



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Writing Students Judging Their Own Writing... "I like right a lot better."

The grading of an English composition appears to be a magical, mystical experience—for both the writing instructor and the student. That may sound romantic, but it is and/or should be as frightening to the instructor as it is to the myriad of students who flow through our classrooms semester after semester.

The perception that the grading of paragraphs and essays is a fuzzy, gray area finally made an impact as I facilitated a peer editing group in a developmental writing class. Although the grading guides and examples I provided to students was perfectly straightforward to me, one young man had the gall to ask, "Exactly how will this paragraph be graded?" My exasperated answer, "The grade will be based on the premises covered so far in class, as indicated on your assignment sheet" was perfectly satisfactory to me. The young man was neither satisfied nor amused. By the end of class, neither was I. I knew that I needed to step back and look at *exactly how* I arrived at a grade on any writing assignment, and I needed to share that exact information with my students.

I must admit I was already aware that many students ignored the grading guides given out before an assignment, as well as the copious notes I wrote on each paragraph or essay. If students bothered to rewrite a paper, they addressed only the specific areas noted by the instructor while showing no growth in their own understanding of a *well-written* paper of academic quality. How could I help students gain the ability to determine/understand the quality of their own papers? Somehow I had to de-cloak the mystery surrounding what the English instructor really expects in a well-written paper. I had to clarify my expectations and share that information with students. After researching the problem and analyzing the objectives for the course, I developed a two-phase approach to foster confident writers.

Phase One—Until Mid-term:

I decided to stop applying the red pen to students' papers. Instead, I provide a grade/cover sheet for each assignment. The grade sheets evolve with the addition

of new concepts covered between writing assignments. Using the grade sheet, I indicate the categories of errors in a student's paper and jot notes which might be helpful. I make it the student's responsibility to find the actual problem(s) in his/her own paper. One surprising outcome is that students now ask to work with me or with their peer editing groups, rather than my asking them to come in or to get with their editing groups.

A partial example of a cover/grade sheet follows.

Descriptive Paragraph: Check Sheet

The author of this descriptive paragraph is _____.

Grade for *first writing* _____ / Grade for *rewrite* _____

1. Was there a topic sentence? Yes/No

(Notation space is left between questions/statements.)

2. Did all of the paragraph's sentences relate to the topic sentence? Yes/No

3. Did the paragraph follow a logical order? Yes/No

4. Were all of the sentences complete? Yes/No

5. Were there any comma splice errors? Yes/No

6. Were there any run-on sentences? Yes/No

7. Were there any spelling errors? Yes/No

8. Congratulations on _____

9. Suggestions for improving your paper _____

Phase Two—After Mid-term:

After mid-term, students must become their own critics and *pre-grade* all assignments before they turn them in. No *unpre-graded* paragraphs are accepted. Students are given a grading guide, which is quite concrete. While this may not sit well with other English instructors, it will tickle the fancy of the hard-science types. How did I arrive at point values for unquantifiable applications? I sat down and analyzed how important each item would be in creating an academically acceptable paper, a paper which would showcase a student's work and add credibility to a student's ideas. The results have been pleasantly surprising.



The first time students turned in paragraphs which they had *pre-graded*, one fellow groaned, "My paragraph is awful. I only made a 45." My reply, "Then, why are you bothering to turn it in? Why aren't you correcting your errors and handing in a better paper before I get my red pen on it?" He grabbed the paper and headed for the computer lab.

Are students able to find all of their errors? No, they may miss a few. Are students beginning to realize what their errors are and to correct them before I get a chance to send their papers into intensive care? Yes, they are.

A partial sample of the mid-term sheet follows:

Predicting the Quality of My Own Paper

The most useful thing you can take away from a writing class is the ability to judge the quality of your own writing. For the remainder of the semester, you are going to *pre-grade* your own work. Using the information below, go through your paragraphs word by word, sentence by sentence, idea by idea. Determine whether or not the grade you give yourself is the grade you really want to receive. (Do you want this paper to represent you?) Your options are then to turn in the paragraph as is (for grading by your instructor) or rewrite the paragraph, raise the quality and, then, turn it in (for grading by same). Provide the sheet you use to predict your grade.

Points	Item
(For these items, you may deduct full or partial points.)	
10	Well-written topic sentence
10	Well-written conclusion
10	Logically developed/presented support sentences

(You must deduct exactly five points each time one of these errors occurs in your paragraph.)

5	Each run-on sentence
5	Each comma splice
5	Each fragment

Deduct the total number of points from 100, and determine the letter grade for your paragraph (refer to your syllabus for the percentage scale.) Are you satisfied with this grade? If not, rewrite your paper, using the same system.

At the end of every semester, students are asked to critique the class and discuss their growth as writers. After working with the "two-phase system," students indicate they are comfortable knowing exactly what is

expected of them and feel they can see their own growth as writers as well as readers. One student said, "I know what I'm doing wrong. Hey, I even know what I'm doing right. I like the right a lot better and plan to do more rights on future papers."

As the instructor, I see stronger writers moving from my writing classes onto higher levels. They are grounded in theory, practiced in application, and armed with a sense of control.

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