

Successful Writing Assignments

ASSIGNMENTS

Initiating student writing and evaluating writing assignments are at the heart of a composition teacher's job, and the life of a writing teacher has often been described as a perpetual search for effective topics, writing prompts, and assignments. All good writing teachers, no matter how finished their courses seem, are on the lookout for more fruitful ways to get students writing.

We make the assumption in this book that the course you are teaching is "straight composition"—a course in which the *content* of literature plays at most a minor role. Therefore, the assignments discussed in this chapter do not include the genre of assignments that asks writers to respond to literature. This is not to say that such literary topics are insignificant; they are, however, more applicable to literature courses, which have a critical-semantic emphasis, than to composition courses, which have a generative-formal emphasis.¹

The first question you need to ask yourself is whether you will give your students a free choice of topics. The possibilities range from complete student choice of form and content of all topics through complete teacher specifications for all aspects of every assignment. Your program may have conditions you must meet, but most programs give teachers considerable leeway in determining how much control to exert over students' choice of topics. There are arguments for and against free choice. When students determine all the elements in their assignments, they can feel more emotionally invested in their writing than they do when responding to a teacher's specifications. And a benefit for you is that you are likely to get essays on a variety of topics, and so you won't have to spend an evening reading twenty papers on the same subject. On the other hand, given free choice, some students may feel as if they have been set adrift. In addition, some students may tend to respond to free choice by writing personal narratives, and you may wish to encourage your students to try other kinds of writing. For a first-time teacher, relying on some of the carefully developed writing topics found in almost any rhetoric textbook is

¹ If you find yourself teaching a course with an emphasis on responding to literature, the best source for writing assignments will be your colleagues or the director of the course. For specific suggestions on writing assignments for responding to literature, see Edward M. White's *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating*.

not a bad idea, and the following discussion will assume you are providing specifications for writing assignments.

First, you will need to establish the number and length of essays you will require. Second, you will want to decide whether you will make the assignments in a sequence of some kind or correlate the written assignments with the classwork in any given week. The detailed correlation of assignments and lessons has both good and bad aspects. On the one hand, students may become more involved in the lesson and its related activities; on the other hand, your class can become completely grade directed, with students wanting you to spend the time teaching nothing except "how to do this week's assignment." Such activity will not make students better writers, and for this reason alone, you may not want to link graded assignments closely to classwork. Correlations can be made in the students' own minds rather than in the plan for the course.

Assignment Sequences

The first popular sequence for writing assignments was one based on the work of nineteenth-century Scottish logician Alexander Bain. Bain divided all writing into four modes of discourse: narration, description, exposition, and argumentation (118-21). The first two, which are the more concrete, serve as the bases for initial course assignments; they allow students to draw on their own experiences and observations for subject matter, seldom forcing any higher-level generalizations or deductions. The second two modes, which are the more abstract, are left for later assignments, when students will presumably be better able to manipulate nonpersonal ideas and concepts in expository or persuasive fashion.

The supposition of this sequence of assignments is that students gain confidence in their writing by first using the more concrete and personal modes of narration and description and are then better able to use the abstract modes. Unfortunately, skill with narration and description does not seem to carry over easily to exposition and argumentation; students who are confident and even entertaining when narrating experiences and describing known quantities sometimes flounder when asked to generalize, organize, or argue for abstract concepts.² Bain's modes of discourse are far from the realities of the writing process. As James Kinneavy and James Moffett, among others, have pointed out, modes are not aims, and teachers using the modes must be aware of their limitations. Kinneavy's *Theory of Discourse* talks about increasingly complex communicative acts. Kinneavy would have students begin with expressive discourse before moving to reference (or informative), literary, and persuasive discourse. But increasingly, teachers have chosen sequences of assignments that are not based so much on classes of discourse as on the ways

² See, for example, the research described in Crowhurst and Piche.

in which sequence can help students begin to see themselves in the image of writers, begin to relate themselves to the idea of readers in a new way. As David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky say, good assignments "bring forward the image of the reader and writer represented in our students' textual performances . . . so that they can reimagine themselves as readers and writers" (8). Bartholomae and Petrosky remind us that for most of our students, every response to an assignment is an act of the student writer "inventing the university," evolving a way of imagining and fitting into the academic community. We as experienced students and teachers tend to take the discourse of academia for granted; it is the water in which we swim. But for new college students, this community can often seem closed, threatening, mysterious, and it is important that the assignments we give provide some purchase for them, some ways of melding personal experience and ability with the necessary reaching out for new information, new knowledge, new ability.

Bartholomae and Petrosky's book *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* describes a writing course based around a sequence of assignments that brings together a series of readings and a carefully designed progression of twenty-four responsive and encapsulating writing tasks. Many of the readings are themed around personal experience and autobiography, and the assignments ask students gradually to consider and reconsider the writers' methods of autobiography and then to write about the readings and about themselves. It is a sophisticated and widely admired teaching method built around the idea of gradually accumulating genuine writerly authority by becoming a careful and yet resistant reader.

Another sequence of writing assignments often used is James Moffett's cycle of assignments in his book *Active Voice*. Moffett's ideas on education have been pivotal in several areas, but perhaps nowhere more so than in his concept of speaker-audience relationships and speaker-subject relationships. For Moffett, the speaker-audience continuum of discourse begins when one is thinking to oneself (inner vocalization), progresses to speaking to another face-to-face (outer vocalization), then to writing to a known party (informal writing), and finally to a mass audience of people unknown to the writer (formal writing or publication). The speaker-subject continuum begins with recording *what is happening* (drama), moves on to reporting *what happened* (narrative), then to generalizing about *what happens* (exposition), and finally moving on to *what will, may or could happen* or *could be true* (logical argumentation) (13). These two continua, Moffett claims, are the basis for all discourse, and his cycle of assignments in *Active Voice* follows through on the interactions of his two discourse continua. It's important to understand that Moffett himself rejects the idea of "sequencing" itself. It's not the job of teachers, he says, "to hustle children up a ladder" (12), and group sequencing, as opposed to sequencing according to individual students' needs, does just that. Nonetheless, Moffett's assignments do begin with inner vocalization and do end with research and theory. Here, from *Active Voice*, is his list of assignments:

REVISING INNER SPEECH

Transcribing Real Talk
 Transcribing Oral Literature
 Survey
 Interview
 Stream of Consciousness
 Spontaneous Sensory Monologue
 Composed Observation
 Spontaneous Memory Monologue
 Composed Memory
 Spontaneous Reflection
 Monologue
 Composed Reflection

DIALOGUES AND MONOLOGUES

Duologue
 Invented Exterior Monologue
 Invented Interior Monologue
 One-Act Play
 Dialogue of Ideas
 Dialogue Converted to Essay

OTHER POEMS

Songs
 Limericks
 Picture Poems
 Haiku
 Occasion Poems

NARRATIVE INTO ESSAY

Story Starters
 Being Something Else
 Photo Stories

Dreams
 Tall Tales
 Correspondence
 Diary
 Diary Summary
 Autobiography: Incident
 Autobiography: Phase
 Eyewitness Memoir: Human Subject
 Eyewitness Memoir: Nature
 Reporter-at-Large
 Biography: Phase
 Chronicle
 Science Fiction
 Sports, Adventure, Mystery Stories
 Legend
 Myth
 Parable
 Fable
 Proverb and Saying
 Directions
 Labels and Captions
 Home-Made Encyclopedia
 Wishes
 Editorial
 Speech
 Narrative Illustrating a Generality
 Thematic Collection of Incidents
 Generalization Supported by Instances
 Research
 Theory

Moffett's two discourse continua are obvious here, but we cannot go into explanatory detail. Moffett has built a whole book around explaining these assignments, and all we can do here is mention them and recommend *Active Voice* for more information on Moffett's suggested uses. Moffett insists that these assignments do not represent a linear sequence, and he argues that any of them can be approached with varying levels of expertise and ability (*Active Voice* 8-9). Even so, he continues to believe that this sequence mirrors growing cognitive abilities more effectively than any other developmental sequence.

If you decide to try all or parts of Moffett's sequence, you'll find that rather than adhering slavishly to it, you will be better served by choosing among the assignments in the sequence and paying attention to the gradually increasing cognitive demands they place on a writer. Moffett himself suggests that his

assignments should never be used as topics for the whole class at once since the development that the sequence mirrors always takes place on an individual basis. Instead, he'd advise you to offer an array of assignments and let students choose their own point of entry. Since each one can be done at many different levels of ability, you may want to allow students to find their own challenge and try their hands at their own choice. After a student has satisfactorily completed one kind of writing, she can be encouraged to proceed to a more demanding assignment.

Assignments Based in Literature

Some first-year writing courses are based primarily around the reading of literature, in which case you will probably be using an anthology containing "apparatus"—questions and assignments following each selection that are created by the editors of the textbook. But teaching a writing course using literature is very different from teaching a literature course. John A. Hart and his colleagues list three conditions that must be met in order to use literary assignments in the writing class: the teacher must resist the temptation to *teach* literature—that is, the *technae* of literary form, biography, literary judgment; the literature chosen for use must be the kind students can understand themselves without a great deal of help from teacher or class discussion; and every writing assignment must be planned so that the student is asked to examine a significant aspect of the work being read and asked to work on a particular kind of compositional problem (237-39).

We must always remember that most of our first-year students are not (and are not going to be) English majors, and that the level of literary experience we may assume from our own educational experiences may not be theirs. The important criterion here is that the first-year student must find meaning in what she reads before anything else useful can be done, and this can only be done by carefully choosing texts and then by spending extensive classroom time in student discussion of them (Glenn 103). As Edward P. J. Corbett says, the test for literary assignments is this simple question: "Can my students, with their present equipment, fulfill this assignment, can they develop this topic or thesis, without a lot of specialized knowledge about the techniques of creative literature, simply with the data that any normally intelligent person can glean from a careful reading of the text at hand and from his experience of living in the world?" (200)

Writing literary assignments is a science and an art. Students are advised to study the wording of literary assignments with particular care, so exact wording about the important elements of the problem is important. Make certain that you choose your key process terms with care; students asked to *analyze* will attempt different things than those asked to *describe* or *discuss*. If you ask for *comparison and contrast*, make certain that students have full access to and understanding of both elements to be compared. Students will want to know about whether they are expected to use secondary sources, and if so, how many

and in what ways. Information about the degree of direct citation and quotation you expect will help students understand your directions. And reminding students that you expect evidence for each claim will ask them to stay close to the text.

However you decide to design your course, one thing is certain: when structuring the sequence of assignments, it is important to connect each assignment to the others, always asking that your students expand their repertoire. In creating the sequence, you must always consider "the activities and operations of mind in which the student must engage if he is to cope with the assignment," as Richard Larson says, and arrange assignments so that they inform one another (212). It makes sense to proceed only from assignments that are cognitively less demanding to those that are more complex. Asking a student for a "five-part argument" between a "comparison-contrast essay" and a personal narrative is not logical because the progression is unclear. Connect each assignment to skills that have been practiced previously and to skills that will follow.³

If you will be assigning a paper analyzing a literary work, another sequence of shorter assignments can allow students to prepare for it. Literary analysis is not, as some students seem to think, some unnatural creation distinct from all other writing, and it should build on the expository skills from earlier assignments. A composition course that teaches literary analysis may be structured around the same sources of information that feed nonfiction writing: memory, close reading, and critical research. Students first look within themselves for material and then cast a progressively wider net. Their work culminates in the literary essay, which may incorporate all these sources of information. A series of assignments—narrative or descriptive essays, then profiles based on interviews (perhaps with one another), and then a critical essay that brings together and discusses several readings—will move students naturally toward an analytical essay. In this sequence, the research paper encourages students to look at the text in the widest sense, often examining topics that have been written about by many people and listening to what diverse voices have to say about it. This approach may demand that students—and their instructors—alter the way they have viewed literary research and writing: it is not just going to the library and reading books and articles, but rather using a growing grasp of all other sorts of writing and planning skills to build to a new kind of complexity.

Creating Assignments

After you have decided on the length, the number, and the sequence of assignments, you can get down to the business of creating each one. You will want to

³ There are larger issues in sequencing assignments that are too complex to be handled effectively here. For detailed discussions of different philosophies of assignment sequencing, see Coles; see also Bartholomae and Petrosky, who provide a detailed discussion and rationale for their sequence.

write down all assignments beforehand and pass out copies of them to your students rather than writing them on the board or reading them aloud. This not only allows you to be as specific as you wish to be but also helps to prevent any misunderstandings by the students. Each word in an assignment, no matter how small, is extremely important: the wording is the seed from which the oak—or the dandelion—will grow. When you distribute an assignment, ask your students to pay close attention to the wording, to what is being asked, before all else.

You may, in fact, want to take some time to go over the wording of the assignment and the general issue of wording. Students need to know, for all their classes, that words like *analyze*, *describe*, and *explain* tell them the strategy to use and often determine the form of their response. The following list, adapted from Chapters 3 and 6 of Lunsford and Connors's *New St. Martin's Handbook*, defines the most commonly used strategy terms:

Analyze. Divide an event, idea, or theory into its component elements, and examine each one in turn. *Example:* Analyze the American way of death, according to Jessica Mitford.

Compare and/or contrast. Demonstrate similarities or dissimilarities between two or more events or topics. *Example:* Compare the portrayal of women in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" and "I Want a Wife."

Define. Identify and state the essential traits or characteristics of something, differentiating them clearly from other things. *Example:* Define "FY student."

Describe. Tell about an event, a person, or a process in detail, creating a clear and vivid image of it. *Example:* Describe the dress of the "typical" college professor.

Evaluate. Assess the value or significance of the topic. *Example:* Evaluate the contributions of African American musicians to the development of the American tradition of music in the nineteenth century.

Explain. Make a topic as clear and understandable as possible by offering reasons, examples, and so forth. *Example:* Explain the responsibilities of resident advisors in dormitories.

Summarize. State the major points concisely and comprehensively. *Example:* Summarize the major arguments against surrogate parenthood.

"Strategy" words give students important clues for determining the thesis of their essays. Once they understand what such a word asks of them, they need only understand the meaning of all the other words in the assignment.

Discussing strategy words with students is a good way to begin your larger discussion of the criteria that will be used to evaluate their drafts and essays. In a sense, of course, criteria for the evaluation of essays are the theoretical heart of any course in rhetoric or writing, but you need to boil them all down to specifics for each new assignment. For each type of assignment, a slightly different kind of invention works best, a slightly different group of forms or

genres is appropriate, as are different levels of descriptive detail or narration and different methods of logical development. In a new assignment to a class, you need to describe thoroughly what you want to see, from specific thesis statements to levels of support, formal structure, use of personal pronouns, use of dialogue, various conventions, and so forth. Some of these criteria will be spelled out in the wording of the assignment, but some you should present and discuss in class.

As you continue teaching, it is a good idea to ask students whose essays are particularly effective whether you can make photocopies of their work for use in subsequent semesters. Such models of successful responses to assignments can help students immensely by letting them see concretely what your necessarily abstract criteria can produce.

So what is a good assignment? Edmund J. Farrell tells us what a good assignment is *not* (220-24).

A good assignment is *not* an assignment that can be answered with a simple true/false or yes/no answer: "Do the SAT exams have too much power over students' lives?" Such assignments do not offer a writer enough purpose or give enough direction, and students are often at a loss for a place to go after they have formulated their simple answers.

A good assignment is not one that leads to unfocused or too-short answers. For example, "How do you feel about the ozone layer?" does not give students enough direction, and to ask "Is the national debt a serious problem?" encourages a brief, affirmative response. A good assignment is also not one that assumes too much student knowledge. "What are the good and bad points of U.S. foreign policy?" or "Is America decaying as the Roman Empire did?" is far too broad, and even a minimal answer would require students to do a considerable amount of reading and research.

Nor is a good assignment one that poses too many questions in its attempt to elicit a specific response: "In the popular television show *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, what do the writers and producers wish to suggest about society? Do the different races of aliens have analogous groups in our contemporary society? What image does the show provide of law enforcement? Of racial tendencies? Of moral leadership? What ethical message does the show give its viewers?" This sort of assignment means to help students by supplying them with many possibilities, but it can provoke panic as inexperienced writers scramble to deal with each question discretely.

A good assignment, finally, is not one that asks students for too personal an answer: "Has there ever been a time in your life when you just couldn't go on?" or "What was the most exciting thing that ever happened to you?" Though you might sometimes get powerful writing in response to such visceral topics, some students will be put off and not wish to answer them, while others will revel in the chance to advertise their angst or detail their road trip to Daytona Beach. Either way, you are likely to get some bad writing, replete with evasions or clichés.

If good assignments are not any of these things, then what are they? In *Teaching Expository Writing*, William Irmscher lists a number of useful

criteria (69-71). Foremost, a good assignment has to have a purpose. If you ask students to write a meaningless exercise, that is what you will get. An assignment like "Describe your dorm room in specific detail" has no purpose but to make students write; the response to such an assignment is meaningless as communication. If the assignment is extended, though, to "Describe your dorm room, and explain how various details in it reflect your personality and habits," it becomes a rhetorical problem. The answer to the assignment now has a purpose, a reason for saying what it says.

Irmscher tells us that a good assignment is also meaningful within students' experience. *Meaningful* here does not necessarily mean "completely personal," but keep in mind that your students do not usually have access to as wide a world of opinion, fact, or experience as you do. Though you can perhaps talk coherently about the recession during the Reagan era or the civil rights struggle of the sixties, for seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, these subjects are probably topics for research. The subjects that students can be expected to write about well without doing research are those that fall within their own range of experience—the civil rights issue as it relates to the busing program at their high school, or the drug problem as it relates to their circle of acquaintances.

A good assignment, says Irmscher, also asks for writing about specific and immediate situations rather than abstract and theoretical ones. "Discuss the problem of sexism" will not elicit the good, specific writing that an assignment tied to concrete reality will: "Discuss how you first became aware of sexism and how it has affected the way you deal with men and women." If you pose a hypothetical situation in an assignment, make certain it is one students can conceptualize. "If you had been Abraham Lincoln in 1861 . . ." is the sort of assignment that will only invite wearying and uninformed fantasy, whereas "Write a letter to the board of trustees explaining why it should reconsider its decision to raise tuition by three hundred dollars per year" is a hypothetical situation (or perhaps it is not) that students can approach in an informed and realistic manner.

A good assignment should suggest a single major question to which the thesis statement of the essay is the answer. "Is smoking tobacco harmful, and should the tobacco laws be changed?" asks for several different, though related, theses. It is better to stay with a single question whose ramifications can then be explored: "Discuss why tobacco should or should not be legal, supporting your argument with details from your own experience or the experiences of people you know."

The assignment itself should be neither too long nor too short. It should certainly be no longer than a single paragraph unless it includes content information, such as a table, a graph, a quotation, or evidence of some sort that must be responded to in the essay. Too long and too complex an assignment will frustrate and confuse students. Too short an assignment, on the other hand, will fail to give sufficient guidance.

A good assignment, then, must be many things. Ideally, it should help students practice specific stylistic and organizational skills. It should furnish

enough data to give students an idea of where to start, and it should evoke a response that is the product of discovering more about those data. It should encourage students to do their best writing and should give the teacher her best chance to help.

A final word on assignments: do not be reluctant to change or jettison assignments that do not work out. As mentioned earlier, every writing teacher is always on the lookout for new and better topics, not because the old ones are necessarily bad but because good teachers constantly search for better ways of teaching. You may also find that you get tired of reading students' responses, even good responses, to an old assignment. When you find boredom setting in, it is time to change assignments, as much for your students' sake as for your own.

REVISION

As the sample syllabi in Chapter 1 suggest, the revision of students' essays before the essays are finally graded should be an important element in college writing courses. The inclusion of a revision option is up to you, of course (unless your department requires or forbids one), but most experienced writing teachers are committed supporters of such an option. Their experience has shown them that the reasons for allowing revision seem to outweigh by far any inconveniences.

The revision of essays allows teachers to escape from having to grade all the writing that students do. At the same time, it removes from the writing situation the constant pressure of working for a grade and thus allows students to concentrate on their writing. In other words, it provides a less judgmental relationship between teacher and student, one in which the teacher can be a writing coach rather than a judge whose only function is to give grades.

Revision allows students an insight into the editing process that is difficult to achieve if all work is graded and then filed away without the writers having any chance to change or reexamine it. Studies of the composing process have shown that many students write a paper with little planning, make no notes, grind out the minimum number of words, and make few changes as they type up what they have written. They see writing as a one-shot make-or-break process. Because the very idea of large-scale revision is alien to these students, providing a revision option allows them to approach the task of editing as a means of re-seeing their writing. They need to learn that in producing quality writing, self-evaluation and self-correction are important elements.

A revision option can work in several different ways, but all of them involve the same general idea: the teacher collects and evaluates students' essays and then returns them to the writers, who have the option of rewriting them for a higher grade. The mechanics of turning in essays and of grading them differ from system to system, but all have in common this "second-chance" element.

Revisions are usually the focus of conferences and workshop sessions, but you needn't use either of these systems. According to another system using a

revision routine, students must turn in essay A on the day it is due. They will either mark the essay DRAFT, which indicates that the writer wants the paper evaluated but not graded, or they will leave it unmarked, which indicates that the paper is to be evaluated and graded.

You evaluate all the essays but grade only those considered final efforts. The drafts are approached differently. On a draft, your task is to provide guidance in revising, not merely in editing. You are looking not for a neater or more "correct" copy of an essay but for a re-envisioned essay. Thus your terminal or closing comments will contain far more specific suggestions and criticisms than will those on a graded essay. The terminal comments on a preliminary draft must serve as blueprints or suggestions for revision, whereas those on a final essay must, by the very nature of the grading process, be more concerned with justifying the grade and giving closure to the assignment.

The next week, you return the students' papers, and give those students who had turned in drafts a week or ten days in which to revise their papers, which must then be turned in for a final grade. If a draft is very good, as occasionally one is, the student may just return it unchanged; but most students rewrite their papers. When the final versions are handed in, ask that the original draft be clipped to the revision so that the changes will be evident. You also ask that any comments from workshop members be attached as well. On this second sweep through essay A, you will read the essay, write comments in the margins, note any remaining formal errors (usually with a check mark), write a short comment on the success of the revision and the general quality of the essay, and return it to the writer for the last time.

In the week before the final drafts of essay A are due, rough drafts of the next assignment, essay B, will have come in and perhaps a few early revisions of essay A will have arrived as well. By the time you get all the final versions of essay A, you will be seeing the rough drafts of essay C. During any given week, therefore, you may be evaluating or grading as many as three assignments. It is not so confusing as it sounds. Here is a diagram:

Week 2

Monday

Friday

Drafts of essay A due

Week 3

Monday

Drafts of essay A returned

Friday

Drafts of essay B due

Some final drafts of essay A turned in this week

Week 4

Monday

Final drafts of essay A due

Friday

Drafts of essay C due

Drafts of essay B returned

Some final drafts of essay B turned in this week

Week 5*Monday*

Final drafts of essay A returned
Final drafts of essay B due
Drafts of essay C returned
Some final drafts of essay C turned in this week

Friday

Other permutations of the revision system work better for some teachers. For example, they may permit students to submit multiple versions of an essay, especially if the class is working in writing groups. Other teachers may allow only one or two revisions during the term. Still others will allow students to submit their revisions during a "revision week" at the end of the quarter or the semester. This allows students more time in which to revise, but it also results in a great influx of papers to be read and graded during that final, hectic week. Teachers who grade all papers as they come in and then re-grade those that students choose to revise give students a clear idea of how they are doing in terms of grades. In such a system, however, the grading process is burdensome for the teacher, especially since the terminal comment on a graded paper is expected to justify the letter grade rather than provide suggestions for revision.

The most common objection to the revision option is that it creates more work for the teacher. And in some ways, it does. In a class of 24 students that demands 6 graded essays from each student, the teacher must read and evaluate 144 essays. If revision is allowed, the number of papers to be evaluated naturally increases.

But there is not as much extra work for the teacher as there might seem to be at first. The revision option places more of the added responsibility on the student. Reading for evaluation takes less time than the combined effort of reading for evaluation, assigning a grade, and justifying the grade; and the final reading and grading of the revision take less time than reading for evaluation and justifying the grade. Once you get the system down, you should be able to read for evaluation and write a terminal comment in about five to seven minutes. Grading the revised version takes only about five minutes because you already know the writer's purpose. In neither reading should you give small, formal errors the amount of attention that you would give such errors in a single reading. In the first reading, in fact, you mark no errors at all, although you may mention serious error patterns in your terminal comment. In the second reading, errors get only a check mark. The act of revision generally means that the final essay will have fewer formal problems.

This paean to the revision option should not obscure the problems the revision option can present. The most obvious one is the students' temptation to use the teacher only as an editor. If you mark all the formal errors on each rough draft, you will lead your students to believe that their revision need be no more than a simple reprinting of the essay with the formal errors corrected. If you want to mark errors in drafts, do so with a simple check mark over

the error, which the writer must then identify and correct. Encourage students to rely on one another as editors and proofreaders before submitting drafts. Don't hesitate to say, "This draft isn't ready for me."

The second problem that revision presents is psychological: students tend to believe that a paper that has been revised in a formal process will automatically receive a higher grade than one the teacher sees only once—the A-for-effort misconception. If a draft merits a D and the revision raises the grade to a C, the student often has a hard time understanding why, with all the changes she made, the paper is not worth an A or a B. Students may see any paper without serious formal errors as worthy of an A or a B, not realizing that its content is vacuous or its organization incoherent. Such issues make for useful classroom discussion and exploration. After an assignment has been graded, the class can analyze the criteria for evaluation and grading. Some students, used to grade inflation, simply cannot get used to receiving C's and even lower grades, especially if the work is formally perfect or they received high grades in high school. One way around this expectation is to assign a paper no grade at all until after at least one revision has been submitted or until you can declare the essay "acceptable" (usually the equivalent of a passing grade or a C).

As you evaluate the merits of a revision option, keep in mind that revision of written work is immensely useful to students. No longer is an essay a one-shot deal, submitted in fear or resignation because it must soar or crash on its maiden voyage. The opportunity for revision can foster commitment to the assignment and real intellectual growth. By allowing students to reflect on and improve their writing, a teacher allows them to see writing for what it is: a process of re-seeing a subject, a process that isn't completed until the writer is ready to say, "I can do no more."

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