comments of the teacher are imposed on the first or second draft, the student's attention dramatically shifts from "This is what I want to say" to "This is what *you* the teacher are asking me to do."

This appropriation of the text by the teacher happens particularly when teachers identify errors in usage, diction, and style in a first draft and ask students to correct these errors when they revise; such comments give the stu-

dent an impression of the importance of these errors that is all out of propor-
tion to how they should view these errors at this point in the process. The
comments create the concern that these "accidents of discourse" need to be
attended to before the meaning of the text is attended to.

It would not be so bad if students were only commanded to correct errors,
but, more often than not, students are given contradictory messages; they are
commanded to edit a sentence to avoid an error or to condense a sentence to
achieve greater brevity of style, and then told in the margins that the particu-
lar paragraph needs to be more specific or to be developed more. An example
of this problem can be seen in the following student paragraph:

> *wordy – be precise*   *which Sunday?*   *Comma needed*
> Every year [on one Sunday in the middle of January]
>   *word choice*
> tens of millions of people cancel all events, plans
>
> or work to watch the Super Bowl. This audience in-
>   *wordy*
> cludes [little boys and girls, old people, and house-
>   *Be specific – what reasons?*
> wives and men.] Many reasons have been given to ex-
>   *and why*
> plain why the Super Bowl has become so popular that
>   *what spots?*
> commercial spots/cost up to $100,000.00. One explana-
>   *awkward*
> tion is that people like to take sides and root for a
>   *another what?*   *spelling*
> team. Another is that some people like the pagentry
>
> and excitement of the event. These reasons alone,
>   *too*
>   *colloquial*
> however, do not explain a happening as big as the
>
> Super Bowl.

You need to do more research.

This paragraph needs to be expanded in order to be more interesting to the reader.

In commenting on this draft, the teacher has shown the student how to edit the
sentences, but then commands the student to expand the paragraph in order
to make it more interesting to a reader. The interlinear comments and the mar-
ginal comments represent two separate tasks for this student; the interlinear
comments encourage the student to see the text as a fixed piece, frozen in time,
that just needs some editing. The marginal comments, however, suggest that
the meaning of the text is not fixed, but rather that the student still needs
to develop the meaning by doing some more research. Students are commanded
to edit and develop at the same time; the remarkable contradiction of develop-
ing a paragraph after editing the sentences in it represents the confusion

we encountered in our teachers' commenting styles. These different signals given to students, to edit and develop, to condense and elaborate, represent also the failure of teachers' comments to direct genuine revision of a text as a whole.

Moreover, the comments are worded in such a way that it is difficult for students to know what is the most important problem in the text and what problems are of lesser importance. No scale of concerns is offered to a student with the result that a comment about spelling or a comment about an awkward sentence is given weight equal to a comment about organization or logic. The comment that seemed to represent this problem best was one teacher's command to his student: "Check your commas and semicolons and think more about what you are thinking about." The language of the comments makes it difficult for a student to sort out and decide what is most important and what is least important.

When the teacher appropriates the text for the student in this way, students are encouraged to see their writing as a series of parts—words, sentences, paragraphs—and not as a whole discourse. The comments encourage the students to believe that their first drafts are finished drafts, not invention drafts, and that all they need to do is patch and polish their writing. That is, teachers' comments do not provide their students with an inherent reason for revising the structure and meaning of their texts, since the comments suggest to students that the meaning of their text is already there, finished, produced, and all that is necessary is a better word or phrase. The processes of revising, editing, and proofreading are collapsed and reduced to a single trivial activity, and the students' misunderstanding of the revision process as a rewording activity is reinforced by their teachers' comments.

It is possible, and it quite often happens, that students follow every comment and fix their texts appropriately as requested, but their texts are not improved substantially, or, even worse, their revised drafts are inferior to their previous drafts. Since the teachers' comments take the students' attention away from their own original purposes, students concentrate more, as I have noted, on what the teachers commanded them to do than on what they are trying to say. Sometimes students do not understand the purpose behind their teachers' comments and take these comments very literally. At other times students understand the comments, but the teacher has misread the text and the comments, unfortunately, are not applicable. For instance, we repeatedly saw comments in which teachers commanded students to reduce and condense what was written, when in fact what the text really needed at this stage was to be expanded in conception and scope.

The process of revising always involves a risk. But, too often revision becomes a balancing act for students in which they make the changes that are requested but do not take the risk of changing anything that was not commented on, even if the students sense that other changes are needed. A more effective text does not often evolve from such changes alone, yet the student does not want to take the chance of reducing a finished, albeit inadequate,

paragraph to chaos—to fragments—in order to rebuild it, if such changes have not been requested by the teacher.

The second finding from our study is that *most teachers' comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text.* The comments are not anchored in the particulars of the students' texts, but rather are a series of vague directives that are not text-specific. Students are commanded to "think more about [their] audience, avoid colloquial language, avoid the passive, avoid prepositions at the end of sentences or conjunctions at the beginning of sentences, be clear, be specific, be precise, but above all, think more about what [they] are thinking about." The comments on the following student paragraph illustrate this problem:

Begin by telling your reader what you are going to write about

In the sixties it was drugs, in the seventies it was

avoid "one of the"

rock and roll. Now in the eighties, one of the most

controversial subjects is nuclear power. The United

elaborate

States is in great need of its own source of power.

Because of environmentalists, coal is not an accept-

able source of energy. [Solar and wind power have not

be specific

yet received the technology necessary to use them.] It

avoid "it seems"

seems that nuclear power is the only feasible means

right now for obtaining self-sufficient power. How-

ever, too large a percentage of the population are

against nuclear power claiming it is unsafe. With as

be precise

many problems as the United States is having concern-

ing energy, it seems a shame that the public is so

quick to "can" a very feasible means of power. Nuclear

energy should not be given up on, but rather, more

nuclear plants should be built.

Thesis sentence needed.

think more about your reader

One could easily remove all the comments from this paragraph and rubber-stamp them on another student text, and they would make as much or as little sense on the second text as they do here.

We have observed an overwhelming similarity in the generalities and abstract commands given to students. There seems to be among teachers an accepted, albeit unwritten canon for commenting on student texts. This uniform code of commands, requests, and pleadings demonstrates that the teacher holds a license for vagueness while the student is commanded to be specific. The students we interviewed admitted to having a great difficulty with these vague directives. The students stated that when a teacher writes in the margins or as an end comment, "choose precise language," or "think more about your audience," revising becomes a guessing game. In effect, the teacher is saying to the student, "Somewhere in this paper is imprecise language or lack of awareness of an audience and you must find it." The problem presented by these vague commands is compounded for the students when they are not offered any strategies for carrying out these commands. Students are told that they have done something wrong and that there is something in their text that needs to be fixed before the text is acceptable. But to tell students that they have done something wrong is not to tell them what to do about it. In order to offer a useful revision strategy to a student, the teacher must anchor that strategy in the specifics of the student's text. For instance, to tell our student, the author of the above paragraph, "to be specific," or "to elaborate," does not show our student what questions the reader has about the meaning of the text, or what breaks in the logic exist, that could be resolved if the writer supplied information; nor is the student shown how to achieve the desired specificity.

Instead of offering strategies, the teachers offer what is interpreted by students as rules for composing; the comments suggest to students that writing is just a matter of following rules. Indeed, the teachers seem to impose a series of abstract rules about written products even when some of them are not appropriate for the specific text the student is creating.[3] For instance, the student author of our sample paragraph presented above is commanded to follow the conventional rules for writing a five-paragraph essay—to begin the introductory paragraph by telling his reader what he is going to say and to end the paragraph with a thesis sentence. Somehow these abstract rules about what five-paragraph products should look like do not seem applicable to the problems this student must confront when revising, nor are the rules specific strategies he could use when revising. There are many inchoate ideas ready to be exploited in this paragraph, but the rules do not help the student to take stock of his (or her) ideas and use the opportunity he has, during revision, to develop those ideas.

The problem here is a confusion of process and product; what one has to say about the process is different from what one has to say about the product. Teachers who use this method of commenting are formulating their comments as if these drafts were finished drafts and were not going to be revised. Their commenting vocabularies have not been adapted to revision and they comment on first drafts as if they were justifying a grade or as if the first draft were the final draft.

Our summary finding, therefore, from this research on styles of commenting is that the news from the classroom is not good. For the most part, teachers do not respond to student writing with the kind of thoughtful commentary which will help students to engage with the issues they are writing about or which will help them think about their purposes and goals in writing a specific text. In defense of our teachers, however, they told us that responding to student writing was rarely stressed in their teacher-training or in writing workshops; they had been trained in various prewriting techniques, in constructing assignments, and in evaluating papers for grades, but rarely in the process of reading a student text for meaning or in offering commentary to motivate revision. The problem is that most of us as teachers of writing have been trained to read and interpret literary texts for meaning, but, unfortunately, we have not been trained to act upon the same set of assumptions in reading student texts as we follow in reading literary texts.[4] Thus, we read student texts with biases about what the writer should have said or about what he or she should have written, and our biases determine how we will comprehend the text. We read with our preconceptions and preoccupations, expecting to find errors, and the result is that we find errors and misread our students' texts.[5] We find what we look for; instead of reading and responding to the meaning of a text, we correct our students' writing. We need to reverse this approach. Instead of finding errors or showing students how to patch up parts of their texts, we need to sabotage our students' conviction that the drafts they have written are complete and coherent. Our comments need to offer student revision tasks of a different order of complexity and sophistication from the ones that they themselves identify, by forcing students back into the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning.[6]

For if the content of a text is lacking in substance and meaning, if the order of the parts must be rearranged significantly in the next draft, if paragraphs must be restructured for logic and clarity, then many sentences are likely to be changed or deleted anyway. There seems to be no point in having students correct usage errors or condense sentences that are likely to disappear before the next draft is completed. In fact, to identify such problems in a text at this early first draft stage, when such problems are likely to abound, can give a student a disproportionate sense of their importance at this stage in the writing process.[7] In responding to our students' writing, we should be guided by the recognition that it is not spelling or usage problems that we as writers first worry about when drafting and revising our texts.

We need to develop an appropriate level of response for commenting on a first draft, and to differentiate that from the level suitable to a second or third draft. Our comments need to be suited to the draft we are reading. In a first or second draft, we need to respond as any reader would, registering questions, reflecting befuddlement, and noting places where we are puzzled about the meaning of the text. Comments should point to breaks in logic, disruptions in meaning, or missing information. Our goal in commenting on early drafts

should be to engage students with the issues they are considering and help them clarify their purposes and reasons in writing their specific text.

For instance, the major rhetorical problem of the essay written by the student who wrote the first paragraph (the paragraph on nuclear power) [p. 343] quoted above was that the student had two principal arguments running through his text, each of which brought the other into question. On the one hand, he argued that we must use nuclear power, unpleasant as it is, because we have nothing else to use; though nuclear energy is a problematic source of energy, it is the best of a bad lot. On the other hand, he also argued that nuclear energy is really quite safe and therefore should be our primary resource. Comments on this student's first draft need to point out this break in logic and show the student that if we accept his first argument, then his second argument sounds fishy. But if we accept his second argument, his first argument sounds contradictory. The teacher's comments need to engage this student writer with this basic rhetorical and conceptual problem in his first draft rather than impose a series of abstract commands and rules upon his text.

Written comments need to be viewed not as an end in themselves—a way for teachers to satisfy themselves that they have done their jobs—but rather as a means for helping students to become more effective writers. As a means for helping students, they have limitations; they are, in fact, disembodied remarks —one absent writer responding to another absent writer. The key to successful commenting is to have what is said in the comments and what is done in the classroom mutually reinforce and enrich each other. Commenting on papers assists the writing course in achieving its purpose; classroom activities and the comments we write to our students need to be connected. Written comments need to be an extension of the teacher's voice—an extension of the teacher as reader. Exercises in such activities as revising a whole text or individual paragraphs together in class, noting how the sense of the whole dictates the smaller changes, looking at options, evaluating actual choices, and then discussing the effect of these changes on revised drafts—such exercises need to be designed to take students through the cycles of revising and to help them overcome their anxiety about revising: that anxiety we all feel at reducing what looks like a finished draft into fragments and chaos.

The challenge we face as teachers is to develop comments which will provide an inherent reason for students to revise; it is a sense of revision as discovery, as a repeated process of beginning again, as starting out new, that our students have not learned. We need to show our students how to seek, in the possibility of revision, the dissonances of discovery—to show them through our comments why new choices would positively change their texts, and thus to show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing.

NOTES

[1] C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, "Teacher Commentary on Student Writing: The State of the Art," *Freshman English News*, 10 (Fall 1981), 1-3.

[2] For an extended discussion of revision strategies of student writers see Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (December 1980), 378-388.

[3] Nancy Sommers and Ronald Schleifer, "Means and Ends: Some Assumptions of Student Writers," *Composition and Teaching*, 2 (December 1980), 69-76.

[4] Janet Emig and Robert P. Parker, Jr., "Responding to Student Writing: Building a Theory of the Evaluating Process," unpublished paper, Rutgers University.

[5] For an extended discussion of this problem see Joseph Williams, "The Phenomenology of Error," *College Composition and Communication*, 32 (May 1981), 152-168.

[6] Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning* (Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1981).

[7] W. U. McDonald, "The Revising Process and the Marking of Student Papers," *College Composition and Communication*, 24 (May 1978), 167-170.