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Figure 1: When You Make Marginal Notes

By Jack Ramey

- Find something positive to say. Certainly, you need to point out weaknesses and flaws, but concentrating solely on the negative can be deflating, and, in some instances, actually harmful. A “good point” here or a “nice touch” there can give many students some needed encouragement.

- Respond like a “reader,” not a writing cop. Try asking a few questions, e.g., “How does this fit in with your overall argument?” or “Are you saying / implying that. . .” or “Can you elaborate on this point?” These kinds of questions carry with them the recognition of a teacher / student dialogue, and are much more conducive to learning than comments like “weak” or “lacks focus.”

- A word or two about grammar: if you are evaluating and grading texts in a “writing-to-learn” context (where writing is primarily a vehicle for learning content), then you may want to mark grammatical errors sparingly and only if they seriously mar the writing. Many studies in the field of composition have shown that marking all the grammatical errors in a student’s paper has little effect on their subsequent performance. However, if you are more concerned about the polished quality of your students’ texts and preparing your students for the demands of the workplace, or academia, then you will need to pay serious attention to grammatical and mechanical problems by pointing them out in the marginal notes and / or the end note.

Sample Grading Rubric

By Jack Ramey

- **A:** An excellent, superior paper that not only addresses the assignment carefully and thoughtfully, but goes beyond it to say something original. Few, if any, mechanical errors or awkward spots.

- **B:** A good paper that addresses the assignment carefully and thoughtfully and is effective. May contain a few minor mechanical errors or awkward spots.

- **C:** A satisfactory paper that addresses the assignment acceptably. May contain minor errors in style, tone, organization, or mechanics. Or may be a "B" paper except for a major flaw.

- **D:** A paper that shows some attempt to address the assignment, but has many minor errors that cumulatively render the paper unsatisfactory, or has a major flaw in organization, tone, writing style, or subject matter.

- **F:** A paper that does not address the assignment or which may be illegible or characterized by unacceptable organization, mechanical errors, factual errors, or treatment of the assignment.

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Common Assignment Tasks

- Analyze—break down into constituent parts.
- Compare—bring out points of similarity.
- Contrast—bring out points of difference.
- Critique—state your opinion on the correctness or merits; approval and/or disapproval.
- Define—give the meaning; distinguish from similar terms or concepts.
- Describe—give an account; tell about, give a word picture of.
- Discuss—present different sides.
- Evaluate—give the good and bad points; give an opinion about the value; discuss advantages and limitations.
- Explain—tell “how to"; tell the meaning of; make clear; interpret.
- Illustrate—use a word picture, diagram, chart or concrete example to clarify a point.
- Interpret—give meaning of; translate.
- Justify—give good reasons for; give evidence, present facts to support position; incorporate and refute opposite points of view.
- Prove—establish the truth by giving factual evidence and logical reasons.
- Summarize—give the main points briefly.
- Trace—follow the course or trail of; give a description of progress.

Adapted from Simmons, J.M., ed. *The Shortest Distance to Learning.* 1983, ERIC ED 241-073: 49-58.

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Creating Effective Writing Assignments

By Mike Jackman

Your students turn in their writing assignments. You read some sample papers. Some are good, but some worry you. Maybe you expected an analysis and got a superficial description. Maybe you wanted a comparison/contrast and got a summary. Maybe students' prose seemed full of grammatical errors and their organization or purpose was unclear. And what happened to that thesis statement?

Perhaps your students' writing skills aren't entirely at fault. The iffy grammar, the tentative organization, the uncertain grasp of facts and meaning doesn't necessarily indicate lack of studying, inability to think clearly or critically, or inability to write. It may indicate the need for more guidance.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out that we acquire culture and taste through a long process of education. Once education is complete, we forget the long acquisition and take our understanding of the world to be self-evident. His insight applies well to educators. We often forget the time consuming and sometimes painful acquisition of our disciplinary skills. We forget that an assignment may not be as self evident, clear and logical to students as it is to us.

Writing theorist David Bartholomae states even more radically, "every time a student sits down to write for us, he [sic] has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English." Students unfamiliar with the conventions, Bartholomae argues, get lost in the discourse of their readers, which they can't yet control. This is one reason for their prose sounding awkward, uncertain or changing register in a way that seems inappropriate.

Once we acknowledge that what is self-evident to us may not be so to our students, and may not be the result of a lack of preparation on their part, we can then ask: How can we best prepare assignments for students still learning our disciplines? We can strive to create assignments that will be clearer to students and will help teach them those disciplinary writing and thinking conventions we think are necessary.

Here are four suggestions for making writing assignments more effective:

- Reflect on the purpose of the assignment.

- Revise the assignment to make that purpose clear and to make tacit assumptions and expectations explicit.
- Discuss the assignment in class, reserve time and offer activities for practice.
- Refine the assignment for next semester based on the results.

Reflecting on our purpose will help us understand what we want. Spending time carefully reviewing our expectations will pay off well beyond clarifying things for students; we can discover new purposes and new, more creative assignments. Many faculty in our Spring 1996 Workshop found a reflection activity helpful.

Once you have jotted down your reflections, use them to revise a previous assignment or to create a new one. You might include a statement of purpose, a description, suggestions, and your criteria for evaluation. Although it is a writing adage that "less is more," to make writing clearer, and to make hidden assumptions explicit, sometimes "more is more." A list of commonly used terms and their definitions can help make assignments more precise and clear.

How much time you incorporate into class to help students prepare is up to you. Often faculty believe that there is a trade-off between teaching content and teaching writing. This is a complex issue. Two quick responses would be to note that the content of a course exists only in language, primarily in writing. Therefore, by working to improve students' understanding of disciplinary writing, you are simultaneously improving their understanding of content and developing their critical thinking. In addition, what constitutes acceptable course content evolves over time (see Teach Writing or Teach Content?).

To clarify an additional point, this article doesn't advocate that instructors of content classes should teach general writing skills, but advocates that they should make explicit some of their tacit disciplinary issues, issues such as what constitutes good evidence, a valid argument, a successful summary, a good thesis statement. These approaches to writing vary between disciplines, and perhaps even between classes, as each class represents one professor's insight into a discipline.

For complex assignments, at least consider time to discuss the description, provide examples of superior work, offer some preparatory work, and respond to drafts so students have the opportunity to revise. Revision provides one of the best opportunities for instructors to mentor students into the discipline, as your comments can be acted upon and incorporated into the assignment.

When I hand out assignment sheets to my classes, I ask for feedback. I want to know what students think the assignment asks them to do, how they would go about doing it, what questions they have, what is clear and unclear. I ask them to give me their understanding of certain terms—what, for example, do they think it means "to analyze." This way I compare their expectations with mine, and proceed accordingly. I may also identify some unanticipated loopholes in the assignment.

Loopholes, as any instructor knows, are astounding phenomena. One professor's assignment presented a list of questions she wanted students to answer. Although she expected an integrated essay, she was confident students would assume this. Instead, many students modeled their responses on the form of the assignment description and answered the questions in order, often numbering the answers to coincide with the questions. This unexpected loophole needed to be closed in subsequent descriptions.

After students hand in the assignment, use the results to revise the description for the next class. The results will indicate what needs to be rethought for the assignment's next incarnation. What didn't work? What loopholes still need closing? What expectations did you have that students didn't realize? This assumes consistency among student populations; use your own judgment as to whether problems in interpretation were due to other variables.

Incorporating these guidelines for creating assignments can have far-reaching results, for your students and also for you. Not only will you help students do the work more efficiently, but you will be truly initiating them into the discipline. Further, you should notice an increase in the quality of student responses. Many professors report they enjoy teaching more and find renewed creativity and energy for teaching sections that had become old hat.