GTA Grading Scenarios...and Reflections

Some beginner college students don’t understand what constitutes appropriate academic writing. Papers that include references to sex and drugs sometimes occur among first-year students who don’t know that such subjects are not appropriate material for academic essays. At the opposite end are students who try to sound overly academic in their writing; these students may misuse words or seem preachy in their approach to their audience. Sometimes students misjudge audience another way, as suggested by a student I once had who wrote, when referring to his cheating ex-girlfriend, “If she had a strong personality like mine, it would not even have been an issue. She doesn’t though, most likely because she is just what she is, a girl.”

As a GTA, I’ve learned to not assume that students know what content is effective for an academic paper or for any audience more generally. For college papers, content should be appropriate (e.g., don’t write about sex and illegal activities), should reflect that the content or substance is more important than trying to sound like a Harvard professor, and wisely avoids insulting references to those in the audience. As GTAs, we may be the people who can best tell them so.

—Alex Reblin, GTA, Psychology

When students do come see me, I let them talk first. I want them to get out their frustrations and I want to hear what they have to say. I then go through the assignment with them, explain why I gave them the grade I did, and offer to help them create a plan to do better on the next assignment. I don’t change the grade. If they argue, I explain my grading system is not arbitrary and therefore not negotiable.

At the extreme, if students become unreasonably insistent or even hostile, I send them to the course director. I think it is important for students to understand that I am the teacher. As the teacher, it is my job to reward the grade earned.

Holistic writing encourages students to examine their entire piece of writing rather than small, separate components. Connections between concepts and application of material to novel situations warrant a better grade than simply fixing a stylistic error. Holistic grading scrutinizes the entire paper, which encourages the student to be more engaged and thoughtful about all components of their writing rather than just the required elements. In the end, this global revision results in better writing, better writers, and a much more enjoyable grading experience.

—Jake Benfield, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Psychology

Keep a positive attitude toward students. Writing is about confidence. If your comments are designed to help the students become better writers, things will come much easier for you and the student. Convey that writing involves a challenge to the status quo. Encourage students to recall that writing is not simply a communicative tool, but a way to learn, a way to challenge existing paradigms, and a way to think about the bridge between the university and “real life.”

Understand authorship. Students often take for granted that textbook knowledge is the truth. Encourage students to connect ideas with authors, to be critical of those ideas, and to take pride in the authorship of their own work. Emphasize that writing is a process. Writing is iterative. While you may not receive the chance to grade first drafts, direct your comments toward the future, so students know how to improve their next piece of writing.

—George Stetson, Doctoral Candidate, Political Science