

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 10 / NUMBER 2 • JANUARY 2006



## *Offering Meaningful Commentary on Student Writing*

Rhoda L. Flaxman, Ph.D.

*Director, Dean of the College Writing Programs; Director, Writing Fellows Program; Adj.Asst. Professor of English*

The process-writing “revolution” of the 1960s has left us with heightened awareness of the importance of thinking all the way through the stages of writing, from setting goals with students to constructing effective writing prompts and, finally, to giving helpful feedback on student writing. The presence of all three of these factors offers students their best chance to write well at the college level. Yet many of our colleagues have not had time to learn of advances in writing pedagogy. They struggle to find ways to encourage more writing from their students, since practice makes perfect. At the same time, professors find that the pressure to prepare classes and to do their own research and writing prevents them often from having enough time to comment meaningfully on student prose. In fact, the most frequent question at my pedagogy workshops for professors is, “How can I help student writing improve without burning myself out writing endless rounds of comments? Often I think my comments are either ignored or counterproductive.”

Like so many of my colleagues, I, too, was not trained to teach writing per se; my Ph.D. is in nineteenth century literature and art history. To my surprise and pleasure, when I came to Brown in 1987 to direct the Writing/Rhetoric Fellows Program, I found a new field full of fascinating theoretical and interdisciplinary materials in the body of work now known as composition studies that helped transform me into a teacher of writing. In facing some of

the same time constraints all professors face, I've come up with some techniques that might help others become more expert, more efficient, and more genuinely helpful when they offer writing feedback to students.

First, and most importantly, you need to diagnose the specific writing problem accurately. Is the argument weak? Is there insufficient evidence? Is the paper disorganized, and, if so, in what way? Are there glaring mechanical errors that interrupt the flow of the content? Often the problem derives from error in the way a student wrote the paper. Did the student free-write or brainstorm first? Was there adequate idea generation? How many drafts, and how much time, did the student spend on writing the paper?

Once the instructor has a good sense of a diagnosis of the writing problems—a product analysis—then the next step, of course, is to suggest ways to cure the problem—a process analysis, if you will. Like good paramedics of writing, we have to diagnose writing problems quickly, and offer helpful feedback in the form of task-oriented responses. We need to suggest concrete ways for our students to work on their essays. Coaching student writing, as opposed to judging it, requires us to make those suggestions that will matter the most in a revision, and offer students the chance to revise their papers to improve their grades.

Composition studies offers many techniques for helping students improve both their process and the product of writing. Techniques include learning freewriting techniques, issue trees, descriptive outlines, logic exercises, and many other tools about which faculty can learn.

But learning them takes time. In the absence of pedagogy workshops, what can faculty do to make the job of diagnosing student writing problems and suggesting 'cures' easier? Here is a process that's worked for me over the years, and it's backed up by published research in composition theory:

1. Before commenting on any individual paper, skim and sort through the stack without a pen in your hand. If you must write while you read, write your comments on a separate piece of paper. Reading through the whole pile of essays acquaints you with the range of responses, and, armed with this overview, the reading of individual essays moves more quickly.
2. Divide the papers into those you can easily diagnose, and those that you can't. Often this divide also reflects the differences between effective and ineffective responses. I usually move papers into one of three piles and reward my working over a less fine response by reading one in the more effective pile.
3. Prioritize your suggestions according to those that would make the most difference to the essay and concentrate on those.

4. Let your students know what your methodology for commenting might be. None of us can comment on each and every kind of error in each piece of student prose, nor would this be effective. If you have more than one paper required for the course, you can spread your suggestions out, choosing the most important ones first. But be as transparent in your evaluative hierarchy as possible, saying, for example, “A valid argument is my strongest objective for excellence in this assignment, so I did not comment on every mechanical effort here. I will, however, note patterns of error this time, and comment on them if they persist in the next paper.”
5. Write comments about both the content and the form of the paper. Writing Fellows often tell me that both they and their fellowees would really appreciate receiving commentary on their writing as well as their ideas, and this often does not occur.
6. Try to write something on every page. This gives students a sense of how you are reading their essay, and that you are doing so carefully. Try to balance specific and general commentary, and be sure your internal and final comments correlate.

There are also some admonitions from the field of composition studies:

1. Don't label error (often called “awking and fraging,” from those high school grammar books, signifying “awkward” and “fragment”). Don't cross out words and add your own corrections without explanation. In other words, don't revise for students. We've found that they learn nothing from this time-consuming set of corrections, and merely copy the correction without learning the nature of the error and how to correct it on their own.
2. Don't give cookie cutter responses. This is very tempting if everyone in your class is writing in response to the same prompt. But commenting fatigue always shows. Instead, tailor your commentary to the specific issues in a student's paper, referring to some of the errors in the final comment.
3. Don't “ideal text” your students. Don't give them the impression that there's only one correct way to write an essay. If you use model essays, be sure to include several different kinds of responses.

These are just some of the suggestions from the field of composition studies. Try one this semester and let me know how it works!