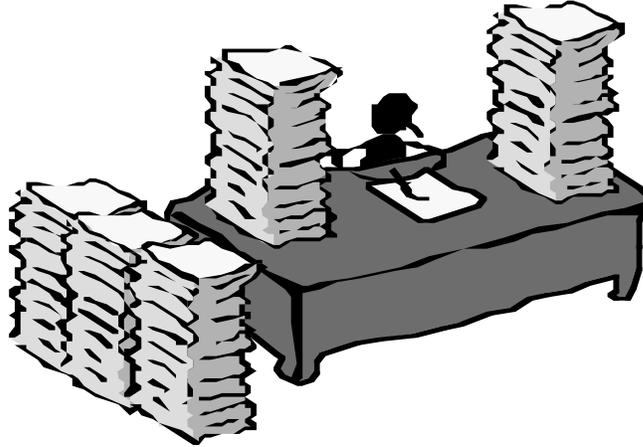


Grading Student Papers

Some Guidelines for Commenting on and Grading Students' Written Work in Any Discipline

A Joint Publication of
the University of Maryland's
Freshman Writing Program and
the Center for Teaching Excellence





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¹“Six Steps for Careful Planning” by Michael F. Anderson has been reprinted with permission by Michael Anderson and the *Teaching and Learning News* published by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Maryland, Volume 11, No. 2, 2001.

² The Philosophy of Grading and Grading Standards are those adopted by the University of Maryland Freshman Writing Program and are published in the program’s textbook, *Introduction to Academic Writing*.

³ “Putting Theory Into Practice: Stop Plagiarism! Find It. Prevent It.” was first published in *Teaching & Learning News*, published by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Maryland, Volume 11, No. 2, 2001.

⁴ “How to Get the Most Out of the Writing Center: A Guide for Students” is reprinted with permission from the University of Maryland Writing Center.

Introduction by Nora Bellows and Erin Sadlack

One of our coordinators overheard two students waiting for the elevator in Susquehanna Hall. One complained bitterly that his teacher had given him a D, just because there were a lot of mistakes in his writing. His companion, somewhat dumbfounded, responded, “Dude, it’s English. Of course grammar matters.” While this conversation initially struck us as funny, it also raised the implicit question: what about history, theatre, art, the sciences and engineering? Would writing not count there? If writing doesn’t “count” in other classes, what message would that send to our students?

Not long afterwards, at a session on “Talk about Teaching Writing,” a program sponsored by the University of Maryland Center Alliance for School Teachers (CAST), we heard teaching assistants from a variety of disciplines express their frustration about the quality of student writing, but even more importantly, about the difficulties they felt in trying to assess that writing. Listening to those TAs compelled us to take action to alleviate the situation, to help find a way to enable TAs to feel more confident in holding their students to high standards of writing.

The importance of writing, however, extends far beyond the hallowed halls of the university classrooms: the ability to communicate ideas thoughtfully and clearly has always been and always will be important. There is sometimes very little that differentiates a badly articulated idea from a bad idea.

There are countless examples of this: one of our colleagues sits on an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) for a private bio-tech firm and often sees experiment protocols that are so badly written the details of the experiment are obscured. These experiments do not get approval. At a recent competition for hybrid vehicles, in which engineering departments from universities nationwide participated, a Georgia school was doing very well in the “performance” aspect of the competition, but did not place well because their “presentation,” or their written articulation of the attributes of their hybrid SUV, was not well done. One of the professors in charge of the project lamented the writing in the presentation, saying that his department needed to start taking writing more seriously.

These are just two examples of how we do our students and ourselves no favors if we fail to hold them to the standards we say we as representatives of the University of Maryland pledge to uphold. And, ultimately, if we do not give our students permission to turn in badly-prepared written assignments, all of our jobs as teachers and evaluators of students’ written work are made easier. Reading a clear and well-written assignment is a pleasure in any discipline. We, as teachers, need to ensure that our students understand that writing is important to us and important to them, no matter what their discipline.

Assessing writing in every course raises another important issue: how do already beleaguered teachers communicate the importance of writing in addition to the intricacies of string theory, or the components of impressionism, amidst all the other demands of their positions?

This packet of guidelines has grown out of our desire to address this dilemma, to help teaching assistants and professors who want to hold their students to high standards in all areas of their work without unduly burdening themselves. We hope that you find it useful.

What You Can Expect Students to Know After They Complete 101 at UM

by Erin Sadlack

Most of your students will have received formal training in writing in English 101 at Maryland or in an equivalent course at another institution. As you consider your students' writing, you will find it useful to know what they had to learn to pass that course. English 101 at the University of Maryland has two key components: argumentation and research. After students complete the course, you have a right to expect them to employ the following skills as they complete written assignments:

Argumentation:

1. Craft a specific thesis that details the main argument of the paper.
2. Find detailed evidence appropriate to the topic and to the audience of the paper.
3. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of other writers' argumentation.
4. Consider opposing viewpoints, evaluate their strengths, and then either refute them, make appropriate concession, or develop reasonable compromise positions.
5. Tailor arguments to appropriate page requirements, that is, be able to choose the best evidence for shorter assignments and also develop an extended argument if such be required.
6. Demonstrate the exigence of the argument for the audience.
7. Use a variety of rhetorical strategies such as the rhetorical appeals *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* (appeals to character, emotion, and logic).

Research:

1. Identify and shape appropriate research topics.
 - a. Find a variety of appropriate sources for the topic.
 - b. Students have completed an 8-10 page research paper with at least 20 outside sources consulted.
 - c. Students are trained to use both internet databases as well as the library's resources, but are also encouraged to find other sources of information such as interviews.
 - d. Students are also taught to evaluate which sources are the most useful, as opposed to using those which are merely easiest to locate.
2. Summarize articles effectively and accurately.
3. Incorporate research seamlessly into the paper without allowing the outside sources to "take over" an argument.
4. Appropriately mediate quotes, paraphrases, and summaries from sources and follow all material taken from sources with citations according to MLA standards.

Writing/Tone:

1. Use language that is specifically tailored to the audience, having considered whether the audience is neutral, friendly, or hostile.
2. Proofread to eliminate careless errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Organization:

1. Develop strong paragraphs focused on proving claims or discussing specific ideas.
2. Create and organize paragraphs that flow in a logical fashion throughout the paper, providing the reader with appropriate guides to the structure of the argument.
3. Use transitions within paragraphs to demonstrate the logical flow of ideas.
4. Write a strong introduction that catches the reader's attention, introduces main points, and presents a clear thesis.
5. Finish with a conclusion that summarizes main ideas effectively.

Six Steps for Careful Planning

By Michael F. Anderson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln



Good preparation may mean less time spent reacting to behavior problems and more time on content. When you prepare for a course, a unit, or even a lesson, it might be helpful to develop or adopt a planning process. You could ask other professors to share their planning process, you could search for planning models in resource libraries (such as the Center for Teaching Excellence in 2130 Mitchell Building), or you could adapt pieces of several models until you find a process you like. Here is a six-step planning method, one among many, that may help you plan more effectively. This model could be used to develop a general outline of a course, unit, or daily lesson.

1. Develop an abstract that briefly describes the course/unit/lesson.

An abstract could include a few sentences describing the content, methodologies, scope and sequence of material. A short abstract is a helpful summary of the course and can become an organizer for the development of course components; students will also benefit from a clear purpose statement.

2. Develop a rationale for the course/unit/lesson.

Your students need to know why your content is important and how it fits into their career paths. A student is less likely to resist classroom activities that include clearly stated reasons for comprehension, application, and analysis of content information. Moreover, if students know why you chose a particular methodology, such as why you used group work in one unit and lectures in another, they may feel more involved in their learning rather than as empty vessels waiting to be filled with information.

3. Develop clearly stated learning objectives.

Students need to know what is expected of them and courses that include well-written learning objectives are easier to negotiate. Objectives written using action verbs to describe the behavior change or desired ability resulting from course lessons are generally easier to understand (Banset, 1999). Further,

clear and concise objectives help the students know how they will be assessed or evaluated.

4. Consider the methodology or activities that are best suited for your content and your students.

What material is best delivered by lecture, or by lab, or requires field observations? Does your class include process goals such as team building, and if so, should you use cooperative learning? This part of your planning process could help you organize for future classes, remember activities and methods that are successful, or help you make changes in areas that need attention.

5. Develop ideas about how you will assess or evaluate student progress.

Assessment strategies that are directly linked to your learning objectives are desirable. You may want to consider the “fit and feasibility” of your assessment choices; does the method fit your learning goals and can you carry out the assessment within the scope of your assignment. For example, is it feasible to use essay style exams in large classes? Your goals might include teaching writing, but grading large numbers of papers may not be possible (Walvoord & Anderson, 1999).

6. Allow time for writing and reflection about your teaching.

Sometimes our planning efforts seem perfect on paper but are less successful in the classroom. Reflecting about your students’ responses to teaching ideas and their progress will help you keep courses fresh and intellectually sound. New books, papers, and research about teaching and your content should influence the choices you make and be integrated into the course.

“Six Steps” was reprinted with permission from Michael F. Anderson, a professor at University of Nebraska Lincoln from *TLC Teaching at UNL* 23.2 (October 2001), and from the *Teaching and Learning News* 11.2 (Nov/Dec 2001).

Helping Students Understand the Requirements of Your Assignment

by Nora Bellows and Erin Sadlack

Assignment Description:

When students are unclear about the exact requirements of an assignment, a frustrating situation arises for everyone: students don't understand what is expected of them and teachers get completed assignments they don't expect.

The antidote to this problem is a clearly articulated, specific, well-organized written assignment sheet that outline for students the purpose of the assignment, how it fits into the trajectory of the course, what they are supposed to learn, what they are supposed to do, what to turn in, and when to turn it in. The excellent assignment does all this in clear, unambiguous language and asks students to complete a task that engages them in higher level thinking and coaches them through a process that they can use in other classes and eventually in the workplace.

Assignment Objectives:

- To write an assignment that engages students in higher level thinking, focusing on process in order to help students become self-sufficient learners.
- To create an assignment sheet that is specific, clearly articulated, and furthers the learning goals of the overall course and a specific course unit.
- To write an assignment sheet that includes all of the recommended components and anticipates student problems by offering helpful methods for proceeding.

Assignment Logistics:

Your assignment sheet should have the following elements:

1. Assignment objectives
2. A clear description of the global assignment in lay terms.
3. A concise outline of assignment logistics, including but not limited to
 - a. the assignment due date
 - b. the assignment length
 - c. required assignment formatting details (such as font size, margins, etc.)
 - d. discipline-specific citation information
 - e. a list of exactly what to turn in (and in what order if it matters to you) e.g. You need to turn in your paper draft, your completed paper (stapled at upper left and with page numbers in the bottom right hand corner), and your properly formatted "works cited" and "works consulted" pages.
4. A list of common pitfalls and a tip guide for successful proceeding

Common Pitfalls and Their Antidotes:

1. Too many teachers don't write down their assignments at all, relying on verbal descriptions. Others write down the assignments but may not clearly articulate one or more aspects of the task, resulting in a tendency among students to guess. *The Antidote:* Write it down and show it to colleagues. If you fail to anticipate a problem, use student reactions and common problems to change your assignment for the next class.
2. Assignments do not clearly reflect an aspect of the course objectives (or students fail to see how a particular assignment does). *The Antidote:* Tell students in the "objectives" section what the assignment is supposed to do. Then ask students to engage in reflective thinking to make connections between their own thinking, the assignment, and the course objectives. Often, even telling students why they are doing something fails to convince; if they have to tell *you* why they are completing a particular assignment, they are more likely to believe what they are saying.

What is C Work? A Philosophy of Grading

There are two ways to approach the problem of defining grades. One is to take them linearly—to begin, for example, with A, define what an A grade is, and then move on to B, C, D, and F, showing how each falls short of the grade just before it. This is probably the most common system, the one students and teachers are both most accustomed to. We have in fact used it on the following pages for precisely that reason. But this system has one important disadvantage: the danger of presenting A as a norm, a standard from which work receiving other grades has not just deviated, but has fallen short. The problem with this approach is that A is not a standard in that sense; that is, work that merits A is not A “normal” work, but rather work that is striking in its excellence, work that is superior in all respects. A-quality work is both exceptional and rare.

An approach that more accurately reflects basic divisions between levels of quality begins by defining C work. This division serves as a more accurate guide to the assignment of grades, because it makes it clear that C, B, and A represent different levels of achievement, given the basic stricture that the task was completed satisfactorily to begin with. D and F likewise represent different levels of falling short of fulfilling the assignment.

Note that both presentations, the linear sequence, and the organization that starts with a division between satisfactory and unsatisfactory work, say essentially the same things. Examining both should give a clear picture of what level a paper must achieve to receive a specific grade.

Grading Standards¹

To get a grade of C, an essay must be adequate in each of the following four areas.

- 1. Content: The C paper fulfills the assignment.** It meets *all* specified requirements as to length, subject, pattern of organization, etc. Moreover, it presents a sound central idea supported by relevant material. The central idea may be lacking in originality, and the support may achieve nothing greater than sufficiency, but everything is there and in place.
- 2. Evidence and reasoning: The argument is appropriately supported with evidence, and the reasoning used in the argument is clear and makes sense.** Possibly the reasoning is predictable, or the evidence may occasionally be on the obvious side, but both are sound and clear. The paper shows awareness of other points of view.
- 3. Organization.** The paper has a discernible and logical plan. The entire essay is unified in support of the central idea; individual paragraphs are similarly unified in support of subordinate

points. The train of thought is generally clear. Failure to provide an effective introduction and conclusion, or, alternatively, to provide adequate transitions may occasionally make the organization seem a bit disjointed. (Note that if both of these occur, we are likely no longer dealing with a satisfactory paper—the reader will have to work too hard to make sense of it.) In contrast, the organization may be artificial, forced and labored. Essentially, however, logical order prevails, to the benefit of the intended audience.

- 4. Expression and literacy: Although the style need not be distinguished, the C paper is written in clear English.** The C paper may commit a few of the errors listed below, but such lapses must not be serious enough or frequent enough to interfere significantly with the communication of ideas: loosely strung out sentences; choppy sentences; poor parallelism; illogical word order or subordination; unnecessary shifts in subject or verb; awkward use of the passive voice; wordiness; vague, trite or inappropriate

diction; dangling or misplaced modifiers; subject-verb disagreements; pronoun-antecedent disagreements; unclear or problematic pronoun reference; incorrect verb forms; mixed constructions or any other ungrammatical constructions; run-on sentences; comma splices; sentence fragments; any misuse or omission of punctuation marks; misspellings; errors in capitalization and in hyphenation or compounding of words.

The C paper, then, is satisfactory. It may not display special competency, but it gets the job done.

The B paper goes beyond adequacy to excellence. The thesis may be more original or interesting, and the paper shows full awareness of its intended audience. The evidence is detailed and fully persuasive. The reasoning is thoughtful and shows clear awareness of other points of view. The organization is clear, and the presentation flows naturally from point to point—no misplaced paragraphs, no loose ends left dangling. The overall structure of the paper is well thought out and is appropriate to its audience and purpose. Sentence structure and diction are effective, requiring only minor improvements. There are at most only infrequent and minor errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

The A paper has all the virtues of the B paper, but in fuller measure and to an exceptional degree. It is particularly marked by originality in thought and elegance of style. The best evidence is used, and used effectively. The organization is carefully crafted to give a sense of the necessary flow of the argument. Audience accommodation is adeptly managed.

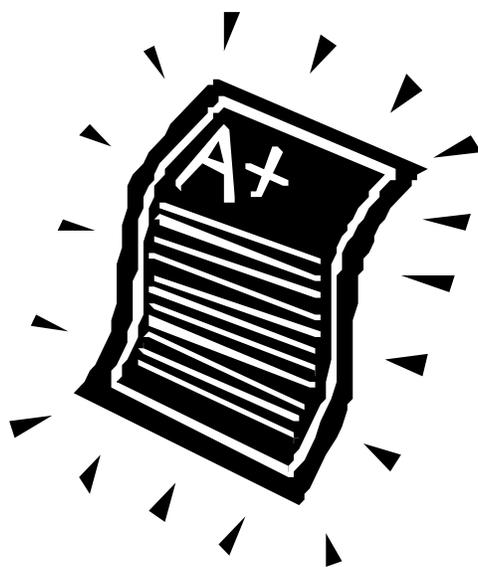
Work that falls below the C standard is inadequate in at least one of the four areas.

The D essay fulfills the assignment overall, but to an inadequate degree. A few, but not all, of the following problems may occur. The paper does not appeal to the intended audience or does not satisfactorily fulfill its stated purpose. Sometimes, the purpose cannot be discerned without some work on the reader's part. Evidence may be inappropriately obvious, out of order, or irrelevant; in some

cases, important evidence may simply be missing. The reasoning is flawed or inadequately supported. It is difficult to keep track of the organizational structure. The paper may suffer from significant or numerous errors in grammar or mechanics, and the diction may be awkward or problematic for the intended audience.

The F paper shows more than one or two of the problems mentioned as typical of the D paper; or it is off the assignment or falls seriously short of length requirements (which almost invariably means insufficient depth of analysis or discussion); or the thesis is unclear; or evidence is missing or has been inappropriately attributed; or the organization is haphazard; or there are numerous and consistent errors in grammar, mechanics and diction.

¹ These grading standards have been adapted by permission from the standards used in the Hood College, Maryland, English Department and reprinted here with permission from the Freshman Writing Program at the University of Maryland..



Freshman Writing Program Grading Standards

The A Paper

1. It not only fulfills the assignment but does so in a fresh and mature way. The paper is exciting to read; it accommodates itself well to its intended audience.
2. The evidence is detailed and used persuasively and where appropriate; citations are used effectively where appropriate and are formatted correctly.
3. The organization gives the reader a sense of the necessary flow of the argument or explanation. Paragraphs are fully developed and follow naturally from what precedes them; the conclusion reinforces the reader's confidence in the writer's control of the argument. Organizational guides are used as appropriate.
4. The prose is clear, apt, and occasionally memorable. The paper contains few, if any, errors of grammar, mechanics, word choice or expression, none of which undermines the overall effectiveness of the paper.

The B Paper

1. The assignment has been followed and fulfilled at a better-than-average level. The paper appropriately addresses its intended audience.
2. The evidence is detailed and persuasive. The paper may sometimes rely too heavily on the obvious, though the writer does not consistently settle for the obvious. The reasoning is better than adequate: it is thoughtful, with awareness of other points of view.
3. The introduction and conclusion are clear, but perhaps not as forceful as they could be. Most paragraphs follow well and are appropriately divided, though one or two could be better placed and developed.
4. The expression is more than competent. Not only is sentence structure correct, but subordination, emphasis, sentence length, and variety are used effectively. Some sentences could be improved, but it would be surprising to find serious sentence errors, such as comma splices, fragments, or fused sentences, in a B paper. Punctuation, grammar, and spelling reveal proficient use of the conventions of edited American English.

The C Paper

1. The assignment has been followed at a satisfactory level. The paper presents an appropriate thesis. However, the thesis may be too broad or general, or its presentation may be problematic in some way—e.g., the intended audience may, for various reasons, have trouble immediately discerning the thesis.
2. For the most part, the argument is supported with evidence. However, while an effort has clearly been made to find and use the best sort of evidence, the evidence is likely to be obvious; the paper may even lack some pertinent information. The reasoning, while generally sound, is predictable; or the reasoning, while generally good, is occasionally flawed.

There is some awareness of other points of view.

3. There is an implicit sense of organization, but several paragraphs and / or sentences within paragraphs are misplaced to the extent that the organizational structure is recognizable but disjointed.
4. Sentence structure is generally correct, although the writer may show limited competence with sentence effectiveness, failing to use such elements as subordination, sentence variety, and modifiers to achieve emphasis. A C paper may thus be characterized by a “wooden” style. Comma splices, unintentional fragments, and fused sentences—errors that betray inadequate understanding of sentence structure—may occasionally crop up. The vocabulary is fairly limited. The paper may contain errors in spelling, mechanics, and grammar that reveal unfamiliarity with conventions of edited American English. (While a C paper may differ from a B paper in containing some errors in mechanics, grammar, vocabulary or expression, note that too many errors of this sort will quickly change a C paper to a D or F paper.)

The D Paper

1. There is a poor sense of audience and a limited sense of purpose. The purpose or thesis cannot be discerned without significant work on the part of the reader.
2. Necessary evidence is out of order and / or missing; irrelevant evidence may instead be present. The reasoning will necessarily be flawed.
3. The organization is difficult to discern. The introduction is unclear or nonexistent, paragraphs are not well-developed or arranged, transitions are incorrect or missing.
4. There are numerous errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The diction and / or syntax may be so weak that sentences are sometimes incomprehensible for the intended audience, although experienced readers can make sense of what is written. Lack of proof-reading may turn an otherwise adequate paper into a D paper.

The F Paper

1. It is off the assignment. The thesis is unclear; the paper moves confusedly in several directions. It may even fall seriously short of minimum length requirements.

and/or

2. There is virtually no evidence, or the attribution of evidence is problematic or has been neglected.

and/or

3. The organization seems to a significant degree haphazard or arbitrary.

and/or

4. Numerous and consistent errors of grammar, spelling, punctuation, diction or syntax hinder clarity or even basic communication. Some sentences are incomprehensible.

A Step-by-Step Guide for Effective (and Efficient) Grading

by Linda Coleman

Getting Started

- 1. Budget your time.** How much time do you have between when you get the papers and when they must be returned? Consider planning for several grading sessions. Everything depends on your own best working schedule, of course, but many teachers find that trying to do too many papers at once may make it harder to avoid poor or inconsistent grading. If you're likely to get cranky when you see the same error on the sixth paper in a row, plan for breaks.
- 2. Break up the pile into smaller, manageable units.** The longer the stack sits there intact, the harder it is to get started. Plan a short grading session within a day or so of getting the papers.
- 3. Read a random sampling of papers first.** Instead of diving right into the pile, get a broad sense of what kind of work the class is doing. Consider taking an hour to skim through all or most of the papers before doing any grading. Getting an overview of consistent errors, consistent good points, and the quality range on the assignment will cut down on the time spent on each paper later.
- 4. Spend a reasonable amount of time on each paper.** You will be tempted to spend too much time on most papers, especially those with many problems. Fatigue also increases the time you spend on papers—small editing corrections are easier than judicious responses. Some teachers use a kitchen timer and allow a specified period of time per paper.
- 5. Give good papers good comments.** It is tempting to move too quickly through the better papers. If you find yourself thinking of good papers as needing little attention because “nothing is wrong with them,” you're falling into the trap of seeing the teacher's job as “correcting papers.” Papers with “nothing wrong” have much that is right, and students who write good papers deserve serious and thoughtful responses. They've relieved you of the need to point out errors; enjoy the intellectual give-and-take they're clearly ready to appreciate.

Writing Comments

- 6. Keep your assignment sheet and your grading standards in front of you.** Use the language of the grading standards in the end comments, in particular. That helps students see how your assessment of their work is connected with what they were asked to do to begin with.
- 7. Try to make at least one comment on each page.** Students respond better when they see that we read their papers carefully.
- 8. Avoid filling the margins with comments.** Students can absorb a limited amount of feedback. A couple of good remarks per page are enough to be helpful without being overwhelming. Things that recur—good and bad—can be included in your closing comment.
- 9. Make your feedback precise and concrete.** Abstract terms are difficult for students to apply to their writing.
- 10. If you have abbreviations or symbols you frequently use, explain them to the class.** You'd be surprised how few students will ask about marks they don't recognize—they'll simply ignore them.
- 11. Balance your comments with a mix of positive and constructive criticism.** There is almost

always something good to say about the work and there is always room for improvement: marginalia and closing comments should be neither unremittingly positive nor unremittingly negative. Most people will be reluctant to read comments if they only focus on the negative.

12. **Consider commenting in pencil**, so that you can easily erase or modify comments.
13. **Don't copyedit.** Mark the first few instances of a particular type of editing error, but when errors recur, make a general note in the margin or mention them in the closing comment. Reader-oriented comments and questions can help you steer away from grading for grammar.
14. **Papers that have not been proofread are not worth your time to read.** Anyone can miss a couple of misplaced commas or a spelling error or two per page, but you should not waste your time trying to read a paper riddled with errors the student was too careless to correct.
Handle such situations with care: giving a paper back with nothing but a dismissive comment can do more harm than good. It is your job to help students understand how important it is to produce work appropriate for the audience—and that includes presenting good, clean, easily read text.
15. **Commenting is a part of grading, which is a part of teaching.** Marie Secor, professor at Pennsylvania State University, remarks: "Remember that the purpose of everything you write on a paper is to give useful advice. It is not to show that you know your stuff, or that you are very smart or very conscientious, or even to show that the student doesn't know enough." Your comments should be aimed at helping the student improve her work.
16. **Closing or "end" comments should follow the "sandwich" structure:** begin with praise, then remark on areas where improvement is needed, then, where you can, close with something positive. (Of course, not in all instances is it appropriate to close with praise.)
17. **Closing comments should include some suggestions for what the student should try to do on the next written assignment.** What pitfalls should he watch out for? Is there something that worked particularly well that the student should expand on or play with a bit more?
18. **The final comment explains the grade.** One should be able to read the final comment and get an idea of what the grade is, even without seeing the letter grade.

Assigning the Grade

19. **Consider writing the final grade on a Post-It note, or lightly in pencil.** When you have finished with the entire class, go through again and assign permanent grades in ink.
20. **Stay consistent across papers, that is, pay attention to what you are using pluses and minuses for.** Is that C+ paper really just a little above average, or is it an average paper whose author you are trying to encourage by adding the +?
21. **Does the overall grade picture reflect your sense of the class as a whole?** When you have finished grading, go through and note how many grades you give at each level. Often, teachers give over half the class **A** or **B**, but would not claim that the class as a whole is "above average." In fact, however, that is what the teacher *is* claiming with that grading profile.
22. **Return graded papers promptly.**

15 Tips for Effective Commenting and Grading

by Tim Helwig

1. Use pencil in margin and end comments, but use pen for the final grade.
2. When you use pen, use blue or black ink. Do not use red ink.
3. Write legibly, which doesn't take much longer. Use a word-processor for end comments if your handwriting cannot be made legible.
4. Provide students with a key to any markings or symbols you use.
5. Provide both positive comments and constructive criticism.
6. Clarify your grading criteria to students before they submit their essays. How will you weight content and style, for instance?
7. Clarify ahead of time exactly what you expect from the assignment, and then address those specific issues in your comments.
8. Provide approximately three substantive comments per page, or one substantive comment per paragraph.
9. Pick your battles in your margin comments. Noting every error results in student overload.
10. Margin comments should provide specific examples of issues you raise in your end comments. Conversely, if you refer to something frequently in the marginalia, it should be remarked on in your end comments.
11. Provide a comment on Works Cited lists, title pages, and other "ancillary" parts of an assignment.
12. Keep in mind that students' errors in their writing are not intentional; try not to take such errors personally.
13. Treat their writing with respect, as you would like readers to treat your own writing.
14. Do not try to make jokes or ironic remarks in your comments. These can be easily misconstrued by the student and are inappropriate.
15. After you return the papers, enforce a 24-hour cooling-off period before students can discuss their grades with you. Encourage students to read all of your comments before meeting with you to discuss grades; it will save you time, since you won't have to repeat what you wrote on the paper.

Three Step Process of Commenting on Student Work and Assigning a Grade

by Nora Bellows

1. Step One is **Identification** of success or failure to achieve standard based on grading criteria

At this point in the commenting process, the *Teacher is a Representative of the Standard*. Does the student achieve the standard and in what areas?

A failure to identify for students what works and what doesn't promotes ignorance of problems and an inability to fix problems and repeat successes.

Identification alone has much the same result: it leaves students ignorant about whether something is good or bad and how to improve.

Identification helps students to begin a process of **critical recognition**: Student becomes aware of tension between standard and own written work

Translation leads to student **transformation**: standards become automated thinking at which point students can begin to *identify* the areas of their own writing that work well or need additional work.

The Student
As a Writer
and Thinker

2. Step Two is **Explanation** of how the student text does or does not achieve the standard

At this point the *Teacher functions as Judge*: How well does the student achieve the standard?

A failure to explain why something does or does not meet the standards means that a comment may seem to be the teacher's whim, a stylistic preference, or simply "correcting" a "finished product."

Explanation alone reads as punitive judgment.

Explanation helps students to learn a process that leads to **change**: students' work to automate new standards

3. Step Three is **Translation** of current success or failure to improve future written work

At this point, the *Teacher is a Coach* and helps the student make changes for future mastery by indicating how to fix problems and how to repeat successes.

A failure to "translate" or direct students toward future work in favor of copy-editing written work or minimal comments may have one or more of the following effects:

1. Sends the message that students are "finished products" who cannot improve.
2. Leaves students who want to improve without a "roadmap" for future change or revision.
3. Students feel the teacher doesn't care about them or their work.

Translation alone does not help students learn a revision process that is not merely "data entry."

Anatomy of an End Comment

by Erin Kelly

Dear Bllelyn,

You have selected a fine topic for an encomium of a film, and have begun to lay out a successful argument of praise by stating that the new Star Wars film "is true to the original trilogy."

However, this paper falls short of the requirements for the assignment in significant ways. You do not expand upon your thesis by making argumentative claims throughout your paper that will appeal to your audience. While the descriptions of action scenes in the film imply claims, these claims are not clearly stated enough for your audience to follow them easily. Even if the argument were more clearly presented and structured, this paper would be unsatisfactory because of the numerous stylistic, spelling, and capitalization errors.

The problems I have identified in the previous paragraph mean the paper falls short of the basic expectations for this assignment and thus earns an F. As you rewrite, I suggest you start by choosing a more focused audience. Be sure to think about specific values and previous knowledge of the subject possessed by your audience, and let these qualities guide you as you develop specific argumentative claims in support of your thesis. Please come to see me during office hours and/or see a Writing Center tutor by appointment with a draft of your rewrite before you submit it for grading.

Yours sincerely, Ms. Jones

What Works? Begin your end comment by indicating what worked in this paper. For an unsuccessful paper, you may find yourself straining to produce sincere praise, but be sure to point out something the student did right so that he or she is ready to hear your criticism. For a very successful paper, the praise may seem obvious, but a student won't necessarily repeat elements of good writing in the next paper if you don't note them. Positive comments might echo language from the assignment sheet, your grading standards, or both.

Material from the student's paper. Quotes from a student's paper or reference to the main idea of a paper make clear that you have engaged with this text – so your comments bear a great deal of weight

Explanation of the grade. Whether you put the letter grade at the end of the comments or work it into your comments, the final section of your comments should explain why the paper received the grade it did – ideally by using language from your written grading standards

Goals for the next paper. Giving a student goals for the next paper (or a revision of the current paper) not only helps a student improve that piece of writing, but also reinforces the idea that students should use your comments.

Address to the student and closing. If the end-comment looks like a letter instead of an end comment, maybe the student will be more likely to read it.

What Needs Work? When writing about a paper with lots of problems, choose the most significant areas of concern and explain exactly why they are troubling. When writing about a very good paper, be sure to identify something the student can improve upon. Negative comments can refer to requirements from the assignment sheet and/or from the grading standards.

Recommendation of specific things to do. If you simply identify problems in a student's writing he or she may not know how to fix them. Try suggesting something specific to try (even if it's just to leave extra time to revise).

Dear Hortense,

You have presented a well-supported argument that Hamlet's concern with Gertrude's sexuality is a typical example of his anxiety about things that cannot be empirically tested. Your thesis directly states the main point of your paper, your supporting paragraphs logically develop your argument, and your analysis of textual evidence fully explains your points.

That said, the conclusion of your paper seems unworthy of such a successful argument. In that paragraph you repeat - almost word for word - the ideas in your introduction. Please remember that your conclusion is the last impression your reader has of your writing. To make that impression positive, present fresh language - and perhaps a new spin on your main idea - in that final paragraph. Also, while I note that you have greatly improved your punctuation usage since the last paper, there are still one or two small comma errors in this text. Perhaps reviewing pages 8-12 of your grammar handbook would be of help.

Your paper is very successful because it presents such a sophisticated argument using detailed, persuasive, and well-organized evidence. As you write your next paper, I encourage you to use your argumentation here as a model while setting a personal goal to improve your conclusion. You might try drafting three conclusion paragraphs for your next paper and, after setting them aside for a day or so, choosing the best of the three to revise and use in your final draft.

A-

Yours sincerely, Ms. Jones

Anatomy of a Margin Comment by Ryan Claycomb

Research suggests that margin comments that simply correct individual mistakes on a paper do little to help the student apply the logic of those comments to future work. This typical model of grading focuses on product—simply evaluating what’s been written—instead of on writing as a growth process. But since grading papers is often the most intense one-on-one teaching we have available to us, effective commenting requires a shift from “correcting papers” to “coaching writers,” and the way we construct our comments can reflect this shift. And so, what follows is an anatomy of the process-oriented margin comment.

◆ **The Three-Step Margin Comment**

- 1. Identify the issue:** Simply identifying writing problems is the most familiar component of commenting, although alone it does not do enough to teach students good writing. To help students apply the same critique you apply to their writing, consider identifying mistakes through higher-level questioning.
- 2. Explain your logic:** By accompanying the identification of a local writing issue with a more global rule, you give the student the larger principle that justifies your comment, which can then be applied to future writing.
- 3. Make future-oriented suggestions for improvement:** Since writing is a process, make suggestions for the next paper and beyond. Phrases like “consider using” or “in the future, you might try” or “work on” are useful here. This way, your students will have concrete tasks to apply to future exercises.

- ◆ **Treat positive comments as teaching moments:** Phrases like “good” and “excellent” don’t tell students anything. Explain *why* moments in the text are good by explaining *what’s good about them*—that way students can revisit their successes in future work. Don’t be afraid to link up a positive example with a less successful example from earlier on.

◆ **Some sample margin comments:**

“What can you do to make the thesis more specific? A vague thesis leaves your audience guessing as to your logic. Consider incorporating a preview of your major claims into the thesis to map out the path of your argument for your readers.”

“What evidence can you use to support this claim? Remember that the strength of your argument lies in the evidence you use to support it. In the future, you might look to [xxx source] to support the claims that underpin your argument.”

“YES! You support this claim with nice evidence. Use this type of specific support to bolster the problem claims in your first body paragraph.”



Grading for Grammar FAQ



by Erin Kelly

Students' lack of awareness of basic grammar rules can seem like bad weather – everybody complains but nobody ever does anything about it. Many teachers lament their students' errors but cannot find time in the semester to teach basic grammar as well as Shakespeare or geology or physics. Others can recognize that students have grammatical problems but don't have the training to identify and correct those problems. Still others simply figure it's someone else's job. Below are some ideas about grading for grammar that should be of help to any teacher who assigns written work.

Can I hold my students accountable for basic writing skills?

If you don't expect correctness in grammar, spelling and punctuation in student papers, you send the message to your students that those elements don't matter (or only matter in English classes). Since employers also expect mastery of basic writing skills, it is important that you make clear to your students that these elements are also important in your field – and that they will be a part of the grade on any written assignment.

My course isn't a writing course. Should I give a separate grade for writing and content?

While you might be tempted to give such "split" grades on written work, have you ever actually seen a paper that was badly written but contained brilliant ideas? Often a student's inability to write clearly and correctly is related to his or her difficulty communicating complex ideas on paper. By giving students one grade on written work – a grade that takes into account the quality of ideas, the quality of writing, and how these elements work together – you send the important message that a student has not truly mastered a concept until he or she can communicate it to others.

What if I don't know grammar rules myself?

Whether you find yourself able to tell when a sentence is wrong but unable to explain why or whether you fret about your own struggles with writing, remember that your lack of knowledge of formal grammar may be an asset as you try to teach your students that grammar is important. Many students believe that grammar is something you are born knowing or that you will never know – not something that you learn. In fact, the rules of grammar for formal writing are not intuitive for anyone.

Learning grammar rules is like learning the vocabulary of any discipline: some rules are common

sense, some are logical, and some must be memorized.

Don't be intimidated by your own lack of knowledge – set yourself the goal of learning the grammatical rules you find most challenging, tell your students that grammar is something you are learning – and tell them how to learn these concepts on their own. They will benefit from your example.

What do I do if I don't have time to correct all of my students' grammatical errors?

* *Focus your comments on only one or two types of grammatical problems on each written assignment.* (Obviously, you will want to choose areas of concern for most of the students in the class, something you can figure out using a diagnostic essay or an ungraded grammar quiz.) If you concentrate on one or two concepts a month, you might even have time to present quick in-class lessons.

* *Set reasonable grammar goals for each student and address in your comments how well each student meets his or her goals.* A diagnostic essay early in the semester makes it possible to list three or four grammar problems evident in each essay. Give each student a list of these problems and tell them they will be held accountable for these errors in their next paper. Have students attach your list to their papers so that you can comment on the problems you identified.

* *Mark all of the grammatical errors in only one paragraph of any paper.* Write a comment indicating that the errors in this section are typical of those in the entire paper.

* *Refer your students to an on-line grammar and style site and encourage students to purchase the style guide that is the standard in your discipline.* Then teach them how to use it and let them see YOU using it.

* *Circle errors you see and list at the end of the paper the most typical types of grammatical errors you found.* It is the student's responsibility to identify and fix errors.

How to Get Students to Read (and Use) Your Comments

by Erin Kelly

Teachers often complain that students repeat the same errors in their writing from one paper to the next — even though these errors have been marked and commented upon. Students often complain that they do not understand the grades they were given and do not know how to improve their writing so as to receive better grades.

Both complaints can be addressed with the same strategy: making certain that students read and understand comments written on papers. The best-written, most thoughtful marginal comment on a student paper is useless if it fails to reach the reader for whom it is intended, the student. Many students who proclaim that they wish to improve their grades will do almost anything — come to your office hours, make an appointment with the Writing Center, show a draft to a friend — before trying what may seem most obvious to you, reading your comments.

The strategies below propose strategies to encourage students to read and use your comments as well as assignments that require students to use your comments.

- * **Tell your students how you grade and comment.** Students will be more likely to pay attention to your comments if they know that grading papers is something you consider important work. They might cease to view grades as personal attacks (or lovely, unexpected gifts) if you inform them that you follow a regular process when grading a set of papers.
- * **Give your students a set of written grading standards.** Distributing standards also cuts down on grade complaints since it makes clear to students why a particular grade was given (especially if you use the language of your grading standards in your written comments), and helps students to understand how your comments relate to their grades.
- * **Give your students a key to your comments.** If you use code or abbreviation in your comments, let your students know what these marks mean. By giving this information to students early in the semester, you cut down on student questions after graded papers are returned.
- * **Make sure your comments are legible.** Students can't use comments they can't read or don't understand. If your handwriting is illegible, consider printing in block letters or even typing your comments.
- * **Make your comments easy to follow and use.** Whether you write or type, it is best to write important comments in full, clear sentences; to give clear, specific instructions for improvement; and to use terms with which your students are familiar. When you write comments in the margin of a paper, make certain the student can tell what part of the paper is being critiqued, perhaps by drawing arrows or by numbering your comments.
- * **Use a grammar and/or style handbook.** Many English teachers require students to purchase a grammar and style handbook; if you ask students to buy a handbook, you can write comments on papers that direct them to specific sections of the handbook in order to correct errors.
- * **Tell students you will not discuss grades with them until they read your comments.** We recommend you tell students you will not discuss a paper grade within 24 hours of when papers were returned. This policy not only prevents unpleasant conversations with upset students, but also reminds students that grades and comments are equally important.
- * **Bury the grade within the final comment.** If you put the final grade at the bottom of a page of comments, you encourage students to look at the grade and ignore your comments. Consider

burying the grade within your final end comment, perhaps within a sentence.

* **Teach students to write comments.** If you have students participate in peer review of drafts, give them draft worksheets that provide instructions for writing comments that model your commenting process. Revision worksheets students can use to review and rewrite their own papers can also demonstrate your commenting process.

* **Ask students to hand in papers throughout the semester in a portfolio.** A folder that contains not only the paper to be graded but also drafts, draft worksheets, and graded papers from earlier in the semester creates a portfolio of work that allows a teacher to refer back to comments on previous papers while commenting on a new paper. This kind of commenting demonstrates to students that they should be using your comments to improve from paper to paper.

* **Grade and comment on a sample paper in class.** If you work on a critique of a sample paper in class with your students, they will be better able to critique their own work and to use your comments. This activity also helps students to understand the argumentation characteristic of your academic discipline.

* **Tell students how to use your comments to guide appointments with tutors at the Writing Center.** A student who brings a graded paper to an appointment with a Writing Center tutor can ask for help with areas the instructor has identified as writing problems.

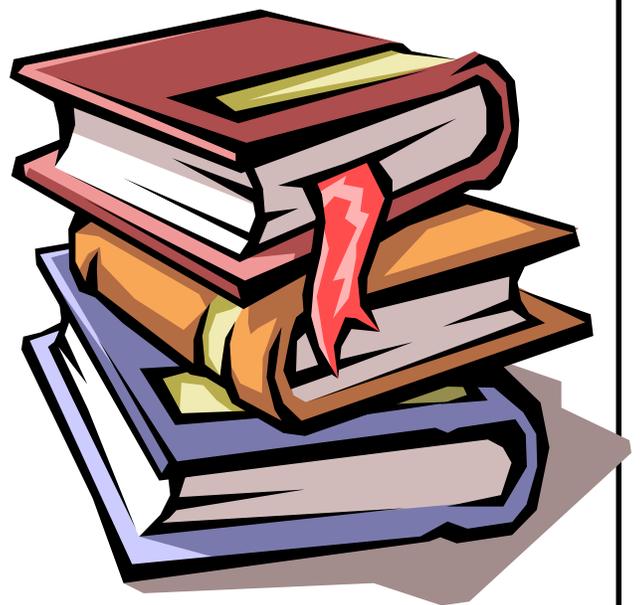
* **Require students to give you a written memo that summarizes your written comments.** If you require students to summarize your comments and to submit that summary to you, they will read and attempt to understand what you have written. You can also encourage students to use this memo to ask questions about comments or a grade, and thus you can easily evaluate the effectiveness of your grading process.

* **Ask students to use your comments to write a set of two or three goals for the next paper.** If

you ask students to write a set of goals for their next paper based on your comments on their last paper, they will be more likely to make good use of your comments. It is particularly effective to have students attach this list of goals to the new paper so that you can comment while grading on how well they met these goals.

* **Require students to bring their marked papers to class with them one day, and ask them to complete a revision exercise using your comments.** Some students have no idea how to use comments to revise a piece of writing, so you can do them a great service by modeling this process for them. Give students specific directions and remind them that revision usually means significantly rewriting, not merely fixing punctuation errors.

* **Make students “publish” a section of their papers.** If you use WebCT or a reflector list for your class, you can ask students to “publish” a part of their papers in the class website. Require your students to use your comments as a guide as they select and revise a section of their written work for publication. Students are usually highly motivated to make “public” work excellent, and they will rely on your comments to help them perfect their efforts.



Putting Theory Into Practice: Stop Plagiarism! Find it. Prevent it.

by Nora Bellows and Ryan Claycomb

Find it First!

As you finish up this semester and final papers are due, you may be concerned about whether any of your students are plagiarizing papers and other final written assignments. We at the Freshman Writing Office in the English Department have, because of the sheer number of papers that get turned in to English 101 classes, worked hard to identify plagiarism--unwitting or intentional. We have come up with a list of "red flags," things we have seen in students' papers that *may* indicate the student has plagiarized.

Look carefully for style changes either 1) from paper to paper or 2) from paragraph to paragraph. Caveats: A student may have done significantly more work, gone to the Writing Center etc., to account for the improvement from paper to paper. If there is a register shift *within* the paper, it may indicate a copy/paste, but it may also indicate the use of more familiar language—a student who writes an overall mediocre paper with a fantastic (although not perfect) feminist reading of King Lear, for example, should raise your antennae. A quick Google search may turn up something, but, if not, a meeting with the student and a question as to how that student came up with this particular reading will generally indicate in short order whether the student has done his/her own work.

Different vocabulary/theoretical framework than what has been used in class. Example: All semester you have been using the language of "courtship" to talk about romantic love in Shakespeare's plays. A student turns in a paper that never uses the word "courtship" but uses "wooing" instead. It may be that the student felt odd about using that term and turned to Roget for an alternative, but may also be (as in fact, it turned out in this case) that the

The paper fails to use current sources and information: in English 101, we require students to use up-to-date sources as they research current topics under debate in politics, science, the arts, education, sports, etc. If

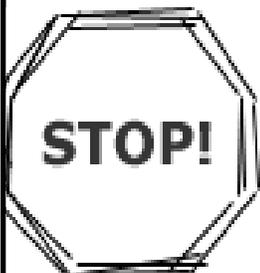
you have students write about the latest developments in your field, you may benefit from what we have noticed here in the Freshman Writing Office: plagiarized papers often have one or more of the following characteristics: 1) out-of-date information, 2) no recent sources, and 3) information/circumstances from the past treated as if happening currently. A student recently turned in a paper that discussed "current" Congressional activity. There was no mention of President Bush; instead the paper talked about President Clinton.

Serious deviations from the assignment. We have observed that, when students purchase papers or "borrow" them from friends or from on-campus files of papers they sometimes cannot find an exact match for the assignment you have handed out.

The paper has been cut and pasted together from one or more electronic or paper originals. This may be indicated by interesting or noticeable *font changes* (although this may also mark an effort to reach length requirements) or *photocopying marks* on the page.

There is problematic citation of sources. We look for the following: 1) Copious parenthetical citation without any introduction to the quotes. 2) Parenthetical citations that do not appear on the bibliography, 3) Websites listed are main sites but not individual article addresses

All of a sudden, there is a beautiful finished product. While this can indicate that a student has been mulling things over and then sat down and wrote, it may also indicate that a student in trouble didn't do the work.



Tips for Cutting Off Plagiarism at the Pass

Compiled by Ryan Claycomb

Things To Do And Say In the first week of class

1. Include in your course policies/syllabus a statement on academic dishonesty and the reasons, both practical and philosophical, why it must be avoided.
2. Spend some time discussing the fine points of academic honesty and how EXTREMELY seriously you will deal with plagiarism. Hint to them that the last person you caught was not a happy camper.
3. Have them sign something indicating that they understand the policy on academic dishonesty. Save these signatures, let your students know you treasure them.
4. Provide students with links to websites like www.plagiarism.org that provide searching capabilities of paper topics. Then go over these when you discuss plagiarism. If students are aware (or at least believe) you will be using these search methods, they may think twice before plagiarizing.
5. At Maryland we have an honor code, which asks students to handwrite and sign a pledge that they have not committed academic dishonesty on the assignment they are turning in. Make a clear statement about the honor pledge in your course policies and then follow up with a discussion or moment that requires students to reflect about what the pledge means. Then ask them to write it and sign it before they turn in their written assignments and exams.

Things To Have Your Students Read

6. Now that the Code of Academic Integrity is available online, make it required reading in your syllabus at the start of the semester.
7. Since most students take Engl. 101, many have grammar handbooks (such as *A Writer's Reference*) and these handbooks contain sections on avoiding plagiarism. Point this out to them. Additionally, you may be sure that, if your students have had Eng. 101, they know what plagiarism is and have been told, specifically, how to avoid it. Remind them of this.
8. In her textbook, "Writing with Sources," Brenda Spatt has a wonderful section on plagiarism in which she has two snippets side by side about James Agee—the second is by John Hersey, the first is his source. The point is Hersey got nailed for plagiarism and had to apologize publicly in "The New York Times." I wrote both snippets up on the board, one time in 101, and I remember the students were aghast because Hersey HAD made

all sort of minor word changes and so they felt he should have been off the hook. Nevertheless, he hadn't credited his source. The exercise made its point, I think.

Individualize Assignments: Mix it up!

9. Be aware that if you give the same assignment on the same topic(s) every semester, you are more likely to encounter papers you have already seen, but this time in the hands of different students. The antidote to this unfortunate eventuality, is to keep changing your assignments. Require very recent sources, require evidence of substantial revision in students' own handwriting, etc. Other ideas: Spend one class day in the computer lab, giving students the class period to begin working on their written assignment. Do this later in the assignment; it may mean pushing back the due date a class period, but we find that it really helps improve grades and ensure that students get invested in doing their own work. Have them print out/e-mail you what they've done. Keep in mind that no one will write as well in this class period as they will on their own time, but at least you will get a sense of how they write. Also, this locks them in to a topic. Walk around once or twice while they're working to make sure they didn't bring a plagiarized paper and try to just type out some of it in class; this is quite unlikely to happen. Then collect what they do and give them feedback, though this is up to the instructor.
10. Have them hand in pieces of their work periodically. Try not to let them get themselves in a position of 11th hour desperation.
11. Have your students do annotated bibliographies. Make them turn in copies of all their sources and tell them that you're requiring them to turn them in because plagiarism is so rampant and you want to have their sources to check for problems. (Obviously, this gives them a clear warning).
12. Have students do the assignment in class. That makes it quite difficult to plagiarize. If you let them bring in any notes/index cards, collect them so you can see if there are any quotes on the cards that aren't properly cited.
13. Be very reluctant to allow students to change topics or hand in something that is off the assignment.

Special thanks to Jennifer Harding, Leslie Jansen, Steve Severn, and Anita Sherman who contributed to this list of tips.

How to Get the Most Out of the Writing Center: A Guide for Students by Lisa Zimmerman

Call for an appointment.

Although we accept walk-in appointments, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to fit you in. We accept one hour and half hour appointments.

If possible, schedule an appointment at least one day before the paper is due.

You may be surprised at the amount of revision your tutor and you can generate. You want to give yourself enough time to incorporate these revisions into your paper. You may also want to come back for another tutoring session before you turn in your final draft.

Show up on time.

If you are more than ten minutes late, we will give your time-slot to a walk-in appointment.

Bring your assignment sheet and previous papers with your teacher's comments.

Remember, tutors are not with you in class and therefore do not know what your teacher expects.

Be prepared to work.

Tutors will expect you to be an engaged and active participant in the tutoring process.

Know that our goal is to help you become a better writer.

Although your paper will most likely be improved upon visiting the Writing Center, we are more concerned that you learn how to identify and correct errors in your writing.

The Writing Center will:

- Provide trained peers.
- Work with students one-on-one.
- Work with drafts at all stages of the writing process, including invention, or brainstorming.
- Work with both grammatical and structural concerns. That is, we can help you with comma splices and thesis construction!
- Provide you with other helpful resources: manuals, worksheets, workshops.

The Writing Center will not:

- Edit, proofread, or fix mistakes.
- Comment on an instructor's grading.
- Provide you with an estimation of your grade.
- Belittle your concerns, nor your writing.



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