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Write More, Grade Less

Mike Schmoker

For more than 30 years, Marzano and others have demonstrated that conventional grading practices are not only unnecessarily time-consuming for teachers, but also have a negative impact on student writing performance. The key issues are

- **Overload: we grade for and comment on too many dimensions of a single writing assignment (which students ignore—because these comments discourage and overwhelm them—with no clear direction on how to revise).**
- **Infrequent writing assignments: because grading papers very thoroughly takes so much time, we wind up reducing the number of assignments—though *frequent* guided writing assignments are essential to becoming an effective writer.**
- **Delay: writing assignments are commonly returned weeks after they are completed--which nullifies any benefits for students. And we seldom provide guided opportunities for students to revise their papers, based on feedback.**

There is a better way. The key is to teach the basic aspects of writing and the criteria in our scoring guides *carefully, explicitly and frequently*, making sure that students write a sufficient number of both short and long papers. It is critical that in the course of instruction we provide student and professional **exemplars**—so that students can learn to peer-edit and self-evaluate their work at each stage, before submitting it to the teacher.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teach *one trait* or feature (like “voice” or “transitions” or “sentence fluency”) at a time, using a rubric, as well as student/professional models to guide the work. Then, *immediately* give students the chance to practice that trait or criteria on a short writing assignment. That is,

assign and grade only one to three paragraphs for *that trait only*—with limited comments, and the opportunity for students to revise

have students peer-edit for that trait only (e.g. “Write 2-3 evaluative comments on your partner’s paper with respect only to the designated trait we just learned”)

Rather than always assign longer, comprehensive argumentative papers (with multiple supporting arguments and paragraphs) regularly teach students to effectively organize and explain only one point or argument in only 1-2 paragraphs.

To ensure their success, (and reduce the amount of time-consuming corrections you must make!) always teach them using student/professional models (“exemplars”) of good paragraphs, passages and written works—written by students or professionals. For instance,

give students professional or (anonymous) student papers or paragraphs which teach these fundamental (but not always

explicitly taught) skills like the following: making a specific point or argument clearly, without confusing the reader or wandering off-topic; selecting and integrating appropriate quotations or evidence from one or more texts and then effectively expounding on/explaining the importance of that quote or evidence as it relates to the main thesis/point/argument you are making.

(If these basic features of good writing are **routinely and explicitly taught, in carefully-sequenced steps, with exemplars**, students *will* learn them, and there will be far less correcting to do).

Vet thesis statements! : Many papers are confused and incoherent (and devilishly hard to grade) because students don't know how to develop and write a clear thesis or argument.

Every year, at different levels of sophistication, the thesis statement must be taught carefully (with examples/models), i.e.:

Always “vet” thesis statements (Jago 2001) before students write or complete even a short paper or an outline (walk around evaluation/assessment can be adequate here—so that you don't have work to take home).

Have students self-evaluate or peer-edit for any of the above using checklists (Stiggins and Spandel; CTW 145)

Vet Outlines: Have students freewrite, “web” or make lists of quotes, page numbers or evidence from their close reading of one or more texts. Then have them select their best points/content and then make a brief, working outline (which they can change if necessary—as writers do).

Inspect student outlines (“walk around” evaluation may be adequate here as well)

Carefully teach students to self-evaluate or peer evaluate to ensure:

Coherent paragraphs: clear, on-topic; with good use of carefully-selected quotes, evidence, “exposition” (i.e. where the writer clearly explains the significance of the quote or text reference to their argument or thesis) and to ensure that

each paragraph/section *clearly* aligns with, and does not deviate from, the thesis/argument

Have regularly-scheduled “writing days”, when you read and grade papers—while students read or write. During this time, students are free to come up to your desk if they have questions about their drafts

Have students **evaluate/revise good or bad sample papers in pairs or by themselves**-for one trait/criteria at a time (while you do walk-around evaluation/assessment)

-then have them write their own paragraph or two focusing on that same trait

BOTTOM LINE:

IF WE VERY CAREFULLY and REPEATEDLY TEACH THE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF WRITING AND THE ELEMENTS OF OUR RUBRICS—USING GOOD STUDENT/PROFESSIONAL EXEMPLARS—STUDENTS *WILL* WRITE BETTER.

THAT MEANS LESS TIME CORRECTING

AND

IT MAKES IT FAR EASIER FOR STUDENTS TO **SELF-EVALUATE** AND TO **PEER-EVALUATE** MEANINGFULLY AND WITH CONFIDENCE.

IF WE IMPLEMENT PRACTICES LIKE THE ABOVE, THEN GRADING EVEN LONGER PAPERS, IN STAGES, WILL TAKE FAR LESS TIME, BECAUSE IT ENSURES THAT STUDENTS DO A LOT OF THE WORK FOR US—BEFORE HANDING THEIR WORK IN.

SUCH PROCESSES GREATLY REDUCE THE TIME SPENT GRADING, WHICH MEANS FAR MORE WRITING AND FAR MORE EFFECTIVE WRITING INSTRUCTION.

MAKE NO MISTAKE: WHEN STUDENTS WRITE—**ESPECIALLY ABOUT WHAT THEY HAVE CAREFULLY AND CLOSELY READ**—THEY ENLARGE THEIR INTELLECTS AND ARE PREPARE THEMSELVES FOR COLLEGE, CAREERS AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN A WAY THAT CAN'T BE SURPASSED.

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