❄ INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Yes, We Can Expect Perfect Papers

Having been involved in graduate education courses and in administration for almost 10 years, I had lost touch with the real world of the community college student. Was I surprised when I stepped back into the classroom two years ago!

Some of my colleagues tried to warn me, but I wouldn't listen. They said that the community college student of today has changed and cannot be expected to write—period. Did I believe them? No. Did I get some proof that they were right? Yes.

In the first class I taught, I assigned what I thought was a relatively simple writing project; it was to be a brief *research* paper based upon a minimum of 10 magazine articles and was to contain no less than three and no more than five pages of body, plus a cover page and a bibliography—a weekend project at best. Wrong! And, when I suggested that it be typed, the students almost came unglued.

The best paper that semester had 66 mistakes on the first page (I didn't bother to read the second). The worst paper had 88 mistakes on the first page (this one from a computer science major whom I knew had access to a spell-checker, thesaurus, grammar-checker, etc.). Surprise!

When I asked the students what happened, the standard answer was, "We've never had to write a research paper before. We've always written essays, and the instructors never checked for mistakes. They only checked for content."

"Impossible," I thought. So, I checked it out with students in other classes—same response.

Maybe I hadn't made myself clear. Next semester I beefed up my instructions; checked out the writing lab, the library, and the tutoring department to determine what help was available; and took another shot at *research* papers. The results were a little better—some papers actually were typed, and some only had 30-40 mistakes. Something worked, but what? Careful analysis of my instructions indicated several loop-holes—the writing lab didn't understand exactly what I was trying to do, ditto for the tutoring lab. No fault with the library.

The next semester I made some serious changes in the instructions to students. Also, I asked the students to buy a copy of the stylebook used by the English department, the writing lab, and the tutoring lab. (At least we would all be singing out of the same songbook.) I scheduled tours of the library. I spent two hours during my management courses to personally take the students to the tutoring labs to introduce them to word processing on the lab computers. And I set to learning more about how to teach research writing.

Then, I announced: "You will be allowed no more than *five* mistakes on the entire paper." My rationale was that this number would be generous enough. After all, if these students were going to be the future managers in the business world, five mistakes could be enough to make a small business go belly-up; and I wasn't teaching them how to fail! Great idea, right? Wrong, again.

Students went to the program director, the chairperson, and the dean. The end result was that I had to back off a little, but it was still my belief that a perfect paper was not entirely out of the question.

The spring semester brought about more changes in the instructions and more study on my part—and these extra efforts are now beginning to pay off. I actually had two papers with no obvious mistakes and several more in the range of 4-5 mistakes. On average, the quality of the papers has improved dramatically.

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The current process goes something like this:
1. After the initial shock of the first day of class, I distribute the term paper instructions and go over them very carefully—word by word and page by page. The final paper is to be a research report from at least 15 magazine articles and contain 5-10 pages of body, plus cover page, contents page, and bibliography. It is to be typed. The instructions include a copy of the grading sheet which will be used to grade each part of the final paper. To support this project, I include a library tour, writing lab tour, and "private" sessions from the tutoring lab instructors to learn the basics of word processing.
2. The term paper is now a phased-project over a 16-week semester.

A. During week one, a topic is negotiated and submitted on a 3 x 5 card.

B. Two weeks later, a preliminary thesis is submitted on a 3 x 5 card.

C. Two weeks later, a preliminary outline is submitted—typed. The students must have gone to the library and completed some reading to get this far.

D. Paper number one (due one week after the outline is submitted) is a summary of one magazine article on the agreed-upon topic. The summary is written on a paper I provide—15 marked lines with space for the title, author, publication, etc. This paper may be handwritten. It must include one quote from the article. At this stage, I want to see content—i.e., whether students know how to summarize without including their own opinions. (I found that I have to teach them how to summarize. All students read the same article, summarize it, and read their summaries aloud. We discuss any major points they omitted and how to condense a summary, if necessary.) I check for accuracy in grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc. This paper is graded and returned before paper number two is due. The grade for this paper is 10 percent of the grade for the final paper.

E. Paper number two (due one week later) is a summary of two more magazine articles on the same topic—one summary, two articles—again on 15 lines. This one may also be handwritten and must include two quotes—one from each article. There are now three articles on the same topic and two 15-line summaries of the three articles. The paper is graded and returned before paper number three is due. The grade for this paper is 20 percent of the grade for the final paper.

F. Paper number three (due two weeks later) is a summary of four more magazine articles on the same topic. (Note: For each assignment, the number of articles has doubled.) There is one summary of four articles with two quotes—student's choice. This paper is to be typed, and the limit of 15 lines is still enforced. At this point, I bring to the students' attention that they are now halfway through the paper; i.e., seven articles have been read and summarized. This paper is 30 percent of the grade on the final paper.

G. The last assignment becomes the final paper. This time students must read eight more articles (for a total of 15). The body of the final paper is to contain information and quotes from the first three papers (not necessarily verbatim quotes). By this time, I have corrected papers and shown students how to cite publications; how to use quotes; how to use the spell-checker, the thesaurus, and the grammar-checker on the computer; and generally how to "think" in terms of a perfect paper. In addition, I inform students that I will go over the paper and check for mistakes at any time they choose before the final paper is due (two weeks before finals week). This check is not a grade; I just help "fine-tune" the final project. The grade for the final paper is 40 percent of the grade for the entire project. (During the final two weeks of the semester, I grade the papers. I read every word, including cover page, contents page, body, footnotes, and bibliography, and look at style as well as format and content.)

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The papers are getting better and better; the students are the same, but there seems to be more motivation. The students still complain at the beginning of the semester when they find out that the rumors they've heard are true; but by the end of the semester, their attitude seems to have changed.

The word about my classes is spreading, and I am sure that some students shy away from them and me. Yet, I can't help feeling that "the harder I work, the luckier I get."

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