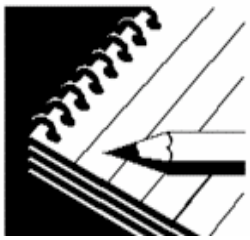

HOW TO AVOID THE PAPER TRAP: MANAGING THE PAPER LOAD

Many faculty resist adding writing assignments to courses because they fear the extra burden of grading papers. That's a well-grounded fear. There is no way around some extra work. There is no machine that responds to student writing as you do in the context of your instruction.

That said, several practices ensure that you won't bury yourself in paper grading. Many teachers spend their time responding to writing after the student is finished. However, we know that students write best when they submit *drafts* to peers or to their professor that they can revise after receiving feedback. So, if your students write formal papers, you owe it to them to give them feedback on their work (preferably in a draft) and a chance to revise by putting your comments into practice. Drafts are the place to encourage students to dig deeper, to be more analytical, to augment their source material, to consider different organizational patterns—in other words, to make major improvements.

If you are working harder than your students, then something is wrong. Here are some tips for avoiding the paper trap.

- **Use informal assignments to get quick readings on what students are thinking and learning** by collecting short, informal writing for quick review, assigning credit or no credit. These types of *low-stakes* assignments can be as important to student learning as are *high-stakes* formal writing, and they add a writing and critical thinking component to your course without adding grading time.
- **Concentrate on what is most important**: Offer high-level comments (dealing with quality of thinking, argument, organization, or use of sources and supporting information). Attend to the success of the whole essay (rather than local or sentence level concerns) as you read the students' drafts.
- **Don't spend time on post-mortems.** Extensive comments on a final draft waste your time; several studies suggest that students don't benefit from the professor's comments on a final draft (Kennedy). If you are grading a final draft that students *will not* be able to revise, keep your comments brief and summative. A grading rubric works well in this instance.
- **Don't become the editor/proofreader who marks every mechanical error.** When held to appropriate standards, students can generally correct most of their own errors. If they have major grammar or punctuation problems, explain the problem in general terms (some faculty create *grammar hotsheets* to hand out when they return drafts to students), refer them to a good website or handbook, and tell them you expect them to fix their errors—your final grade will reflect correctness.
- **Set up peer review groups**. Have students exchange drafts after you have given them a checklist of what to look for. Even better, devote part of a class to teaching students how to conduct peer reviews. It's time well spent. Students benefit from reading and critiquing each other's papers; for many, seeing how classmates have composed an assignment is as useful as the specific feedback they receive on their own composition.
- **Distribute a rubric for each assignment** to identify the features you want in a piece of writing (or a presentation), and use it as a checklist for evaluation. Have students evaluate their own or each others' work in relation to the rubric. Students can be surprisingly accurate judges of their own work.
- **Use quick evaluations** with a ✓ for *satisfactory/meets expectations*, ✓+ for work that goes *beyond expectations*, and ✓- for work that *fails to meet your expectations*.
- **Encourage students to use the Writing Center**, if your campus is lucky enough to have one. The Writing Center provides feedback to students developing their drafts or polishing their final drafts. In addition, it is the place for students to learn how to identify and correct many of their own mechanical

errors. Avoid *requiring* students to attend, however. Forced attendance does not result in productive sessions, according to most Writing Center instructors.

- **Assign two or three papers; then ask students to submit their best effort** for your evaluation. In other words, students choose to revise and submit their best work. This procedure allows students to explore several areas or problems, while you evaluate only *one paper* per student. (Papers not submitted could be given several points based on a simple rubric.)
- **Respond to the class, rather than the individual.** As you grade, keep a running log of common problems that can be discussed with the whole class. Don't mark problems individually; instead, present them to the whole class in a mini-lesson.
- **Use web-based discussion tools (bulletin boards):** Courseware such as WebCT allows you to post a discussion question and have students respond in writing. They can learn to write thoughtful responses and to engage in written discussion of the issues in your class. You can read these quickly, and they are often of high interest. You can give credit without grading and correcting. Here is a URL for one teacher's rubric for classroom discussion posts: http://www.delta.edu/annader/syllabus/pta.html
- **Use Calibrated Peer Review or automated essay evaluation:** There are quite sophisticated systems that use computers to organize peer review or that give students feedback (based on latent semantic analysis). In these systems, professors create models for specific writing tasks based on clear criteria. They "train" the computer with a model essay. Students then submit their work to the computer. In some systems, students evaluate other students' essays according to set criteria. In both systems, the students do a lot of work with their writing, write multiple drafts, and work to align their writing to criteria, all before the professor sees the work.

USEFUL SOURCES:

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Kennedy, Mary L. *The Online Manual for Writing Across the Curriculum*. SUNY Cortland. 4 Oct. 2002. 4 Feb. 2004. http://www.cortland.edu/english/wac/index.html

Useful web sites with excellent coverage of these topics:

http://www.mwp.hawaii.edu/resources/qt-paperload.htm

Calibrated Peer Review (NSF): http://cpr.molsci.ucla.edu/