Evaluating Writing

Incorporating ideas from Richard L. Larson's list in *Writing in the Academic and Professional Disciplines: A Manual for Faculty.* Herbert H. Lehman College (CUNY), 1983.

Establishing Criteria

Criteria for evaluation should emanate from the assignment itself; establish criteria as you design the assignment.

Responding

Instructors comment on student papers for several reasons:
- to show that the instructor has read the paper;
- to indicate strengths of the paper;
- to suggest improvements;
- to explain reasons for the grade.

The form and length of the comments need to be driven by the purpose of the comments and the use that will be made of them. Comments may be written on a checklist, on a separate sheet of paper, or on the student's paper itself.

Tips:
- Evaluate the text holistically, as an entire document that communicates ideas pertaining to your discipline. The success of the paper is then measured by the extent to which the student writer succeeds in convincing you of the validity of his/her knowledge and point of view.
- Some discipline-specific instructors hesitate to respond to students' writing, thinking of responding as grammar-correction. If you have hesitancies, remind yourself what you want to teach the student about your field of study, and respond accordingly.

Types of Comments

Typical comment forms include marginal and summary comments.

Marginal Comments

Marginal comments are written at the side of the text as annotations. They help point out strengths and weaknesses in argument, ask for clarification, and indicate other views.

Tips:
- Take care to be a teacher rather than a proofreader, editor, or judge.
- Let students know when thinking, style, or organization is especially effective.
- Avoid pinpointing issues of diction and sentence structure that are matters of taste. Do let students know when grammar, spelling, punctuation and word-choice problems interfere with your ability to read the writing.

Summary Comments
Summary comments appear at the end of the paper or on a separate sheet. They help record your overall impression of the paper, establish how successfully the student addressed the assignment, and point out future goals for the student.

Tips:
- Respect the student's paper, remembering that the paper is being commented on, rather than the student him or herself. The student wrote the paper, and, after it is marked, it should still be the student's paper.
- Comment on strengths as well as weaknesses and on how well the student met the challenge of the assignment.

Content of Responses
The nature of your responses is likely to vary depending upon what you want the students to do with the comments. If you want students to revise their writing, respond with questions and suggestions that will prompt revision. But questions frustrate students if they are attached to a final paper with no option of revision. Instead, consider responding with remarks that will allow students to see strengths and weaknesses for future application. Jokes, sarcasm, and cynicism are best held in check when commenting on papers.

The amount of commenting varies by individual taste, but, generally, less is more. Students are more likely to benefit from a few carefully chosen comments than from a paper reddened with responses. And, of course, if the responses are illegible, the commenting time is wasted.

Even if they provide excellent guidance through their responding to substantive issues in student papers, teachers are often concerned about their responsibility toward papers that have stylistic flaws. Richard Larson suggests that for discipline-specific writing, the key is to make clear to students that the way they write is integral to what they write and that their work will be evaluated accordingly. Students should be made responsible for the care and accuracy with which they prepare papers in academic courses, and should be led to understand that they will not receive credit in these courses unless their writing is careful and precise.

Tips:
Test question: Is the style reasonably clear, free of distracting errors in punctuation and of syntactic features that complicate reading?

- If not, offer this possible comment: "The numerous [whatever problem] distracted me from your argument."
- Keep in mind that correcting stylistic faults seldom changes students' writing.
- If you need to point out student style flaws, consider marking one paragraph and having the student edit the rest of the paper marking problem areas with checks in the margin, letting the student edit. Mark problematic paper with "read to here," and return it for revision.

Grading

Holistic Grading

Holistic grading involves looking at the paper as an entire document instead of distinguishing content from form. Criteria state what qualities constitute an A, B, C, etc. Like the evaluation criteria, the best time to establish these criteria is prior to grading. Even if you are working from a departmental standard, it is helpful to articulate for yourself what constitutes each letter grade. Writing out your understanding of the criteria insures consistency and provides a useful point of discussion in student conferences.

Some people make a list of the qualities that comprise crucial grading criteria. Here, for example, is what one teacher defined as qualities necessary for an "A" paper: assignment—exceeds expectations; style—clear, concise, direct; control—confident. This list is useful, but some people are tempted to separate these qualities instead of treating them as collectively necessary for a successful paper. They prefer to write out a description of the paper in a brief paragraph. For example, these qualities in paragraph form might look like this:

A. This paper is *insightful*. It addresses the assignment in a way that indicates your comprehension of and control over the assignment itself as well as an understanding of the underlying issues. The message is communicated *clearly*, *concisely*, and *directly*. There is a *confidence* in this writing.

Working with this ideal, the remaining paragraph descriptions easily fall into place. Just adjust descriptive words as the *emphasized* words and phrases in the following examples illustrate. The tone can also be adjusted to be more accessible to students:

B. The paper *meets and, at times, exceeds* the basic requirements of the assignment. The paper indicates that you are *beginning, at times*, to think through and deal with major ideas in the assignment. The message is communicated with *generally* effective clarity, directness, and conciseness. *Some* unevenness in writing may be apparent.

C. While the paper offers *little insight* into the greater issues of the assignment, it meets the basic requirements. The message, for the most part, is *reasonably* clear, concise, and direct, although there *may be* unevenness in the writing.

D. The basic requirements of the assignment are *partially met*; however, *additional revision* is necessary if you are to communicate the message clearly. There is *considerable* unevenness in the writing.

E. The assignment's basic requirements are *met only marginally or are not met at all*. The writing is *not clear, concise, or direct*.

Working from such criteria will help you assign letter grades in a consistent fashion, especially if you combine this strategy with stacking papers into A, B, C, etc. piles prior to assigning letter grades. As you flip through the piles, ask: Are these papers similar enough in quality that they

should all be in the same pile? This procedure takes a few more minutes, but it improves internal consistency on grades tremendously.

Grading With Checklists
Evaluation sheets or checklists permit:
- students to use a checklist handed out with the assignment as a guide to write and edit their papers;
- teachers to use checklists for debriefing with a student on an assignment.

However, note that some graders find segmenting the paper into specific items counter to their holistic understanding of writing. Others dislike using points that may add up to less or more than the grade the paper seems to merit.

Grading Short Writings
When writing is used to generate discussion, as in the case of in-class writings or microthemes, a simple informal method of evaluation is very effective.

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