Improving Formal Writing Before It Needs to be Graded

None of us wants to waste time grading poor student papers!!!

Here are some tips for improving formal writing before it is submitted for grading.

Prepare Students for Good Writing Results

Students may submit final papers which, in reality, are simply "edited rough drafts . . . undeveloped and often truncated thinking process" (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 9). Many professional writers create similar drafts – but they recognize that these are not finished papers – they are only a first draft.

Help students recognize the characteristics of a first draft:
- Tries to say a little bit of everything about a topic
- May be well-organized into categories, but the categories may not "function as reasons in support of a thesis" (Bean, 2001, p. 22)
- Information may be well-arranged, but is not persuasive
- Includes students' "general store of knowledge" (p. 22)
- May not respond to a research question
- May be a "summary" of information learned from research
- May result in "data dump writing" which "reveals a student overwhelmed with information and uncertain what to do with it" (p. 23)
- May have no reasoned analysis or argumentation
- May be an attempt to offer the "correct information" rather than "support[ing] a position in a complex conversation" (p. 25)

To help students move from a first draft to a more polished paper, consider using Peer Reviews, Reflections by the Student Authors, and/or Your Comments on a Draft.

Peer Reviews

A Shameless Plug for the FHSS Writing Lab: "Empirical research on writing centers has shown that students who receive feedback on their drafts from writing center tutors make substantial revisions, gain confidence as writers, and leave their sessions with a more positive attitude about themselves as writers and their drafts" (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 285).

Empirical data suggests that requiring students to visit a Writing Lab has many benefits:
- Helps students value revision (Rapp Young, 2014, as cited in Blackmon, 2022, p. 12)
- Increases likelihood of students returning to the Writing Lab for help (Blackmon, 2022, p. 12)
- Motivates procrastinators (Rapp Young & Fritzsche, 2002, as cited in Blackmon, 2022, p. 12)
- Increases confidence and student skill levels (Blackmon, 2022, p. 12)
- Increases student persistence (Irvin, 2014, as cited in Blackmon, 2022, p. 12)
- Helps the student understand the relevance of this writing assignment (Blackmon, 2022, p. 16)

Peer Student Advisors from the FHSS Writing Lab: Consider attending an FHSS Writing Lab staff meeting and training the advisors on your expectations for the papers (bring your prompt & rubric) or invite a student advisor to your office to be trained. The student advisor will then train the other advisors at a staff meeting.

Train Your Students & your TA's in Your Expectations for the Paper: Assign 2-4 Students to Exchange Their Papers for a Class Peer Review: Choose what results you want from a class peer review. Based on your goals, here are a few options for a class peer review assignment:
- Review multiple papers using the same rubrics you will use (but omit point totals)
- Review multiple papers using simplified rubrics
- Review with a focus on global issues (thesis/ argumentative claim, organization of ideas, use of evidence to support claims, etc.)
- Review with a focus on correct use of your documentation style (e.g., Turabian, Chicago, APA, MLA, etc.)
- Review with a focus on assessing the student authors' use of summaries vs quotations with the appropriate citations
- Review with a focus on distracting wordiness

Reflections on Drafts by Student Authors

Student reflections are actually a "retrieval" practice. Consider assigning students to submit a reflection of their drafts in conjunction with comments they received from peer reviewers:
- "Reread the grading rubric provided with this assignment. Based on these criteria, what are the strengths and weakness of your current draft?
- What areas of your draft most needed [reviewing] by a peer reader? What questions did you have for your peer reader?
- Based on your own self-assessment and comments from your peer reviewers, what do you plan to do next on this draft?" (p. 237).
- Was your peer reviewer able to identify your argument? What is your plan for improving the clarity of your claim?
- Did your peer reviewer correctly identify your research question? What claims in your paper will need more supportive evidence?
- Were there gaps in the paper where the peer reviewer got stuck? How will you bridge each gap? (Be specific.)
- Were there any points the peer reviewer made that you do not agree with? Provide a rationale for not implementing the suggestions.

(Adapted from Bean & Melzer, 2021, pp. 237-242).

Your Comments on a Student Draft

Why should I review a draft?: Keep the big picture in view. Your goal is not to simply analyze a student's final paper and give it a grade. Instead, consider an analogy of trying to improve your putting on the golf green. If you simply putt 10 times, it is unlikely that you will get much better. But if a qualified person teaches you some basic instructions about putting and then gives you feedback after each attempt, your skill should be more and more refined. Students need us to teach some basic principles of good writing within our disciplines and then provide useful feedback after each attempt (Thaler & Sunstein, 2021, pp. 96-97).

Respond as a reader – NOT as an editor: "The best teacher commentary focuses primarily on students' ideas and the strengths, weaknesses, or clarity of their arguments, no special terminology is needed. . . . be honest readers, making comments such as these:
- 'I'm getting lost. How does this paragraph connect to the previous one?'
- 'Readers will need more evidence here.'
- 'What about Petriono's research on this problem? Can you summarize and respond to her argument?'
- 'Excellent point!'" (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 12).

Be aware that "novice writers may have difficulty imagining their drafts *from a reader's perspective.* If a passage seems clear to the writer, he or she believes that it ought to be immediately clear to the reader also. Novice writers may simply not recognize their reader's confusion and consequently not recognize the need to fill in gaps, to link new information to old information, or to arrange material in the order needed by readers" (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 34). Responding as a reader rather than as an editor can help students clarify their ideas.

To help students improve their papers before submitting the final version, reframe students' revisions as something they need to do in addition to what they have already done, rather than "replacing or undoing" what they have already done (Cahill et al., 2017, p. 8).   Revising papers is part of the writing process.

References

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