



### THOUGHTS on Grading Writing: Establishing Priorities

The old saying “less is more” applies directly to grading a student’s writing. When I grade papers, I need to keep in mind that I should not simply ‘correct’ papers. It is more effective and less degrading to the student to find a few error patterns and make comments on those error patterns. Furthermore, the hierarchy of concerns is extremely important. Although spelling and grammar are important, it is more important to have substantial evidence supporting a clear thesis with a few typos rather than a paper with perfect spelling and grammar but no coherent argument.

*Austen Wilson—Music*

I think it has been so ingrained in us (both as writers and graders) to tear apart a paper and highlight all of the simple mistakes (and in a sense the student’s ego as well) that we don’t consider the ramifications of our

I have found that hierarchical ranking is at times difficult but does provide the student with some positive feedback as well as constructive criticism upon which to improve. In addition, playing devil’s advocate during commenting not only allows the student to think more expansively – to grasp the big picture—but it forces me to think more exhaustively as well. This has carried over to my own studies where I have begun more and more to accept things not simply at face value but rather to react to them comprehensively.

*Brandon Luedtke—History*

How do I go about giving constructive comments? There is a difference between wanting to help and succeeding, and wanting to help but actually failing,

comments on future writing. I can vividly recall getting a paper with a thousand red marks all over it and feeling utterly destroyed, yet I was turning around and doing the same thing to my students last year. My goal for the future is to try to identify one major error that each student is making and really trying to point that one thing out in order to better help them pick their battles. So far I have had one writing assignment to grade, during which I really tried to give more specific, helpful feedback than what I have in the past. I have also tried to shift my perception of grading from “what can I mark off” and “how can I prove to the student with my comments that I was right in taking away points” to “what is the goal of this paper and where is this student in meeting this goal.” Just taking this approach has made grading more pleasant and meaningful for me.

*Holly Scanes—Psychology*

possibly hindering the student’s writing further. I need to know what to look for when grading papers. My comments should reflect the level of the given assignment. Focusing on insignificant aspects of a paper will not only prevent me from truly understanding what the student has done, but will also prevent the student from learning what he or she could have improved upon. Hence, I need to provide specific suggestions for revision, in addition to praise for specific aspects of the writing that are positive.

*Shawn Brady—Philosophy*

The goal of any course is to encourage mastery of a specific content area and empower students to apply this information. Much of my traditional no-

I have learned how to comment on student writing in a way that will be constructive instead of discouraging. “Responding to Student Writing” by Nancy Sommers gave me a better understanding of how teacher comments can affect student writing by appropriating their work or overwhelming and stifling their creativity. After reading her article, I will strive to prioritize and individualize my comments so that students recognize the most important errors and feel capable of correcting them. I will try to use a “minimal marking” strategy to provide effective feedback and involve students in the editing of their work.

*Meaghan Bludau—Anthropology*



tions of grading do not further these goals and are less helpful to the grading process. As an undergrad, I taught a course and was trained to grade for mechanical errors in the same instance with content errors. This method of grading is ineffective and suggests that minor mechanical errors are of equal importance to larger content errors. If a student removes an entire paragraph or idea in a revision, a mechanical error may simply disappear and correcting this error may be irrelevant. There are appropriate times to grade for mechanical errors, but even these corrections focus on patterns of error, not every instance. Both focusing on content errors over mechanical errors and grading error patterns instead of specific errors increase student self-efficacy and potential future achievement.

*Jeff Nepute—Psychology*

For any course, grading can be a tricky process. For this issue, we asked students from E680 to provide their input about what they’ve learned concerning the grading process.

“I have learned about the hierarchy of rhetorical concerns, a framework that is going to be crucial as I am grading papers because it will remind me what to focus on in my comments.”

*—Natalie Wolfson—Psychology*

“Praise is all good and well, but careful and appropriate praise is most important, as praising for the sake of praising doesn’t necessarily do the student any good.”

*—Sarah Tisdale—History*

“The notions of minimal marking and positive feedback left the strongest impressions on me ... perhaps there is some sort of compromise between giving instructive feedback on what needs to change in order for a student to improve as a writer, and giving encouragement only.”

*—Heidi Espe—Anthropology*

“I don’t need to address everything with comments... I have to treat [grading] as a means to teach my students something.”

*—Julian Gonzalez—Philosophy*

“I found the ideas of identifying patterns of error and focusing on the big picture ideas expressed in the paper to be very helpful. I really want to have an impact on students’ scientific writing ability and these approaches to commenting on student papers seem to effectively improve writing.”

*—Katie Raymond—Psychology*