Grading Student Papers: Reducing Faculty Workload While Improving Feedback to Students

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Most professors believe that clear and effective writing is important in all levels of psychology and in most of the professions for which we are training our students. And most professors give their students writing assignments because they believe that practice will improve students' writing. And as part of this process, most professors (and their teaching assistants) believe that their feedback will improve the quality of students' writing, so they spend countless hours providing written comments on these papers (after all, psychologists have long known that practice without feedback is futile, right?). Of these three assumptions, probably only the first one is true.

Developing effective writing skills is one of the top goals for undergraduate psychology education identified by the APA's Task Force on Undergraduate Major Competencies (2002). It is also among the top goals that I have personally for my own students. However, reflecting on 35 years of graduate and undergraduate teaching, the aspect of this job that I find the least productive and certainly the least enjoyable is grading student papers, and I know that I am not alone in this. A colleague of mine recently said, "They don't pay me to teach; I love doing that. They pay me to grade papers." But, why do we undertake this onerous task semester after semester? Is there any evidence that the feedback that we provide on student papers actually improves the quality of students' writing?

In considering this question, I have reached several harsh realizations. First, I do not think that most students — graduate or undergraduate — read most of the comments that professors provide on their papers. In fact, I think that a significant number of students read *none* of the comments that we provide on their papers except the letter grade assigned on page one. Second, those students who endeavor to read the comments on their paper, often (a) cannot even read the handwriting, (b) perceive the feedback to be arbitrary, (c) do not understand the point of each comment, and (d) do not have the opportunity to see how each suggested comment would actually improve the quality of their paper. Consequently, when learning from this process does occur — if ever it is at a very superficial level, making it less likely that improvements in writing ability will result.

Several suggestions follow from these realizations, suggestions that will increase the utility of grading student writing assignments and at the same time make this process easier and more efficient for professors. These suggestions also apply to a wide range of writing assignments from topical position papers to APA style research reports.

Suggestion #1: Provide Feedback in a Manner That is More Likely to be Understood and Utilized by Students

It is time to abandon the academic artifact of providing students with handwritten comments on their papers. This practice should go the way of the typewriter. For the reasons specified above, this process is just not effective. I have developed my own "top 10 list" of issues with student papers. I derived my list

by systematically analyzing the modal comments that I have written on student papers over many years. These are not simply grammatical violations that I find offensive, but at a more superordinate level, these are actual barriers to the clear presentation of ideas in writing.1 These points are as much about clear thinking as clear writing. My own list is specified in the box below. Now, as I read each paper, I simply mark the paper with the letter codes that correspond to the feedback that I want to provide at appropriate points. For example, rather than writing, *"The transition here is not clear. Think about what you just said, the point you want to make next, and then use clear language to articulate the transition between these ideas,"* I simply write "*T*." Although I make other comments on student papers in addition to those in my "top 10 list," the large majority of the remarks that I make continue to be from this list. I distribute my list with each course syllabus. This alerts students early to the dimensions that they should consider important in writing their papers and provides them with a reference so that they can decode my remarks later. Thus, students get clear detailed feedback about how to improve the quality of their writing, feedback that they are less likely to perceive as arbitrary and more likely to incorporate in the future. 2

This shorthand method of providing feedback helps circumvent another problem. Providing detailed feedback on student papers is effortful, time consuming, and tedious. Consequently, the amount of feedback that students receive in handwritten remarks from professors is likely to vary by (a) how many papers the professor has just read and how many remain in the stack, as well as (b) knowledge of whether each particular student is likely to consider the feedback. Unfortunately, students who perform well are likely to get more specific feedback than those who do not. Streamlining the process improves the uniformity of the feedback provided on all papers.

Providing students with useful feedback — maybe even *perfect* feedback — is worthless unless they are going to read this feedback and then apply it. Toward this end, when possible, it is recommended to have students rewrite each paper, and turn in the first draft along with the revision. Only then can we have confidence that they have read and utilized the feedback provided on draft one. Requiring students to rewrite their paper in light of the feedback provided on the first draft communicates that you are serious about having them improve the quality of their writing.

Let's be honest, when a student writes a paper for a class, they typically write one draft shortly before the paper is due, sometimes proofread this draft, and then turn it in. This process provides students with a limited writing experience that constrains what they are likely to learn about the practice of writing. On the other hand, the process of revising a paper requires students to rethink the organizational structure of their paper and how each paragraph fits within that organizational structure. It also requires them to play with language, to think about alternative ways of articulating a point, and then to decide which of these alternatives is preferable and why. This is the experience that is more likely to produce polished writing, the type of writing that will be required of them in a professional setting.

There are several ways of working out the logistics of grading two drafts of the same paper. I require that students hand in two drafts of the same paper, and I assign a letter grade to both drafts. However, I grade the first draft with a high criterion — there are few As. When students turn in their revision, they need to attach their first draft to the revision so that I can assess the extent to which they have successfully incorporated the feedback provided on draft one. In computing each student's final grade, I let the grade on the revision replace the grade on their first draft. This serves to motivate students to take the review process seriously. How can faculty efficiently read two drafts of each paper? The next

suggestion addresses this point.

Suggestion #2: Assign Shorter Papers

When students are assigned a class paper, they are often told that the assignment is a "10-page paper." In their minds, the project is one in which they have to do "something" that fills 10 pages. However, in light of the fact that more writing is not usually better writing, and more writing results in more grading time, writing assignments should be defined by the purpose of the project not the page limit. And, students should be told that their goal is to fulfill this purpose as succinctly as possible, certainly taking no more than, for example, 5 pages. The premier publication in any field of science is the journal, *Science*, and *Science Brevia* articles are restricted to 800 words…including references. The Gettysburg Address is only 272 words, and the point is both clear and beautifully crafted. The reality is that brevity will be encouraged in most of the professional writing that our students will do after college. There is practical utility in teaching students to write succinctly.

A shorter writing assignment requires students to have a point and without wasting space, to structure their paper so that the support for this point is clear and convincing. Rather than pondering, "How can I fill 10 pages?" this assignment challenges students to think, "How can I best structure my paper to present and support my point?" If students do not know what the point of their paper is, it will be harder for them to obfuscate this in a 5-page paper than in a 10-page paper. As a result, shorter assignments are not only quicker for faculty to read, but with shorter papers it is easier to discriminate bad, good, and great papers.

Suggestion #3: Have Students Proofread Each Others' Papers

I require that prior to the due date for each paper, each student has another student in the class proofread their paper.The proofreader's name is to be indicated on the paper when it is submitted.This requirement improves the quality of writing with no additional demands on the professor. It serves several additional purposes as well. First, it encourages students to break the habit of writing a paper the night before it is due. Second, it gives every student experience with the review end of the writing process. Identifying places where another student's writing can be improved enhances each student's sensitivity to the qualities of good writing. Third, this process communicates to students that writing is a public process, not just a private one. Students need to learn to feel comfortable having their work read by peers both in college and in the professional world thereafter. If the first draft of a student's paper is seriously deficient, I require the student to meet with a tutor in the University's Writing Center for help with the revision and to provide evidence of having done so when they turn in draft two.

To facilitate this process, two class sessions prior to when their draft is to be submitted to me, I have students bring a hard copy of their paper to class and then randomly pair students who are to exchange and proofread each others' papers by the next class meeting. In that next class session, I allocate class time for students to meet in pairs and provide each other with detailed critical feedback. Students are then expected to use this feedback in the revision of their paper.

But students do not make good proofreaders unless they are trained to do so. It is a good investment of class time to allocate a few brief sessions to teaching proofreading skills — skills required in proofreading a student's own paper as well as classmates' papers. This involves first, setting one's criterion at the

right level. Students are often surprised to learn that proofreading a paper means doing line-by-line editing, not just making summary comments about the paper at the end. A proofreader needs to learn that comments such as those in the attached "top 10 list," are typically required in every paragraph of a paper and, in some paragraphs, on most sentences. The best way to train students on proofreading is to provide the class with the same sample paper and have them each proofread and mark up the paper as a take home assignment. Then, project the paper on the screen in front of the class and mark it up yourself, explaining your comments as you proceed. This will not only let your students know where their proofreading criterion should be set, but it will communicate where your criterion is set — after all, *you* will be grading *their* paper. This exercise also familiarizes students with the shorthand code in the "top ten list."

Suggestion #4: Establish These as Department-Wide Practices

If faculty find these suggestions useful, it would be helpful to students if these suggestions could be applied uniformly department-wide. This is especially relevant for suggestion #1 — using a consistent shorthand code for providing feedback to students. Whether you use my "Top 10 List of Writing Issues" provided below, or one developed among faculty in your own department, it would be useful if students could be exposed to the same method of feedback in all classes in the department. This would help them realize that there is a uniform discrete list of issues that define good clear writing and would focus their efforts on these issues. When students receive detailed comments on their papers, they are often overwhelmed by the feedback, and this feeling prevents them from incorporating the feedback when they work on future papers. This would be less likely to occur if all written papers in each department were assessed on the basis of a uniform list of concerns. And this would ease the faculty demands in grading student papers as students became more familiar with the shorthand code for feedback.

In addition, regarding suggestion #3 above, if students are required to proofread other students' papers in all classes in their department, they will become more proficient at this task. Consequently, improvements in student writing across classes would be cumulative, with no extra faculty grading time required. Through some minimal curriculum coordination, students could be familiarized with the department's "Top 10 List of Writing Issues" and proofreading could be taught in one of the first writing-intensive courses required of majors, such as Research Methods. Thereafter, less class time would be necessary providing proofreading directions and clarifying faculty expectations.

Faculty are more likely to assign class papers and to provide useful feedback to students if this process in not an onerous one for them and if they see that it results in improved students' writing skills. The suggestions in this paper help lighten the workload for faculty grading student papers and at the same time sharpen students' writing skills — a win-win situation.

1 To insure that students also learn the more subordinate principles of good writing, I encourage assigning Strunk and White in every class. We can no longer assume that most students learned even the basic principles of grammatical writing in high school.

2 There are other new methods of providing feedback to students in a form that they are more likely to utilize. For example, software is available online that allows faculty members to do a video capture of a student paper and then talk through their ideas (for example, see http://www.jingproject.com). This allows faculty members to provide more nuanced feedback than can be provided with handwritten

comments. However, it is not clear that this method is an efficient way to provide feedback on every page of each paper submitted in a class.