The Writing Program Bulletin

The Writing Program, Green Hall 109

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Any time the topic of assigning and commenting on papers comes up, most faculty members agree that giving detailed feedback can be overwhelming. It’s important, however, to remember that not all student writing needs extensive feedback, or even written feedback at all. It depends on what you’ve assigned and why you’ve assigned it. Today’s Bulletin provides some concrete, and I hope practical, advice on how to use writing for various purposes without necessarily increasing your workload.

In my recent workshop “Editor, Teacher, Reader? What’s Your Style in Commenting on Student Papers?” I provided participants with a chart that outlines types of writing assignments (from low stakes to high stakes), the kind of feedback that’s necessary for each, and then how this kind of assignment and feedback benefits both students and faculty members. Please see page two.

For more on “write-to-learn” assignments, see the Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse: <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop5.cfm>

For a detailed explanation of the “One Minute” paper, see David Bressoud’s excerpt from the online book from the Mathematical Association of America at <http://www.maa.org/SAUM/maanotes49/87.html>. He adapts this technique from Angelo and Cross’s *Classroom Assessment Techniques*, which I have in my office and you’re welcome to borrow. Another helpful discussion of the one-minute paper appears in the *On Course Newsletter* by Skip Downing: <http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/Awareness012.htm>

Anyone who had wanted to attend the “Marginalia” workshop but could not attend, please note that it’s being offered again on October 21, 3:00-4:30pm, in Social Sciences 102. Please sign-up here:

http://www.tcnj.edu/~writing/faculty/index.html

**Marginalia: A Meta-Reading Workshop**

What can our students’ marginal notations in assigned readings convey about their understanding of a text? How might we use them more purposefully for greater comprehension of course concepts and better writing? In this workshop, participants will engage in an interactive reading and writing activity that can then be adapted and used their own classes.

**The Writing Program at The College of New Jersey, Mary Goldschmidt**

**Types of Written Assignments and Feedback**

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| Type of Assignment | Type of Feedback | How it helps students | How it helps you |
| Write-to-learn, e.g., by connecting new information to what students currently know, or explaining concepts to “new learners” or write-to -demonstrate comprehension /  “Low Stakes” | Check marks (or points), or check marks with +/- for level of accuracy; this writing is usually brief so read them all, note patterns, and share notable examples with the class to review concepts again. [[1]](#footnote-1)  The One-Minute Paper is a common example of write-to-learn assignments. | The oral feedback for the entire class, with strategic use of examples, allows students to see how close or far off the mark they were; but your follow up re-explanation and clarification will help them understand the concepts better. | You can read quickly to see which concepts students have the most difficulty with, and then provide different explanations, additional examples, etc. If there is wide-spread misunderstanding, it may clue you in to the need for a different kind of delivery. If students have excellent understanding, you know you can move on.  These assignments may also give you an early indication of which students might benefit from study groups, tutoring, or a meeting with you. |
| Write-to-learn higher order thinking skills (analysis, evaluation, etc.) / “Low Stakes” | Check marks with +/- for level of accuracy; again, brevity allows for reading all assignments quickly, and then noting patterns. | Same as above. Here, providing additional problems or scenarios to allow students to continue practicing the skills can be helpful. | Same as above. |
| Write-to-demonstrate higher order thinking with *new material*, e.g., apply concepts to new data, situations, or texts / “Medium to High Stakes” | Grades (on whatever scale you use), but not worth as much of the final grade as the next category. If no drafts are required for revision, feedback here should focus on the main learning outcomes only. If feedback is for drafts, your comments should be specific and offer a concrete plan of action for one or two things the student needs to do to revise effectively; salient error patterns can be noted at the end if need be, but not marked and corrected for the student. | Students see that precision is valued, and your comments help them develop their ability to think in complex ways.  Plus, students gain valuable practice in writing longer assignments, *and their comfort level with the material will pay dividends at the next level of formal writing.* | While you do need to give individual feedback here, you can do so in a targeted, focused way. You are able to see how well individual students can organize ideas, and can note which students may need extra assistance on more formal assignments. |
| Write-to-demonstrate full mastery of course content and disciplinary conventions /  “High Stakes” | Grades; substantial percentage of final grade. Drafts ought to be required. Same as above. Feedback can be broken down into macro and micro level categories, and sequenced through two stages of revision. Don’t edit; mark up one page and tell students they are responsible for the remainder. | Students benefit from your expertise, and they are also held accountable for expectations in formal writing, including disciplinary conventions. | Individual feedback is a way to coach and mentor students. Again, using targeted feedback keeps the work load down. By not overwhelming students, it also makes the substantive revision that you expect more likely. |

1. If any of the informal write-to-learn prose is incomprehensible, that student writer likely needs intensive weekly tutoring. Students like this are rare at TCNJ. Errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and even word choice usually do not impede comprehension. Awkwardness, wordiness, or lack of polish also do not impede comprehension, nor should these issues be the concern in write-to-learn assignments. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)