

I Stopped Grading Papers—And You Can, Too

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Practice as Performance

Junior and senior students enrolled in my Creative Writing course expect to churn out a paper (the night before it's due), receive a circled rubric (letter grade attached), and never discuss the assignment again. My classroom shakes not only their expectations but also their work ethic.

Each day, my students write. And each day, they receive feedback on that writing. When they are shocked they have to write every day, I say, "This is a performance class. Much like physical education or choir, you will come in every day and practice. And then, you will receive feedback in order to improve." I tell them we are a team working together to create the best possible piece of art. Like a choir teacher, I want their performance to well tears in parents' eyes, to wow and entertain an audience. And like a physical education teacher, I don't demand Olympic quality work from beginning efforts.

A focus on learning and growing—rather than grading—makes my job more enjoyable. I come in to my classroom each day looking forward to reading what my students wrote. I look forward to assessing what they composed, not for a grade, but for its emotional impact, its beauty, its originality.

Writing is a vulnerable, intimidating task even for the most acclaimed. For the juniors and seniors, a B or a C can inhibit creativity, risk-taking and personal expression. It can diminish effort, confidence and achievement. Rubrics encourage students to search for a minimum, a pathway to a grade defined by vague requirements. It reminds me of what author, edublogger, and teacher Ferriter (2017) says: "The truth is that the things that are the most meaningful are also the hardest to measure."

For at least a decade, my grading system relied on standards, learning targets and points to earn. But assigning a B+ instead of a B- felt arbitrary and often tied to my mood or personal preference. Unsatisfied, I took a year to research grading practices. I attended assessment conferences and spoke with colleagues. I found teachers going gradeless, ungrading, and using contract grading, conference grading, and self-assessments. I was reminded that “teachers accept they have to grade, students accept they have to be graded, students are made to feel like they should care a great deal about grades, and teachers are told they shouldn’t spend much time thinking about the why, when, and whether of grades” (Stommel, 2018). But I couldn’t stop thinking or researching.

At the end of my inquiry year, I implemented process-based assessment. To introduce this to students, I present a letter that outlines the course and expectations (see Appendix). Students respond to me in a similar format, and the letter goes home to a parent or guardian.

Daily, students receive one point (reflecting the student’s ability to address my feedback and elevate language choices, the plot or writing quality). Like other performance classes, I meet students in real time as they work and remind them of what I value: learning, growing, getting better.

Assessment in Creative Writing reflects the work students do to update their drafts and make intentional and purposeful choices. Each assignment, task or draft is worth one process point. I remind students—through words, practice and assessment—that each part of the writing process has equal importance. I want them to shift away from thinking about the grade and toward embracing editing and writing as a challenge or opportunity.

England (1986), the Director of the Louisiana State University Writing Project, wrote, “My teachers, and maybe yours, too, usually told me what I did wrong after I ‘finished’ the paper, gave me a grade, then had me write again—usually on a different topic. It was hard to improve that way” (para. 2). By focusing on the process, students receive feedback along the way rather than just at the end of a piece. They are given the opportunity and tools to improve.

As a writer, I know that brainstorming, writing and editing never end. There are always mistakes to be found, language to be elevated, sentences to be tweaked. My classroom assessment follows suit. Over the course of each assignment, students complete at least three drafts. After each draft, I provide feedback, suggestions and corrections. I use the “suggesting mode” on Google Docs. In providing feedback, I am consistent with what Thomas (2016), Professor of Education at Furman University, recommends:

Teacher feedback must be rich, detailed, and targeted to support revision. The most powerful feedback includes identifying key strengths in a student's work (“Do this more often!”) and questions that help guide students toward revision (“Why are you omitting the actual names of your family members in your personal narrative?”).

As a teacher, I shift my mindset from grader to coach. I focus on building confidence through affirmation and skill development. Mini-lessons encourage students to implement stylistic devices or action verbs or varied sentence structures. Peer editing provides an additional resource. Because my students are juniors and seniors, I encourage them to assume ownership of their writing.

This process-based approach leads to thinking and understanding both of self and world. Online educator Gibbs (n.d.) recommends making students responsible by removing stress to “allow students to pursue their own learning paths and set their own goals.” In using process-based assessment, I rely not on one moment or standard that will not apply to everyone at the same time. Instead, I work as a facilitator. Zach, in his class exit survey, wrote, “I expected it to be like many of the other English classes I’ve taken. You get a prompt, write about it, edit once or twice, and submit it to the teacher for a grade. The system used in Creative Writing is drastically different and engaging. Having your constant feedback throughout the whole writing process is helpful, led me to start thinking outside the box, and caused me to start catching errors myself.”

Progress Is Perfection

Department members have asked, “How do you know what to say?”—“How do you get students to draft multiple times without gripes and eye rolls?”—“How do you have enough time to provide that much feedback?”

I remind myself—and my students and colleagues—that writing is an art. And what is the point of art? To evoke emotion, to make the reader think or feel, to connect with an audience, to live beyond the span of a lifetime. To enjoy it. Because of this, I’m honest with my students and candid in my reactions. Because of this, reading papers isn’t a chore, but an absorption of their art.

In my feedback, I start by providing an emotional reaction to each student’s poem, prose or essay:

1. This gave me goosebumps.
2. This makes me so sad for you (or the character).
3. This reminds me of when my dad broke his arm, the garage door crashing and Mom screaming.

As author, thought leader, and philanthropist Tan (2012) writes, “when a person is given person praise, it reinforces a ‘fixed mind-set,’ or the belief that our success is due to fixed traits that are a given.” However, when giving feedback, “it’s better to praise people for working hard than for being smart” (p. 85). Keeping this in mind, my feedback focuses on effort and a growth mindset:

1. It looks like you’re trying to use a stylistic device here. Are there other places where you can use a different stylistic devices?
2. I see you gave a lot of effort implementing action verbs in this stanza. Can you try to do the same in the next stanza?
3. You’ve worked hard on telling a story in the present tense that uses dialogue. This allows me to visualize the scene.

Students who enjoy writing are more likely to return to it. One former student, Jacob, said, “I learned how to become more patient and understand that not everything is going to be perfect the first time around.” If I’m doing nothing else in my classroom, I want to encourage lifelong writers, people who want to express and create—and who find joy in practicing the craft. I also know that because enjoyment leads to practice, it will likely lead to progress. Former student Cole said, “I now have a lot more courage to just write what I’m thinking, because I know that I can change it if I want or keep it if I like it.”

Established Curriculum/Fresh Approach

When I taught English 9 (a remedial summer school course), I applied process-based assessment. This course focused on grammar, writing and mechanics, but also on reading, research and speech. Whether students gave a speech, read a novel or completed research, I coached them through the process. While the daily point held them accountable and kept them on track to pass, I focused on using feedback to help each student improve.

Process-based assessment can be modified to correlate with your school’s policies and grading procedures. A colleague at my school, who wanted to keep traditional assessments but also implement a daily point system, converted assignments to decimals. Assessments (like 100-point, multiple-choice tests) were scored as .87/1. If using a daily point or process-based system isn’t possible in your district or department, consider making changes that will encourage students to focus on the process rather than the outcome. This may be done by increasing positive comments on student work, providing students with feedback prior to assessments, or individualizing and personalizing instruction.

Formatting your gradebook to favor formative assessments may also provide students with opportunities for growth and learning. If using weighted categories in your gradebook, consider 90% formative and 10% summative. In *Mindful Assessment*, cowritten with Andrew Churches, Watanabe-Crockett (2019) suggests that formative assessment allows students to “engage with feedback and make corrections as learning progresses.”

Before making curriculum or grading practice changes, speak with your administration; be open and honest with department members, students and parents; invite colleagues to learn and grow with you; and provide research and a thoughtful action plan.

Time Constraints

There is never enough time, and there never will be. Providing individual feedback to 180 students each semester remains a struggle. In early attempts at process-based assessment and daily feedback, I commented on everything. This often resulted in students shutting down (“Everything sucks!” “I have to start over!” “I’m a horrible writer!”) and an unmanageable workload for me. I now limit my comments and focus on one or two criteria (language choices, punctuation, or emotional impact). I also narrow my course to three guiding principles: story, structure and stylistic devices. This makes providing feedback more manageable and creates resolve. When students see a few comments to address, and more compliments than corrections, their attitudes improve: “I know what I can do to make this section better.” “This is my best paragraph.” “I’m on the right track.”

During class, lunch and prep periods, and before and after school, I read student work and provide feedback. It’s a never-ending, uphill battle and I regularly feel behind. To alleviate some stress, I put students in control. I say, “Please let me know what I can do to help, where you need assistance or what you’re struggling with.” This allows me to provide useful feedback and narrow my responses.

Rapport and Relationships

It is a delicate balance, providing constructive feedback while including positive reinforcement. How students respond is intensified by hormones, breakups, rumors, and social media. If I add stress, I prevent students from reaching their potential. To encourage them to be creative, play with language and enjoy the writing process, I am mindful of my tone. Much of my feedback happens electronically, so students may misread honesty for brutality. One way to combat misperception is to focus on effort-based feedback or empathy.

As English teachers, we know that expectations are different for writing and speaking. Those who speak have so much more to work with: tone, body language, facial expressions, context. In providing electronic feedback, I have only my words, my capitalization choices and my punctuation. To avoid a misconstrued tone, I often flip my feedback to the students:

1. How do you feel about the progress you're making?
2. Where are you unhappy (or most pleased) with your language choices?
3. What can I do to assist?
4. What emotions did you intend to evoke in the reader here?
5. What did you want the reader to learn or take away from this piece?

I remind myself of what I like about my job: the ability to be creative, to take risks, to try something, to get better each day. I feel safe at work; I want my students to feel safe in my classroom. I like my colleagues and I want them to like me; I like my students and I want them to like me. To create this kind of positive environment, I give students what my administration has given me: a safe place to grow, experience, learn, thrive, and positively influence others. I give them affirmation, praise and my honest opinion.

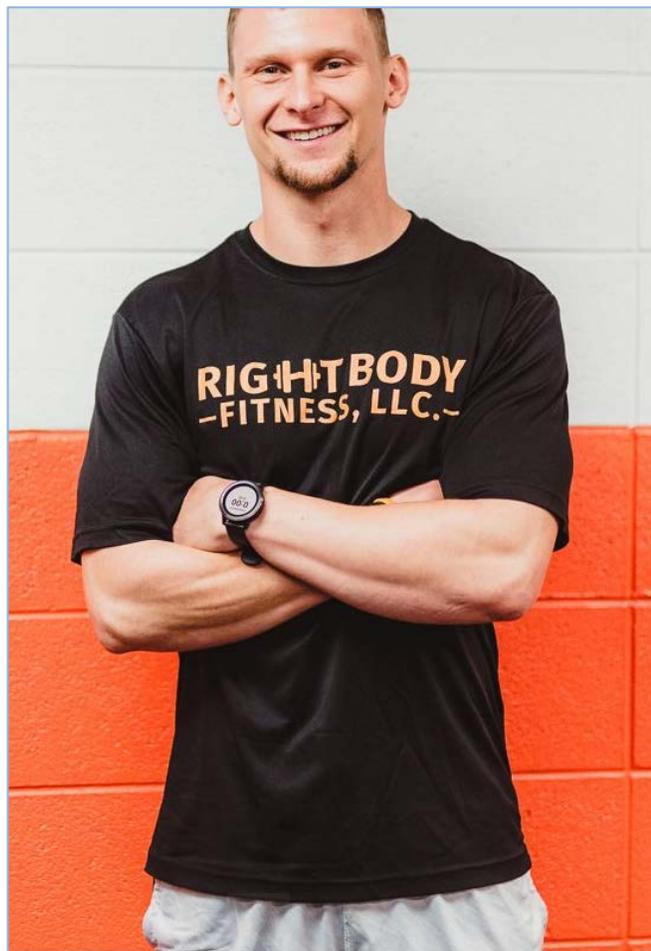
During the interview for my English teacher position, the principal asked, "Do you think it's more important for students to respect you or like you?" I replied that I work harder, better, smarter, for people I like. Of course, those I like I inherently respect as well, so I know if my students like me they are quite likely to respect me, too. I began to envision a classroom where we all liked each other—and it was a place I wanted to return to. It was a place I aimed to create. In giving feedback, I refer to this vision often.

I also assume that students have given me their full effort (at least until they prove otherwise). I look at failures or mistakes as opportunities to improve. Although it's easier (and often the default) to focus on errors, this will shut students down and prevent them from enjoying writing. I keep in mind the following: "Barbara Fredrickson, noted pioneer in positive psychology, found that it takes three positive experiences to overcome a negative one, a 3:1 ratio. In general, each negative feeling is three times as powerful as a

positive one” (Tan, 2012, p. 154). When providing feedback, I aim to provide three positive comments for each correction, edit or negative. Focusing on my emotional reaction or asking students questions helps me achieve this ratio.

Knowing when to push students and when to build them up changes as they experience stress, AP exams, heartbreak, state championships, “promposals,” and spring breaks. I aim to find the “flow [that] occurs when the task at hand matches the skill level of the practitioner, such that it is difficult enough to provide a challenge but not so difficult that it overwhelms the practitioner” (Tan, 2012, p. 135). This means knowing each student.

For years I’ve trained with Ryan Bloor, my fitness trainer, to perfect my push-up form. He started with modified push-ups and progressed to regular push-ups. When my form failed, he cued me to “squeeze glutes.” He also reminded me of what I did well: “elbows are tucked.” When I continued to struggle, he added cues: “create as much tension as you can throughout your whole body.” After weeks of practice, he added another: “Squeeze back your shoulder blades.” For whatever reason, the combination of cues on that day worked. From then on, my push-ups progressed and I’m now doing power push-ups and weighted push-ups.



Like him, I try different cues for different students. I also use cues both simultaneously and at different times, reminding students of what they are doing well.

But, this is not a utopian classroom. Sometimes students refuse to do daily work and fail to earn the daily point; in these instances, an email to a parent is one of my first go-tos. If students continue to resist daily work or refuse to perform, I respond with encouragement and—more times than not—they turn things around:

1. I read in the newspaper about your success at the conference wrestling meet. Congrats! Maybe you'll be able to use your experience on the mat in this essay?
2. You wrote one sentence, and this sentence is great; it included an action verb and a sensory detail. Can you continue in this direction, adding more about what the scene smelled, felt, sounded like?

I've had some students say, "I don't want you to look at this until it's finished" or "I don't want you looking over my shoulder." These meet responses like:

1. I'm here to help.
2. Can you just see me as here to assist you, every step of the way?
3. Writing is never done and it's never going to be perfect. I am here to make sure you're on the right track.

Each day, I view reading student work as my opportunity to assist. It's not a burden, but providing what's best to help them learn and improve. My sister is a professional athlete, and she often says that she doesn't make sacrifices to meet her goal. Instead, she makes investments. This growth mindset helps me give each student appropriate feedback. My former student, Jared, got it when he said,

I think one of the most helpful things about this class was your feedback. You always told me exactly what I did wrong on my pieces and gave me enough feedback to allow me to fix my mistakes and learn from them. However, it's not like you just flat out edited my piece and changed it yourself. I felt like you never just gave me what I was supposed to change, you would instead suggest a different direction. This is perfect for my learning because I feel like some teachers don't give you enough information to learn from your mistakes and just expect you to somehow know what you did wrong.

And to Jared, I said: “I’m so happy you’re enjoying writing. I hope you continue to write. Keep practicing and you’ll only get better—and you’ll only find more joy in the process.”

Why Assess the Process?

1. You can teach writing and focus on growing skills.
2. You can coach students to create quality writing.
3. You can use writing as a strategy (writing to learn in addition to learning to write).
4. Writing is never finished; there is no end (no final draft); it is never perfect.
5. Student learning happens when students modify and edit (not when they are graded).
6. Students will use your feedback to elevate their writing, not to assess quality.
7. Students will see you as a partner; you will work with students to help them excel, grow, and produce quality writing that resonates with readers.
8. You will empower writers to make intentional choices.

What Do Students Think?

“The emphasis on progress and development greatly appeals to me because it contrasts with what teachers focused on in the past. Instead of trying to improve the writers themselves, previous teachers placed all importance on the finished product. While this has improved my grades, my writing itself has not improved.”

“As I grew up, teachers had very strict guidelines that I had to follow and I stopped enjoying writing as much as I had before. In this class, I have much more flexibility with writing than I have in the past and I am excited about that.”

“It is refreshing to see a class focused more on improvement and growth than numbers and scores. It is much easier to flourish in an environment that encourages errors than one where you are too scared to attempt new challenges.”

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Appendix



The Arrowhead Union High School District

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Dear Student,

You are a young writer immersed in the messy process of sloughing off the stuff of childhood and, as the years advance, becoming more astute, more soulful and more adult in your ability to communicate. To help you through the process, our course will emphasize improvement and growth.

This class will focus on skill development. You will learn new concepts and apply them to your pieces in order to achieve proficiency or mastery. Writing is not about being perfect. It is about practicing and improving.

We will use Google Docs so I can see each time you make a revision. Google Docs will also allow you, your classmates, and me to communicate. You can expect to write daily and to complete multiple drafts. You can also expect to receive edits, suggestions and corrections from both your peers and me. We will look for improvement (is today's draft better than yesterday's?).

In Skyward, assignments will be listed as dates. You will receive a point if you complete the draft or task. Writing is a *process* and your grade will reflect your daily work. And because you're expected to write daily, you will **not** be allowed to go back or submit late work. You will be provided with ample time to complete your work.

To become a better writer, you must work hard and accept constructive criticism. Please remember that critiques of your writing are not critiques of you. Proficient writing takes time to learn and even more time to apply. Every writer feels frustration, but (as with anything) it lessens with practice. Because composition is intended for sharing, you will read some of your work aloud and also to send it to our school literary magazine and other writers' markets.

As an upperclassman, take ownership of your writing and progress. If you have questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask.

Your first assignment will be to reply to this letter. Please read the syllabus and then compose a response to me (in approximately 400 words), summarizing and reacting to what you learned, posing questions and setting goals for yourself. Put this in a document titled LETTER inside your last name, first name folder. Please use proper letter form (block format). I look forward to reading what you write.

Sincerely,
Ms. Jorgensen