

Confessions of a Hired Grader

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I had the chance over the past two years to contribute in a different way to the operation of a composition class--two classes, in fact. I was a (shudder) grader, one of those anonymous red pens to whom student writings, like so many dirty shirts, are sent out for cleaning. It was an interesting change in status. I had been, until I took this job on as a sideline, an ordinary T.A., working with my own class in my own classroom, grading and reading and conferencing with my own students. Dealing with freshman writing in this capacity, despite its current good press, still doesn't carry with it an awful lot of prestige, but at least as a classroom teacher one is looked upon as holding a legitimate academic position. Now, to hear some people tell it, I was sub-academe, a kind of para-professional (at best)--something less, anyway, than an apprentice, because a grader does not eventually move up to become a real teacher any more than a laundry man becomes a tailor. This dim view of hired graders comes disguised in more than one form, but generally boils down to a single complaint: an outside grader can only come between a teacher and students. And it isn't hard to see how that might happen, nor hard to understand why someone once burned by such an arrangement would be loath to try it again. Our attempt, though, was a success--at least so far as I could tell--and this is a description of those things that, from the grader's point of view, made it work.

There were four main features of this arrangement that made it work. First, there was the money: if you want to hire a grader with a professional interest in the teaching of writing, some professional training and experience, someone willing to do more than make cryptic copyreader's SYMBS in the margins, then you have to offer more than two or three dollars an hour. I was paid ten dollars an hour, four hours per week; at that princely rate, I was quite happy to work five or six hours to finish a stack of papers--I was paid seriously and I worked seriously. It was easy to think about the work in terms of forty dollars per week and let the hours (within reason) take care of themselves. (Let me stress that this was not part of my assistantship, but a separate contract worked out with another local college.)

So the system was well lubricated. It was also, thanks to the teacher I worked with, very orderly. The reason I was hired in the first place was that her teaching load was four courses, two in composition--and each of

the composition sections had thirty students. No human can carefully read and fully comment on all those papers each week (cost-effectiveness and FTE's notwithstanding), and so my boss-to-be petitioned her administration for a little money to get help--me. But just having someone available does not a useful system make; in order to get maximum results for your efforts, things have to be highly structured. Each week at the same time I got the papers, neatly arranged in folders, by section, with a clear explanation of what the assignment was. There was no 'splitting' the piles; we both read all the papers, and we both read the 'whole' paper--I didn't read the writing as potential mechanical error, nor did she read it "just for the ideas". Where we did divide the labor was at the level of commentary: mine was to be (primarily) on the word and sentence level, while hers was to concentrate on larger concerns--pattern of organization, voice, effectiveness of beginnings and endings, that sort of thing. I read the papers first, made my comments, then returned them to her to be reread and graded. I never put a grade on the papers; of the three grading functions (ranking, evaluating, criticizing), I was limited to criticism, though I frequently made evaluative comments based on my reaction to what had been written.

The third key feature in this setup was communication; we talked, every week, about what we were doing, how the students were doing, how they reacted to the comments. If I made what I thought was a controversial (or dumb) comment, I let her know--she was the one, after all, who had to deal with the writers face to face. The students wanted, from about the fourth week on, to meet me, and we had early on agreed to schedule a class that I might teach. The lesson I had planned, an introduction to cumulative sentences, was lost a little among the questions and head nodding: "So you're the one"

The fourth element in this arrangement is the one about which I have the most to say: my method of marking the papers. The thing that hits you hardest when you sit down over that first stack of papers is that these people to whom you're writing do not know who you are. Even were they briefly introduced or given pictures (that they might later draw moustaches on or throw darts at) they still don't come to know you in the way your own class knows you. Everything they think about who you are and what you say must come from your comments--there are no "you know what I means" or "see mes" or "What did we say about that in class?". And I don't think I need point out that this limited persona is two way--it's a lot like pen pals. So I set about evolving a system and a personality for teaching writing on paper.

Step one in this commentary system was to number any item I planned to comment on. These could be good sentences, bad sentences, mistaken word choices, misplaced modifiers--any part of the writing that struck me as worthy of mention. With the number I'd try, when appropriate, to include the closest copy reading symbol; each student was supposed to keep an error chart, and the charts were based on their handbook's breakdown of error. Also, if there were several errors of the same kind (spelling, e.g.), I'd put them all under (1), following the sound pedagogical advice of (most immediately) Mina Shaughnessy. Then, either at the end of their paper or on a separate sheet, I'd begin the comments:

- (1) "their" not "thier"
- (2) You don't want a semi-colon to set off a list, but a colon (':'), like this: "Grandfather sold a variety of fruit: apples, pears, plums, cherries."

I didn't invent this system--I'm sure a lot of people can lay claim to it. Its simplest and perhaps greatest virtue is that it gets the comments out of cramped margins and into readable space. It also forces the marker to truly explain what has gone awry in a sentence. No hiding behind AWK symbols now--either explain what is wrong and why, offer an alternative construction, or learn to read less like an English teacher.

It wasn't long before variations on this simple pattern started to add some to the 'personality' I was trying to create. Most of the variations come under the heading of 'self-conscious' comments. For example, when I got a paper (hand-written) that was held together by arrows and balloons, paragraphs and sentences strewn all over the page, I'd reply in like form:

(1) Please

scribble all over
the place. It's

don't

hard to read.

Again, I'd get a paper written in a hurry that would be full of abbreviations and idiosyncratic shorthand--symbols for 'and', 's/he', 'Eng.', and the like. I'd respond in kind:

(2) Re: Yr. abvvs. & shtcts, in prev. pp. Ixnay.

I don't imagine the writer who got that back deciphered all of it, but the point is pretty clear. Some people I talked about this with thought that perhaps it was more satisfying for me than helpful to the student, and while I admit that it was satisfying for me (and when you're correcting 60 papers, that is no small consideration), I think my critics underestimate the students. This kind of friendly sarcasm, as part of a larger body of constructive commentary, would indicate to me that whoever this was that was reading my writing was taking some time with it--enough to get a little annoyed at my cutting corners.

In a more constructive vein, I used the self-conscious comment to demonstrate syntactic patterns. Given this sentence:

This idea of walking and standing tall is simplified at this level, it is more complex once we reach higher-higher education (M.A.s, Ph.D.s).

I would number it and comment:

(3) You could really use a semi-colon in the middle of this sentence; it runs on a bit with only a comma.

Get the idea? These are independent clauses you've got here, and at least in this case they don't hang together well at all. Yours would go like this, then:

" . . . is simplified at this level; it is more complex . . ."

Not very complicated---just a case of "Every pronoun has their antecedent" made a little more individual. Here's another example, this one a case of hypercorrection:

Although the Statue of Liberty was placed in New York, only one hundred years ago, it stands out like George Washington, and the Constitution.

(4) Although the point you make, above, is a good one, and true enough, you have a few more commas than you need. You throw me off my reading stride, anyway. Try it like this:

Although the Statue of Liberty was placed in New York only one hundred years ago, it stands out like George Washington and the Constitution.

The same for sentence fragments. Seriously--this method not need always be ironic; the greater portion of my corrections were straightforward. When the comment was positive, I would point out just what made the sentence a good one (referring, that is, to whatever element was clearly experimental on the writer's part).

Questions of spelling, usage, and the non-debatable conventions of punctuation I would explain very straightforwardly; as has been pointed out to me, it seems a ridiculous and punitive waste of time to say to somebody "Look it up" when you yourself know how to spell it, and can easily tell students and isolate the changed letters. The same goes for terminal punctuation, capitalization, all those things English teachers think everybody ought to know; instead of getting righteously irritated, it works better to simply explain the convention one more time and refer them to some further work on it. One day it will click.

Two final points. First, it's important to recognize the fragmentary nature of this review of the grading system. It's the report of the equipment man at the World Series, a caddy's view of the U.S. Open, a lecture on sculpture by the guy who sweeps up after Michelangelo. We know who does the main work.

Second, this whole procedure is admittedly non-scientific, and smacks too much of the re-inventing the wheel syndrome. We never empirically tested student reaction to or benefit from the commentary; we had neither the time nor resources even to consider doing so. For that we apologize, and promise to delve further into the workings of this particular writer-audience relationship as soon as we can. In the meantime, I like to think our system represents a healthy version of the state of the art among the chronically over-burdened, and that this report might help someone else out.