The Art of Grading Papers Quickly and Effectively
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Taking Time

I invited Stephen B. Heller to write this column because his reflections speak to important questions shared by both middle school and high school teachers. How many times have we all waited too long to return papers, and the identified mistakes in the writing were too far removed from the lessons to have the learning impact we wanted them to have? How defeated have we all felt when the writing for the assigned research paper was regurgitation from the three latest unreliable electronic sources, and the student research writing demonstrated deficiencies in thought, ideas, and organization? Steve addresses these issues that we often do not take time to think through carefully. We grade papers and give assignments the same way we have always done it. What happens, though, when we take time to reflect about how we grade writing and give feedback to our students? We just might change a practice or two.

The Art of Grading Papers Quickly and Effectively

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Why Grade Quickly?

One of the most time-consuming and controversial issues of our field is grading student writing. Taking time to comment on student writing—on the first draft, final draft, in conference, on tape recorder, or via email—adds hours to an English teacher's job. *English Journal* has been a forum for teachers on how best to navigate the editorial aspect of our field, with particular attention to peer review, portfolio assessment, and the implementation of rubrics or holistic grading—all to expedite evaluation of student writing while not sacrificing the educational dialogue that teacher comments provide.

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It is on this last note—educational dialogue—that I wish to present my current practice on grading student writing. I have set as a personal goal the returning of most student papers within one or two days after receiving them. My motivation for changing my focus is twofold. This article highlights strategies employed in grading quickly and, more importantly, raises pedagogical questions about what is gained or lost when we return student writing within a short time.

One, students need timely feedback if it is to be relevant. Waiting longer than one or two days means that the writing experience was significantly removed from the student, and returning the paper—no matter how complete my comments—was too distant from our current work. Particularly among accelerated learners, where the business of daily work creates a kind of grocery-list feel, the English paper du jour has a short shelf life, much like the history chapter, the series of math problems, and the foreign language vocabulary list. Students have learned to parcel out X amount of time for their respective disciplines, and while there are some English assignments that mandate a multiweek approach, such as the junior-year research paper, the teaching of writing as a process-driven experience suggests more frequent assignments. For me, this means once a week.

Two, the process of making comments speaks as much to the teacher's sense of authorship as it does to what the students take away

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from the paper. Never a proponent of copious comments on the page, I believe that students read teachers' comments with a fraction of the energy and receptivity that we intend for them. Even for those of us who withhold a final grade (which I don't) or ask students to process our comments through additional writing or recording (which I do), students can only take in so much. Perhaps the clearest companion to this process is the act of raising children. During the course of any given day or week, children can be "corrected" in countless ways, but rarely, if ever, do our children change overnight.

Midway into a teacher's career would be the appropriate time and place for teachers to realize that less is more. Experience allows us to integrate the complex factors of our teaching style to the points of emphasis of student writing, and we recognize that, yes, some students will need to develop *both* the use of topic sentences and successful integration of quotations, *as well as* idea-based transitions and the use of more concrete language. However, we have faith in the length of a school year, or even a high school career, and we move ahead incrementally.

Teachers' Comments and Students' Revisions

I have subscribed to what I call the "25%–75%" rule. Realistically, we can expect students to take in less than all of the feedback they receive but more than zero. Like most areas of growth, a combination of many factors—often emotional and social—will influence the degree of receptivity. This is particularly relevant for comments that ask students to explore deeper meanings or make broader connections in their writing.

For many students, given the training at the earlier years in grammar and style, the act of revision becomes a game of connect-the-dots. As long as I do what all the red ink marks tell me to do, thinks the student, then I am responding to what the teacher has in mind. In a discipline that thrives on originality and imagination, it would be an act of hubris to feel that every comment we make will adequately diagnose all aspects of the students' writing.

If we consider what happens in the teacher's mind when commenting on student papers, I would guess

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that one of three types of reactions occurs. The least significant are editorial comments, such as those that ask for grammatical corrections. I find myself multitasking as I make these comments, for I am able to continue reading the student paper while I note the comma splice or capitalization error.

The second type of comment asks for stylistic maturity. Here, we may note lapses in diction or repetitive syntax or a need for greater use of examples or illustration. These comments tend to be words or phrases. These take more time to write, even if they are abbreviated (e.g., I use *ex* for examples).

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Regardless of the types of comments, writing them is akin to creative writing; it's as if we're ghostwriting the papers. The process can be exhausting if we let it, particularly if we see little progress among the students.

The goal in evaluation of student writing is to not spend more time on the paper than the student did. Further, we want to know when they turn in the next paper—without looking at prior papers—how this one compares to earlier work. For me, this means that once-a-week routine. I allow a certain amount of time to dictate the degree of comments that I put on a paper. For one class set of a one-to-two-page response, I allot one plan period.

I recognize as I approach writing this way that stylistic improvement is given short shrift. But I also subscribe to the belief that the greatest improvements in student writing occur outside the classroom, after the student has grown, matured, and been confronted with the expectations of next year's teacher.

What Do Students Gain?

During a semester or school year, I probably spend as much time grading papers as my colleagues; the difference may be that I am grading more assignments. I defer to the philosophy of the College Board and the course I teach: Junior Advanced Placement Language and Composition. The act of the timed writing—completed every other week—asks students to synthesize text comprehension and quality writing within one class period. Complementing the timed writings is an equivalent number of out-of-class assignments, which reinforce the stylistic and analytical objectives. Presumably, when students

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spend more time outside of class on the explication of text, for example, they will have internalized more ability to produce impromptu writing.

The objectives of the College Board—perhaps the clearest articulation of the standard of excellence in English education—beg the question of what the role of writing is in student learning. If we consider creative writing classes, for example, the *process* consumes time. Even in earlier grades, a period of germination allows for changes to be made in the writing, with the purpose of making a better product.

My eleven-year-old daughter was recently given a short-story assignment. The teacher's copious comments invited substantial and accurate revision, particularly in terms of the length or purpose of the assignment. This was *real* revision, and she was given one month to complete it. During this time, she spoke with her parents and grandparents and spent a significant amount of that month not touching the paper until the weekend before it was due. The final product was a better piece of writing, but I would maintain that my daughter's growth as a writer was incremental. She has a clearer picture of *what* makes a complete story; she has a fuller sense of what the *process* of revision looks like; she may have comprehended the art of adding description in places or actively illustrating conflict, per the teacher's recommendation. But her greatest gains occurred in the drafting of the original story. Perhaps the greatest difference between elementary school and high school is that students are more capable of internalizing these real-life steps toward enhanced writing, with greater independence from traditional teacher comments.

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Other disciplines provide appropriate examples of what I mean. In music, we might consider the recital as the submission of the final draft. The student learns the most in comprehending the original notes, phrases, and melodies. As the student gets closer to her or his final performance, the nuances in technique will make a difference in acclaim, but proportionally the greatest degree of learning has occurred much earlier. In art, too, the submission of the final portfolio makes the difference in overall evaluation of student work and indeed may portend how much of a future that student has in this discipline, but in terms of actual learning, the difference between those who can draw and those who cannot is similar to when we record a D or F on a piece of writing: the student demonstrates fundamental flaws in writing comprehension that suggest that no amount of comments will make this into an A paper.

My colleague Bill Fritz said it best when he remarked to our department that he sees evaluation of student writing as giving students enough feedback to bring the paper up to the next grade, not to the A paper. While we apply local and state rubrics toward student work, we recognize that students will arrive at these goals on different timetables.

If we consider the initial stages of writing as the most influential, we may begin to make new decisions about key assignments. Foremost on my list of assignments to reject is the traditional research paper. Indeed, the research paper is an oxymoron, as there is less and less of a paper that is actually part of this whole process. Even when one considers that there is a paper of sorts, the advent of the information superhighway has rendered research a drive-through process. But let's assume that the boundaries of the research paper—for many students a graduation requirement—have been established such that the students *will not* plagiarize and *will* research something of authentic interest. In a typical high school, this process lasts several weeks. Students must read about the topic, take notes about the topic, synthesize, organize, and write. The student engages in real reading during this time—and the student has acquired enough information with which to write originally.

When this student sits down to write the paper, the process lasts a few hours. That's it. We go through machinations about how to avoid plagiarism, provide appropriate MLA citations, format works cited information, and credit appropriately. All good ideas—but this has less to do with writing and more to do with observing appropriate research protocol. Ironically, the research paper is students' editing of the Internet and, for many students, it becomes an exercise in how to modify language—as opposed to create ideas—to avoid inaccuracies. There are too many other variables that influence the creation of this paper.

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Any assignment that takes a long period of time assumes a degree of investment that I don't believe is

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there for most students. Yes, there are students who will benefit from teacher comments, revision, peer review, and individual conferences. And this is perhaps the greatest casualty of a quicker approach to returning student writing.

Still, in the act of elongating an approach to writing a paper—here's the intro, now write your first body paragraph, and so forth—we have artificially divided how one thinks about and approaches writing. Our approach is less about improvements in composition and more about teachers, curriculum, and expectations; one sign of this early in my career was the Grand Performance prior to returning a stack of papers. As if I had not sufficiently teased my students, who were tired of asking if their papers were being handed back, I solemnly assumed the podium and made grand comments about this paper, whose final grade ironically ended up being not important in terms of the student work. I assured the students that these were the strengths but that some had missed other key points. I then proceeded with the humble roll call as I returned student papers, keeping one eye open for Johnny or Janey as they discovered the A or C, sometimes steeling myself if I knew that the grade was lower than they expected. "Read through my comments," I would exhort.

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Today, it is common for class to begin with what I call the "chaotic" part of the class. I give a small pile of papers to the first students who enter the room and ask them to help pass them out. Meanwhile, I have models of student work either on the overhead or photocopied, as well as the rubric with which students are already familiar. Sometimes there is a grade already on the paper; sometimes I tell the students that we are going to play that favorite teacher game, "Can You Guess What I'm Thinking?" And sometimes I have not even read the paper and students self-evaluate, in which case I put only a grade on the paper.

Students record their strengths and developmental areas on an in-class log; I ask for two comments—one good, one not-so-good—on their work. I remind students that we fool ourselves into thinking the path to improvement in writing is only through being told what we did wrong. Most of us—regardless of the act—improve by being told what we do well. Again, credit to the College Board for its nine-point rubric and the English department at Stevenson High School for its emphasis on providing models of what students' peers are able to accomplish.

What Does Rigor Look Like?

Somewhere near the twenty-fifth writing assignment, a student who earned a D+ on an assignment came up to me and said, "I used to love writing, but you're making me hate it." We can look at this moment from two perspectives. First, from the teacher perspective, the student had misread the assignment. He was asked to trace a particular idea about family in a nonfiction book we had read, and after the first half of the paper he ceased discussing family and moved to the topic of language. This paper required the traditional thesis-driven support of a literary analysis. In reviewing the paper in a conference during his lunch period—which was my invitation after his lament—I pointed out the lack of focus and that he had essentially completed one half of the assignment. He revised and earned the replacement grade of a B.

From the student perspective, however, his comment focused more on the relationship with his teacher and the curriculum than it did on writing itself. An expressive rebel by nature, this student loves to articulate his point of view—spoken or written. What frustrates him is how well his ideas are being received, and we must be careful not to confuse this dynamic with an accurate assessment of his writing or his ability to write. Sometimes, too, I wonder if students misconstrue grades on writing as what we think of them as people. When the student said that my class was making him hate writing, he was commenting on having to adhere to the standard expectations of close reading and organization; he spent perhaps forty-five minutes writing this paper and an equivalent amount of time revising it. What did he learn? More about focus and organization—but the next piece he wrote featured the same errors. This time he earned a C with no opportunity to revise. Selective about which assignments he prefers, this student will develop greater organization in his analytical work when he is ready, and I accept that it may not be this year.

Interestingly, at the same conference, this student produced a creative writing memoir on baseball, for which he earned a B, primarily because the paper did not present an implicit thesis. He was attempting to portray baseball's mystical legacy today, and he incorporated a range of personal and historical examples. Knowledgeable and passionate about his topic, the student was dismayed that the more creative assignment did not earn an A, and he had gone so far as to "shop" with other teachers; in

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other words, he got different teachers' perspectives to see if I was lowballing him.

When we discussed this paper, I failed to communicate to him why the absence of an arguable thesis would make this a B paper. I tried to explain to him that his essay—which referenced the acclaimed PBS series on baseball by Ken Burns—did essentially the same thing. He needed to take his personal experience and make it universal, and I referenced other essays we had read in class. "But I did everything you asked me to do," he said. "I love this topic. I can't see how my opinion is not an arguable one." He left the conference shaking his head, and I, too, wondered if I had graded him too low.

It's possible that through my dialogue with colleagues the grade may become a higher one; I am certainly not above this. At issue here are the less visible measures of emotional intelligence. There is no shortage of modeling and instruction regarding complexity, maturity, and sophistication, ranging from local, state, and national rubrics to personal examples. The degree to which these standards are inculcated and striven for, however, occurs more on the student's timetable than on mine.

The Pygmalion Effect

Finally, let us consider the creative energies behind being an English teacher. For many of us, myself included, there is an element of authorship and readership that is more immediate and potentially gratifying than the job of a published author. Why? In addition to authoring our own assignments on a regular basis, we have the luxury of watching how our readers interact with our initiatives in literacy. Our daily energies are fueled by veritable book clubs, writer-editor relationships, and acting as counselor to the imaginations of others. We are daily journalists whose work is only as good as our last lesson plan. Like Pygmalion, we wish to create students in our image, particularly in terms of their writing.

In the early years of teaching English, teachers likely err on the side of making too many comments, and they begin to reach a law of diminishing returns. Take, for example, the teacher who dutifully evaluates the first draft of the formidable research paper, only to see that a minority of her or his students will do more than connect the dots in responding to the corrections on the paper.

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Indeed, I often subscribe to the "25%–75%" rule based on my experiences as a parent. Over the course of a unit, semester, or year, students are obliged to respond to a portion of my suggestions for developing their craft. If they were to reject all of my comments, then the dialogue is defeated; conversely, it is ridiculous for me to expect students to respond to *all* of my comments. Pygmalion is alive and well in English classrooms, but we will do well to remember that the future Elizas of our class will not become our permanent teaching assistants.

In my third year of teaching, a student of lesser privilege in a sophomore basic class submitted her first draft of a memoir. Barely one page handwritten, the majority of the monosyllabic words were misspelled, and there were few, if any, complete sentences. Clearly, the student had been promoted through school independent of her writing ability. With red pen, I corrected *every* error on the page; I conferenced with this student; and we sat at the word processor together as I watched her proceed with the first draft of her paper. She never finished her sophomore year, and I do not recall how she finally did on that paper. What I do recognize is that that experience with this student was as much about me as it was about her. In spending an inordinate amount of time with her, I was selfishly procuring for myself (I hoped) less time on her future assignments and more time for the other students in this class. During our time together, her emotional investment in the writing was considerably less, and my act of faith would ultimately be disseminated over a wider range of writing assignments and students.

Seeking Balance

Like all things in life, balance in writing is key. Short and long assignments. Creative versus diagnostic writing. Research versus real writing. And balance in grading: a letter grade, a conference. Never copious comments, however, particularly with spell- and grammar-check software. The litmus test I suggest to colleagues is as follows: we know our students' writing—and our students—well enough that when a student turns in assignment X, we should be able to say after reading, "among your finest pieces completed this year."

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