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Writing is one of the most personal activities a person does--whether in a letter to a friend, a paper for a class, or a memo for a job--and it necessarily involves a commitment of the writer's personality. No matter how objective a piece of writing may seem, a human being is somewhere within the text. Inevitably, a student often feels she is being judged as a person. This is no reason for the new writing teacher to avoid grading, but he should be warned that evaluation needs to be a carefully thought-out process. You cannot remove the context of the person from the writing, but you can conduct your evaluation in a positive manner.

Evaluating your students' papers is possibly the most difficult task you will face as a new teacher of writing. It is essential that you develop communication with each student as early in the semester as possible. Before you assign a grade to a paper, you should see at least one draft of the paper and give the student a chance to see your comments and/or talk to you. Also, you can have the students evaluate each other's papers in class; the students can share their ideas about the assignment, and they have a chance to see how other members respond. By knowing what is expected, the students will not be as likely to be surprised when you give them the grade. I would like to share with you my thoughts and some other teachers' ideas on grading papers. I will also suggest a procedure by which you can grade and go over a sample paper I have graded according to my procedure. Each teacher of writing ultimately has to develop his own method. The possibilities range from giving no grades until the end of the semester to creating a detailed list of criteria.

Teachers who do not give grades on papers feel that a grade does not help the student. These teachers generally make their evaluation in the form of lengthy comments or on cassette tape. One writing teacher who follows this approach feels that a grade is a device held over a student's head to make her do better. This teacher sees a grade as a negative means of accomplishing the goal. Instead of using grades to persuade the student to do better, this teacher tries to create a dialog between her, the student, and the paper.¹ With this approach the student has only the comments by which to understand the teacher's evaluation. In a sense, the comments are the grade; thus, they have to be as clear and thorough as possible.

Such an approach can be seen in Richard Veit's "De-Grading Composition: Do Papers Need Grades".² Veit suggests that not giving grades provides a positive means of increasing productivity and communication: "Dialogue is crucial to the learning process in composition classes and must be maintained. . . . I question whether we can afford the barriers grades place between us" (Veit, 433). Grades, Veit says, are not necessary "to convey to our students our appreciation of fine writing. Nor are low grades especially effective in making poor writers improve" (Veit, 433). Like others who use this approach, Veit will provide the student with a sample grade, but the student knows that the grade is not recorded or used in any way.

Other teachers of writing feel that eliminating grades is unrealistic. Both students and society demand grades. For these teachers, grades are a means of motivating students: "In spite of the potentially liberating effect of writing and the joy we experience in saying something well, most of us need some sort of

push to get us over the ever-present reluctance to settle down and write."³ The challenge for the grade-giver is to prevent "grades from exercising their destructive influence on the writer-reader relationship" (Lotto and Smith, 424). In the same issue of College English as Viet's article, Edward Lotto and Bruce Smith outline a system of grading that uses two graders to help remove this destructive influence. Using the holistic, or first impression method of assigning a grade,⁴ each grader reads all of the papers and, on another piece of paper, assigns each one a letter grade. The two then discuss and average the grades, and the student's own instructor makes comments on cassette tape. These teachers feel that their method is more objective than having only one grader and that the students generally respond well to it (though this may be that "being mostly freshmen, they accepted the conditions as immutable" [Lotto and Smith, 424]).

As the three examples illustrate, professionals rarely agree on what constitutes the best method of evaluating student papers. There are many current evaluation theories, including holistic scoring (quickly reading the paper through one time and assigning a letter grade), primary trait scoring (analyzing the writing according to how it fits the criteria of the assignment, but not by comparing it to other papers), relative readability (evaluating on the basis of whether the writer accomplished what she set out to), and an analytic scale (comparing the paper to others written on the same assignment).⁵ It is possible to be overly concerned with evaluation though and, it is always useful to keep in mind that the real purpose of a writing course is to provide a meaningful way to help the person grow as a writer.

The first issue to consider in developing a grading procedure is how much emphasis you will put on a paper's form (grammar, mechanics, and syntax). Normally, content and form are treated separately. Some teachers deal strictly with one or the other, and some go so far as to give a separate grade for each. However you choose to do it, keep in mind that you are dealing with a whole piece of writing that attempts (hopefully) to effectively communicate. In the 1960's content was stressed and form was virtually ignored by many teachers of writing. But in the 1970's teachers began to realize that form was also important. Some instructors became increasingly "message-weary" and they "became aware that applying double standards to excellence is a subtle form of oppression."⁶ If a student wants to get into law school, for example, she will have to use competently the conventions of standard English, and it would be a disservice to her if the teacher avoids mentioning form. Thus, we should not avoid pointing out errors in form. Most students already have learned the rules of grammar and mechanics and will simply need to be directed to an appropriate source to review these rules. Also, many schools now have writing centers that handle such matters, but even if there is no center, it is a relatively easy task to make up a few handouts as they are needed. In most cases, grammar, mechanics, and syntax should be dealt with on an individual basis. Rarely should you use class time for this. The writing course should be used to teach the development of whole pieces of writing; we should be more interested in how well the student says something rather than how many rules she has memorized.

Form is important but should not be given too much emphasis. Especially on early drafts, content and organization are the primary considerations. Since much of the content may be changed, there is little benefit in pointing out problems with form. As Nancy Sommers says, the "goal in commenting on early drafts should be to engage the students with the issues they are considering and help them clarify their purposes and reasons in writing their specific text."⁷ Reading early drafts helps remove the pressure a grade has, increases the communication between you and the student, and makes comments and conferences more valuable. The real

help you can provide the student is to get her to see that writing is a process where each successive attempt gets better and that the grade is of less importance than the progress the student makes as a writer. (Of course, they won't believe this at first.)

In many ways the process of grading begins when you formulate the assignment. You can make the evaluation work best by being honest and providing your students with the best indication you can of how you will evaluate their work. One way to do this is to develop a set of clear criteria and share this with the students before they write the first draft.⁸ You should set criteria in the form of goals which the students will be able to fulfill, and you should base these on what you will cover in class prior to having them hand in the final version of a paper. I make the criteria for each paper cumulative; that is, the criteria for each paper includes those from the first assignment as well as what has been added for each one after that. The list gets longer as the course goes on. Also, you will want to indicate criteria you expect but will not actually cover in class work, such as neatness, originality, length, and form. In a large way, the content of the course determines the criteria. If I see that we cover more or less material than I had planned, then I adjust the criteria accordingly (as long as the students know this). The criteria for a paper should not be finalized too early.

I recommend keeping some sort of record of each paper in the form of comments and a letter grade. I believe you should give grades on a regular basis (at least for the first year), with comments, so that you have a clear understanding of where your students stand. You may want to keep a grading journal where you record comments and grades; this will give you a place to write down whatever you want about a student's paper, and can be the source for conferences or for writing your comments to the student. Also, this provides you with a place to look up comments later if you need to, and it is a valuable duplication of the grades (should, heaven forbid, you happen to lose your gradebook).

I use a fairly specific procedure to grade a paper. Basically, I first respond to the overall impression that the paper has on me, and then go through the criteria, all the while making comments in my journal. (Anyone who says they can grade a paper in five minutes or less is, in my opinion, not doing a thorough job.) My procedure resembles the procedure the students use for their in-class editing (usually, they have a handout that guides them through a self or peer evaluation), except, of course, I am trying to make a final decision and assign a letter grade. The procedure I present here is intended to be suggestive rather than prescriptive; like any model, it is an artificial representation of a complex process.

- 1) Read the whole paper, then write down initial comments.
- 2) Go through the paper and make comments about each criteria item.
- 3) Focus on only one or two major form problems. Include a note on this in the comments.
- 4) Place a tentative grade in the journal.
- 5) After completing all of the papers, assign grades next to or below the comments.

It is important that you assign the grades after you have read all of the papers and made the comments. If you discover that none of the papers fulfilled a certain criteria, then the grades may have to be adjusted; probably, that particular item was not made clear when you gave the assignment.

I require each student to have a conference with me after each paper is graded. The student is not given the paper or the grade until she shows up for the conference. In the conferences I have the opportunity to discuss the paper and the student has a chance to voice her concerns about it and my evaluation.⁹ Usually, the conference takes little time; if I or the student have little to say then we have not wasted much time. But often there is a need for one or both of us to talk about the paper. (I encourage and have many conferences during the revision stage of a paper as well, though these are not required.) The conference is also valuable for other matters, such as discussing other assignments or problems with the course. Conferences encourage an active role on both the instructor's and the student's part, and though it can sometimes take a lot of time and energy, a little time with each student is better than none at all.

The student paper that appears at the end of this article is one that I graded for my second assignment, the process essay. It should give you an idea of how my method works. The criteria for this assignment are that the paper 1) follows the given assignment (an essay in which you give full and clear directions to the reader that will teach him/her how to do something you know how to do), 2) is well focused, 3) is logically developed from the focus, 4) is clearly organized and presents the information in clear and orderly steps, 5) indicates an awareness of the intended audience so that the audience can use the paper to learn the task, and 6) is edited in class and shows evidence of using the comments made by the student readers and the instructor. As my comments to the student indicate (following the paper) the student showed signs of considering all of the criteria except for audience so that, finally, the directions that were given were not very useful (the most important part of this type of paper). The comments for this paper are longer than those I make on most papers, though it is not uncommon for me to respond with lengthy comments. These comments were written and given to the student only because I was using them and the paper in this article; all of the other students' comments and grades were given orally (unless, after the conference, they requested the comments in writing). I often encourage a student to rewrite a paper and try for a higher grade (as long as it was on time), and to me this particular paper is a draft that can be used to write a better paper.

Perhaps the best way to lessen the damaging effect that grades have on writing is to focus on extensive revision practices. Ideally, we want the students to be primarily concerned with how they can best communicate with their audiences and, thus, enter into the realm of idea exchange. For me, the revision process is certainly more important than grading. Attendance and participation on the revision days count a lot, both on the paper's grade and the final course grade. Grading has not been easy for me, but I find that it gets a little easier each time. I feel that the class time spent on revision has contributed greatly to the evaluation process and has given both me and the students a better understanding of how to evaluate both their writing and the writing of others.

Sample Student Paper

For years people have been visiting the wildernesses of the world. Many of these people say the best way to see the wilderness is, by way of back packing. I tend to agree with them.

Now, in order to enjoy the wilderness experience in this way, you must be properly packed and equipped. This is perhaps the most important part of backpacking. Mainly because, if you are not properly packed or equipped your trail of fun could turn into a trail of agony.

When you are going on a trek into the wilderness you need something to store your gear in. This should be some type of backpack with a type of support i.e. a frame. The frame should be made up of a lightweight metal that is durable. The pack should have two or three large compartments and four or five outside pockets. These pockets are used to store frequently used items such as ponchos, a well stocked first aide kit, eating utensils, (usually a spoon and sierra cup) water bottles and more.

The major compartments are used to store food clothing utensils and tentage. When organizing this gear you should always pack at least 2 changes of clothes. One for the warm weather and one change for cooler weather. Your best bet for warmer weather is cotton while wool is good for the cooler weather. Take two changes of socks, by this I mean four pairs two cotton inner socks and two wool outer pairs. My favorite way to pack these is to roll the entire change up together and then put them in the lower compartment on top of these I place a sweater or a light jacket.

Moving up to the larger compartment I first put the utensils for preparing food such as : spatula pots and pans etc. Then I put my back packing stove on top of this.

The stove I have is a Bluet Gaz200 butane cartridge stove. The other types of stoves I recomend are a Coleman Peak 1 a white gas burning stove. The Sven III this also burns white gas. These are all good stoves and fairly low in price.

Next comes food, when buying food keep in mind it must be lightweight and nutritional. There are many companies that make backpacking food the best priced and tasting is mountain house. Although this is the cheapest it is fairly expensive. I recommend perhaps getting a few of these meals and then shopping at your neighborhood store for other dehydrated food.

After this comes the shelter I have a Eureka two man timberline tent. This is the most popular tent for non expedition packing. Other tents are North face Dome 2 and 3 the Boy Scout Voyager II, these are tents that I have used and they are good.

On top of this I put a pair of tennis shoes. These are then covered with a water proof ground sheet. Now close these compartments, next is the sleeping gear.

Sleeping bags come in all sorts of varieties and it is up to the individual to choose their own. Make sure though that it is comfort rated to the climate you will be in.

Also you will need something to sleep on, I recomend a rather inexpensive foam pad. I roll up the poles of my tent with the pad and with my sleeping bag strap them to the pack frame under the lower compartment.

Now for the final test put the pack on the back and strap on the waist belt. Jump everywich way you can and if you dont fall over or feel any weight shifting you will know you have done your job well.

If you follow these simple steps and other information found in any book on backpacking and adhere to the outdoor code you will probably become like the many who enjoy back packing.

Comments to the Student

The focus is not made clear early in the paper and some of the steps seem incomplete. I am not sure what the focus is. Though I think you are writing about how to pack a backpack, there are places in the paper where you digress.

The order that you place things into the pack seems to be o.k., but you do not give much information about how to place the items in.

I think your audience needs to be more closely considered. If, as you imply early in the paper, you are writing for those people who already like to backpack, then your topic does little for them, except to recommend various items they could use. It might be better to write this kind of paper for a "tenderfoot": someone who knows very little about packs and even less about how to fill them (your final sentence does indicate that you are writing for the beginner).

Be more careful with commas and incomplete sentences (look these up in your handbook).

Compared to the earlier version, this one shows improvement; it shows signs of having used the in-class editing and of consideration of my comments. However, it could still use a lot of work. I encourage you to rewrite this. (I appreciate the typing--it really helps.)

(grade: D)

NOTES

¹Kathleen Welch, "Grading," Teaching College Composition course, University of Oklahoma, 7 Sep. 1982.

²CE, 41 (Dec. 1979), 432-435.

³Edward Lotto and Bruce Smith, "Making Grading Work," CE, 41 (Dec. 1979), 423.

⁴Charles Cooper and Lee Odell, Evaluating Writing (Urbana, ILL.: NCTE, 1977). Cited in Lotto and Smith, 424.

⁵Lee Odell and Charles Cooper, "Procedures for Evaluating Writing: Assumptions and Needed Research," CE, 42 (Sep. 1980), 35-43.

⁶Richard Eldridge, "Grading in the 70s: How We Changed," CE, 43 (Jan. 1981), 6.

⁷"Responding to Student Writing," CCC, 33 (May 1982), 155.

⁸Denise Lynch, "Easing the Process: A Strategy for Evaluating Compositions," CCC 33 (Oct. 1982). Lynch uses a "Self-Evaluation Scale" (a list of criteria) in class and grades papers on the same basis. This is similar to my use of criteria and revision sheets (though I do not grade the evaluations they do). Her "Four Part Strategy" (self-evaluation, peer evaluations, instructor's first draft comments, and final evaluation) has, according to Lynch, "motivated students more than did the traditional letter grade scrawled across the page" (314).

⁹While I was working on this article, the October 1982 CCC came (it is about half on evaluation) and it has surprised and encouraged me, especially Allan Rose's "Spoken versus Written Criticism of Student Writing: Some Advantages of the Conference Method" (326-331). Rose, like me, does not write out the comments but does his evaluations in conferences. The students read their essays aloud and, sometimes in groups, discuss them. I have been giving grades and comments orally,

though I also have these written in my grading journal. However, I have begun to feel like a judge sitting there reading my comments and trying to remember what the paper was about (usually, it comes to me soon enough). Once I get over my embarrassment ("Uh, I gave your paper a D, now let me explain . . .") and deal with the content of the paper the conferences seem to go quite well.

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