THE GTA VOICE

For this issue, GTAs speak for themselves. Thank you to all! You are providing invaluable instruction when you grade student writing with your characteristic care and accuracy. We wish we could fit more of you onto these pages!

GTAs Describe Their Roles

Joel Deen—Political Science
I hope to inspire a conversation with my students in my grading and responding. In order to achieve this goal, I pepper my commentary with questions about why the student chose to write a certain way or make a certain choice. In this way, they may develop an internal monologue about the question.

Joo Shin—Psychology
Perhaps the most important theme of my philosophy is that every response to students’ writing should be instructive and interactive based on relationship. I hope that my students accomplish personal growth as well as intellectual growth. I do not think that separating these two is possible or desirable.

Sam Mosier—Political Science
When I grade, I hold responsibility for guiding and encouraging good writing skills from students. How are students to ever learn from their mistakes if all they can read on their papers are remarks that leave bitter associations with writing?

Anne Kirkner—Sociology
Good feedback must always come from a place of compassion. Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun, often says that when we feel terrible hurt and anguish we are really feeling the anguish and sorrow that everyone on earth feels. And from this we can have compassion for ourselves that extends out to others. We have all been knocked down by vicious feedback that served more to elevate the critic rather than teach the student. Working from that place of compassion for one another, we can start to see that feedback is about guiding others through their own process of articulating their ideas. Power is certainly involved in these relationships, but good feedback can come from any level—colleagues, friends, and teachers alike.

COMING UP IN THE SPRING NEWSLETTER

Vaughn Cardona, GTA Music, will have his article, “The Construction of Musical Understanding Through Writing” published in these pages.
GTAs Talk About Assigning Writing

Sunny Albright—Anthropology
I am the kind of writer who sits down to start a paper and ends up, six hours later, with two or three reasonably well-written sentences. I. Write. Like. A. Snail. Races. I get so caught up in producing the perfect expression of my thoughts that I cannot get any thoughts, perfect or not, down on paper. The templates we used in class did not, once filled, produce the perfect expression of my thoughts, but they served as a solid foundation for those thoughts. . . .This was extremely helpful in allowing me to organize my thoughts in a short amount of time. Furthermore, once I had started the writing process with these templates, I was far more capable of continuing it without stopping to edit myself. I produced a paper draft where previously I had been producing only mental ones.

My own experiences with this process led me to believe that informal writing is therefore a practical way of helping students learn the conversations of whatever discipline they happen to be studying.

Chris Coley—Philosophy
Typically, the assignments which are given to large classes are accompanied with minimal instruction. The theory is that the students’ struggle with the material along with the notes they should be taking in class are sufficient preparation for writing a paper. What I found from the first assignment I graded was that the students had not yet developed the academic voice of disciplinary papers. In reality we hadn’t yet taught them that, and were assuming that reading relevant material and listening to lectures was sufficient exposure for taking on the discipline’s writing styles.

In an attempt to help guide the students better for the second written assignment, I gave a special lecture the day the assignment was due, knowing they had already done the work. My strategy was to walk slowly through our expectations, give an example of a good paper, and help to clarify the distinct voice required for the class assignments. I then gave the students an option of a re-write for full credit. By doing this, I hoped to show the students directly the common problems with novice student writing in my discipline and gently direct them in the right way to do it.

The results were fairly astounding (from the students who actually did the re-write). They proved that a well formed assignment, when combined with the option of doing an additional draft, better teaches the skills instructors hope a writing assignment will impart.

GTAs Talk About the Ethics of Grading

Noah Wright—Ethnic Studies
Comments made in the margins should not just summarize what the student wrote; instead comments should demonstrate why a point was effective or how it could be improved upon. Marginal comments must show the student that I am dedicated to developing their writing skills. If my ethos is not established, then students will have no reason to follow my instruction.

Marcus Schultz—Philosophy
Most first time essay responders feel they can solve all of a student’s writing ills by responding to a single essay. They will attack structural issues, convention issues and content issues all in the same paper. Additionally, they will often not only point out many of these errors but act as an editor and fix a lot of the grammatical issues, if not every issue, for the student.

The inevitable effect of this grand benevolence is quite the opposite of what the responder believes it will be. If the errors are fixed for the student, then they just look at it, see it is fixed, and never learn how to avoid the mistakes in the future. If the errors are not corrected, but the paper is nonetheless marked up with every single issue it has, the student gets overloaded with advice and just gives up, not really resolving any of the issues for the long term. What this shows us is that the principle of diminishing marginal returns, which tells us that as a factor is applied, the proportional result becomes progressively less, is alive and well in the grading of and responding to student writing.

Tommasina Miller—Political Science
In grading and responding, graduate teaching assistants are faced with an ethical dilemma: how can they both uphold course standards and extend compassion for their students? In the same way, how can they have standards for their own responses while maintaining compassion for themselves? I advocate four techniques to solve these problems: minimal mark-
ing, low-stakes student writing, the sandwich end comment, and error pattern analysis. When effectively combined, these strategies should allow responders to preserve the course’s grading integrity while fostering student learning and ultimately reducing their workload.

Michael Mabry—Ethnic Studies
The grading process is vital in the success of one’s students because it goes a long way in shaping their confidence. I would adopt the method of being conservative with in text marks. It would be my method to give thoughtful comments at the end of the text not only giving instruction on what should be improved in the student’s work, but also praising the correct and creative details of the work. The amount of confidence and personal investment in learning that a student has will go a long way in deepening their hunger for academic success.

Tristan Nelson—Psychology
When grades must be associated with student writing, it is important that the comments provided on the student’s paper do not become a justification for the grade earned. I believe this can be accomplished primarily through caring. If we as GTAs do not care about the progress of our students, our comments and grading are likely to have little impact. However, if we care and let our concern show through meaningful and helpful comments aimed to encourage progression, those students who desire to learn are likely to notice and benefit from our efforts.

Roxanne Rassti—Psychology
It would be most beneficial to create an ongoing conversation with a student about their writing by encouraging them to keep assessing their own work and providing feedback that will assist them. When commenting on a student’s writing, it is important to always remember that when we’re responding, we’re responding to a person. I also make sure my comments are always constructive in tone and substance to make sure that I am not speaking to them in a degrading manner. In all stages of the writing process, the student needs a support system around them.

Andrew Eggers—Political Science
Providing a rubric does not always tell a student what he or she is being graded on. Ambiguous categories such as “content,” “structure,” and “grammar” do little to benefit student writing. I believe sitting each individual student down for a five minute meeting on what their paper is about, what the structure of their paper should look like, and what the expectations of this assignment are would drastically increase the writing ability of students. Sacrificing an entire class period to one-on-one student meetings would do more for student writing than any 50-minute class lecture could.

After an assignment is turned in, we as GTAs need to be willing to meet with students who want to talk about their grades. We must be able to defend and accurately articulate why a student received the grade and how they can improve for next time. If it is in our power, opportunities to rewrite the paper for a new grade should be given. We need to go the extra mile to help students who are willing to work hard and learn. Our desire is not to offend or punish any of our students, but to develop and cultivate their writing abilities. We must be accessible, we must be approachable, and we must be willing to help.

Rachel Holmes—Music
Grading and responding well to student writing is important because, for every student who immediately throws away our comments, there is a student who pours over what we tell them and truly takes it to heart. If we give them bad advice about their writing, then we are possibly setting them back many months in their writing progress. Merely editing their papers is just as debilitating, because the student will not learn to be proactive. We must strike a balance between praise and criticism if we want students to respond positively and improve their work. In the words of the witch in Sondheim’s musical Into the Woods, “Careful the things you say, children will listen. Careful the things you do, children will see and learn.”
Julie Berry—History
Teachers need to view themselves not as the judge who bestows a grade upon the students, but instead as a commentator who is there to aid students’ writing and is interested in seeing students improve on the next paper. Students will only allow teachers to be this if students trust teachers. Thus, it is essential that teachers maintain professionalism in grading and not criticize too harshly. Teachers and students should be in an ongoing conversation about improving the next paper by learning from the mistakes of the current assignment. Even if the class does not have a next assignment, the teacher should still consider it their duty to aid their students’ overall writing process.

Erica Olivarez—History
When grading an assignment for a student, I first try to find something that the student does well. Whether the rest of their writing skills are lacking, I want them to know that they have some valuable abilities and are capable of doing better. I believe that if a student truly puts an effort into their work, there will be some element in their writing that is worthy of notice.

Alexandra Naday—Sociology
I hope to challenge my students by providing them with multiple opportunities to demonstrate their writing abilities. I will provide constructive feedback, focusing on all aspects of their writing. However, since my favorite saying has to do with teaching, rather than showing, men to fish, I will be sure to allow students to come up with their own questions and direction when seeking assistance.

Nate Douda—Psychology
On the second to last day of E-608 class, we were asked to write about our agreement or disagreement with articles by Thomas Friedman or Berman. After a few students presented their initial views, we discussed the opposing views and constructed an implicit connection between these two articles and then re-wrote our agreement/disagreement statements. For myself and others in the class, the resulting writing was much deeper and had made a connection between the two articles that many of us has not made before we discussed both articles in a “They Say, I Say” type of format. I believe that if we are able to get students to discuss their assignments in a “They Say, I Say” sort of way, as we did, their resulting writing would also see a dramatic increase in depth.

Kaelyn Gustafson—Political Science
My main goal in grading and responding to student writing will remain to encourage students to maintain authority over and confidence in their writing. My genuine concern is that student take not only responsibility, but pride in their work. In order to achieve this end, my review and response will remain limited in the sense that the writing maintains its original author’s voice. Though I may offer constructive advice on organization and critical analysis, it is my intention to keep my own academic voice out of a student’s paper, and to foster the growth of the student’s own authoritative voice.

Jennifer Long—Anthropology
When responding to student writing, first and foremost, it is important that the comments are legible in order for the student to understand what is being asked of them. This not only includes the actual hand writing but also that the comments be clear and concise.

Jason Rosenholtz-Witt—Music
The most difficult papers to grade are the well written ones in which the student has a firm grasp of the course content. It would be simple, perhaps even tempting, to write, “Good job!” and move on to the next paper. However, this is a good chance to help the student get to an even higher level of composition.

Faye Sheets—Ethnic Studies
For many students, topics of race, class, gender, and sexuality are brand new when they enter our classes. This makes grading their papers particularly interesting. It takes caution and balance to find ways to give them feedback on their papers that encourages critical thinking yet does not make them feel that their personal opinions are being graded. This challenge is sometimes like walking a tight rope and can require a one-on-one meeting to encourage their growth and welcome them to the educational experience at the same time.

Jason Chambers—Anthropology
As a graduate student writer, as well as an undergraduate grader, I have a presence on both sides of the writing dialectic. As such, I am in a position to learn from what my undergraduate students are learning, as well as being able to learn from what criticisms I have for those developing writers, by being cognizant of those criticisms in my own writing.

THANK YOU FOR READING!
SEE YOU NEXT YEAR!