

Best Practices and Strategies for Grading Writing Across the Curriculum



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Acknowledgements: Some of the tips in this document have been adapted from a professional development presentation that Jeanne Brinkman Grinnan and I originally developed and presented for SUNY Brockport faculty in 2007 and that I have revised and presented several times since.

Best Practices for Teaching and Grading Writing

1. **Use writing to learn**, not only to assess. This means providing low-stakes informal writing opportunities in and out of class such as asking students to keep a journal, post to a forum, brainstorm a list, write a summary, compose a response, develop a proposal, and so on. You don't have to grade everything! Graded or not, such writing opportunities help students process the new information and skills they are learning.
2. **Require drafts**. Writing to learn also means providing opportunities for students to receive written and oral feedback from you, their peers, and/or a tutor BEFORE the assignment is graded. Students will learn more, and they will be more apt to pay attention to your feedback and to turn in a higher quality final paper.
3. **Use rubrics**. Provide a detailed rubric BEFORE students turn in the assignment so they are aware of your expectations at the start. Better yet, ask students to help develop or modify the rubric criteria.
4. **Encourage self-assessment**. For example, ask students to rate their own paper using the rubric. To help them identify strengths and problems in assessing their own writing skills, also have them compare their ratings to yours.
5. **Provide opportunities to practice** disciplinary writing conventions. Students need to learn what proficiency in writing looks like in your discipline. This does not mean you must teach students how to fix comma splices or write a summary. Rather, it means creating assignments which require students to practice such conventions and provide them with models, resources, and timely feedback so they can teach themselves.
6. **Assign authentic writing tasks**. Provide opportunities for students to practice different kinds of professional communication in which they will engage in your discipline.
7. **Limit feedback**. Don't spend more time on the assignment than the student. Too much feedback is overwhelming for both the instructor and the student. Identify what you value most in an assignment and evaluate for that. Limit your comments to those areas and expect students to address them in their revision.
8. **Act as your students' coach, not their editor**. Help them identify a) what they are doing well so they can do more of it, b) problems they are having so they can fix them, and c) errors they are repeating so they can develop strategies to address them. Rewriting sentences for students or editing their grammar and punctuation does not help them learn how to rewrite their own sentences or edit their own grammar and punctuation.
9. **Ask questions**. Editing students' papers can also unintentionally send a message that the instructor is more responsible for the meaning in the text than the student, or that the instructor knows better than the student what the student means to say. Empower students and hold them accountable for learning how to communicate their ideas more effectively by asking specific questions to help them clarify their ideas.
10. **Employ a positive, encouraging tone**. Students become aware of our attitudes toward their writing (thus, their ideas & them) very quickly. Scolding, sarcastic, or judgmental language use may trigger students' emotional defenses. When this happens, students put energy into protecting themselves instead of learning from their mistakes.

Tips for Managing the Paper Load

These strategies are designed to promote student responsibility and lighten the paper load.

1. Don't evaluate everything in writing. Schedule individual conferences with students, or write "conference" on papers to let students know they need to schedule an appointment to discuss the assignment with you. Talking with students is more effective and less time consuming than writing out comments.
2. Don't read every piece of student writing. For example, collect or check a print or electronic journal at regular intervals and simply count pages or posts. Or facilitate an in-class or online peer review process so students get feedback from peers but not from you. Or simply ignore some writing entirely.
3. Don't comment on every piece of student writing. Assign a check mark to acknowledge the assignment was done or a letter grade to indicate how well it was done. Alternatively, comment only on papers that earned a low or failing grade.
4. Don't grade every piece of student writing. Again, assign a check mark, or provide only minimal feedback.
5. Require short papers that need only brief comments. These papers may become part of a sequence of assignments that culminates in a longer paper later in the semester.
6. On early drafts, limit comments to global issues such as purpose, thesis, organization, or evidence. It is often less time-consuming and more effective to provide one or two comments on several drafts than to comment extensively on one draft.
7. Rather than mark every editing or grammar error, note patterns of errors and expect students to attend to these in future drafts.
8. Occasionally have students work on their papers during class when you are there to help them.
9. Ask students to submit a cover letter with their assignment in which they include—and which you respond only—to the following:
 - a. One or two things they would like you to notice (i.e. what they did well).
 - b. One or two things they are struggling with and would like feedback on.
 - c. One or two questions they have about their writing skills in general or their proficiency in completing this assignment in particular.
10. Use detailed rubrics. This can save time writing the same comments repeatedly.
11. Assign group writing assignments. Require students to write using different colored fonts so you can easily identify how much and how well each student completed their part of the writing assignment and assign individual grades accordingly.

Self-Editing Tips to Avoid Common Writing Errors

Use a writing guide and the Find feature on your word processor to help you complete the following:

1. Find and circle all of the commas in your essay. Determine whether or not they are needed and revise accordingly.
2. Find and circle all of the FANBOYS (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) in your paper. Are they used to join two independent clauses (i.e. sentences)? If so, do you need to add a comma? If not, do you need to remove a comma?
3. Find and circle all of the semicolons (;) in your essay. Are they joining two independent clauses? If not, it's likely that a semicolon is not appropriate. Revise as needed.
4. Find and circle every *it's* and *its*. Determine if you are using the correct word and revise as needed. Remember that *it's* always means *it is*. If you can't substitute *it is*, use *its*.
5. Find and circle every *their*, *there*, and *they're*. Determine if you are using the correct word and revise as needed. Remember that *they're* always means *they are*. If you can't substitute *they are*, use *their* or *there*. *Their* is always plural possessive: "Their cat is missing." *There* usually refers to a place: "It's over there."
6. Find and circle every *effect* and *affect* in your paper. Determine if you are using the correct word and revise as needed. Remember that *affect* is usually a verb, and *effect* is usually a noun. And remember that nouns are preceded by an article (*a/an* or *the*) or by an adjective.
7. Find and circle every *than* and *then* in your paper. Determine if you are using the correct word and revise as needed. Remember that *than* is always comparative: "An elephant is larger than a mouse."
8. Find and circle every *to* and *too* in your paper. Determine if you are using the correct word and revise as needed. Remember that *to* is a preposition (a linking word), and that *too* is an intensifier. If you can substitute *very* or *also*, use *too*.
9. Find and circle every *your* and *you're* in your paper. Determine if you are using the correct word and revise as needed. Remember that *you're* always means *you are*.
10. Find every *should of*, *would of*, or *could of* in your paper and replace them with *should have*, *would have*, or *could have*.

APA punctuation reminders:

11. Commas and periods go *inside* of quotation marks: Doe (2008) argues that "Pity is an expression of dominance," (p. 58) and she encourages compassion instead.
12. Commas and periods go *after* parentheses: According to Doe (2008), "Pity is an expression of dominance" (p. 58).

Writing & Research Rubrics

THINKING, WRITING & RESEARCH SKILLS	Highly Proficient	Proficient	Lacks Proficiency
Attention to task	<input type="checkbox"/> Responds creatively and/or intelligently to the issue under discussion. <input type="checkbox"/> Effectively addresses all parts of the writing prompt.	<input type="checkbox"/> Responds adequately to the issue under discussion. <input type="checkbox"/> Adequately addresses all parts of the writing prompt.	<input type="checkbox"/> Fails to address or ineffectively addresses the issue under discussion. <input type="checkbox"/> Neglects to address some or all parts of the writing prompt or does so inadequately.
Critical Thinking & Development	<input type="checkbox"/> Presents pertinent evidence, examples, and/or logical reasoning to support conclusion or point of view. <input type="checkbox"/> Identifies relevant qualifications or objections or alternative points of view and prioritizes evidence and/or reasons in support of the conclusion. <input type="checkbox"/> Describes the broader relevance, significance or context of the issue.	<input type="checkbox"/> Presents accurate examples and evidence to support conclusion or point of view. <input type="checkbox"/> Identifies some qualifications or objections or alternative points of view. <input type="checkbox"/> Describes the broader relevance, significance or context.	<input type="checkbox"/> Either fails to present examples and/or evidence or examples/evidence provided lack relevance, are inaccurate, or do not clearly support ideas. <input type="checkbox"/> Does not clearly identify or respond to relevant objections or alternative points of view. <input type="checkbox"/> Fails to describe or inadequately describes the broader relevance, significance or context.
Organization	<input type="checkbox"/> Paper is effectively organized and includes meaningful subheadings.	<input type="checkbox"/> Paper is coherently organized, though some paragraphs may need restructuring and/or subheadings may need revision.	<input type="checkbox"/> Paper is ineffectively or inconsistently organized; paragraphs may be ineffectively structured and/or subheadings may be missing.
Introduction	<input type="checkbox"/> Provides context and relevance.	<input type="checkbox"/> Clearly introduces topic or issue at hand.	<input type="checkbox"/> Missing or not well-focused; too little or too much information.
Conclusion	<input type="checkbox"/> Well-demonstrated conclusion.	<input type="checkbox"/> Clearly summarizes or concludes paper.	<input type="checkbox"/> Conclusion doesn't adequately represent the body of the paper or last paragraph does not serve as a conclusion.
Tone & Diction	<input type="checkbox"/> Solid command of word variety; tone and diction appropriate for subject and/or audience.	<input type="checkbox"/> Some degree of control over tone and diction; appropriate for subject and/or audience.	<input type="checkbox"/> Tone and diction often inconsistent and/or inappropriate for subject and/or audience.
Sentence Structure	<input type="checkbox"/> Sentence structure displays sophistication and variety.	<input type="checkbox"/> For the most part, sentences are clear, concise, and well-constructed.	<input type="checkbox"/> Sentences are often wordy, awkward, and/or unclear; problems exist with sentence combining, parallel construction, misplaced modifiers, fragments, and/or run-ons.
Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, & spelling)	<input type="checkbox"/> Mechanics are nearly flawless.	<input type="checkbox"/> Mechanics are mostly accurate and do not obscure meaning.	<input type="checkbox"/> Mechanics are not well executed and may, at times, obscure meaning.
Analysis & Integration of Source Material	<input type="checkbox"/> Evidence is drawn from carefully selected sources and documented using assigned documentation style. <input type="checkbox"/> Conclusions are based on thoughtful integration of the student's own thinking and careful analysis of the outside sources.	<input type="checkbox"/> Evidence is drawn from appropriately selected sources and documented using assigned documentation style. <input type="checkbox"/> Conclusions demonstrate the writer's conscious attempts to integrate his or her own thinking with an analysis of outside sources.	<input type="checkbox"/> Outside sources may be inappropriate to the topic, or information from sources may be presented without careful analysis and/or inadequately documented. <input type="checkbox"/> Conclusions may demonstrate little evidence of the students' own thinking, presenting mainly a summary or restatement of the main sources.
Documentation	<input type="checkbox"/> Writer expertly uses assigned documentation style.	<input type="checkbox"/> Writer adequately uses assigned documentation style. There are only minor errors in formatting that would not be considered plagiarism.	<input type="checkbox"/> Writer fails to or ineffectively uses assigned documentation style. There are errors in formatting that may be considered plagiarism.