



# Faculty Forum

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## **Everyone Can Help Teach Writing**

Imagine a semester where you assign an essay to your students every month or even every other week. Allowing time at the beginning and ending of the semester for getting started and pulling everything together, this might mean 3 or 6 essays from each student each semester. Now imagine enjoying this. Imagine that reading these essays is exciting and interesting, something you look forward to rather than something you dread. Imagine, furthermore, that it is easy to read all of these essays. This can happen to you. This can happen to everyone who teaches at WCU.

Most faculty outside of the English Department might shudder at such a regimen. Many might say, "I have too many students to teach; I don't have the time for grading that much student writing." Others might say, "I don't know how to teach writing; I wouldn't know how to justify the grade; I wouldn't know what to mark as wrong; I wouldn't know what to suggest for improvement." I believe that all of these fears are groundless. Everyone can help teach writing, and reading more student writing can be fun and easy.

Most everyone would probably agree that learning would improve if students wrote more. Writing is a great way to clarify what we know, and writing is also the ultimate test of knowing. When a writer thinks, argues, and explains on a page, the reader can really test the thoroughness and specificity of the writer's understanding. In writing, there is no guessing.

"But what about subjectivity?" some might rejoinder. "I prefer objective testing." Certainly the evaluation of writing is subjective, but so is all evaluation. In true/false and multiple choice testing, for example, the subjectivity is simply buried in the test design. "But the student writing is so bad" others might say. "It is so painful to read." At first it is. But as student writing improves, reading it becomes a joy rather than a chore, and if everyone in the university is helping to teach writing the student writing will improve very quickly. Individual student writing can even improve significantly within the 15 weeks of your course. "But I have too many students," the initial voice still insists. "I would be grading papers all the time. I would have to work 18-hour days." Here are 2 secrets to making the evaluation of student writing easier:

**Don't "edit" student writing (don't rewrite each paper as if it were your own)**  
**Use a "grading standard" that explains each grade**

Imagine reading student papers and not making a mark on them. You simply read each essay and assign the appropriate grade. The "grading standard" is the key. You can create a generic grading standard for all student writing, with a paragraph that describes the qualities that earn an "A," "B," "C," "D," or "F." When the students receive their papers, they find the paragraph that corresponds to their grade and understand why they received that particular grade. Or, you can create a specific grading standard for each assignment (this is a little more time consuming). Better yet, you can ask your students to help create these grading standards, a process that gives them ownership in their own evaluation process. If everyone understands what describes an "A" paper, all you have to do is assign grades according to those descriptions. Keep the grading standard as simple as possible and talk about it with your students. Make sure they understand how to make an



"A" and they will teach themselves the qualities of good writing. To see examples of such general grading standards, you can access my personal web site at <http://www3.wcu.edu/~nienhuis>. To see grading standards designed for specific assignments, you can find examples on my course newsgroups (access newsgroups through the Computer Center home page). These examples are not meant to be authoritative. Though I have been using grading standards for many years, they are, as with everything else in our teaching, work in progress; they can always be improved.

If formal essays still seem too daunting, here's **secret # 3**: you can help teach writing and make your job even easier and more fun by asking students to do a lot of **"informal writing."** This is writing usually done in class. It can be called "discovery writing" because it is writing that helps students articulate what they know or what they have questions about. For example, you can begin a class with informal writing, asking students to summarize their out-of-class reading for the day. Or you can end a class with informal writing, asking students to summarize your lecture, adding any questions they might have. You can use informal writing in the middle of a class period, asking students to write about their personal experience in regard to course issues, for example. You should read this informal writing because it will give you genuine and immediate feedback on student learning, but you don't have to grade it. The students will take this writing more seriously if you give them some kind of credit for it, but just read it, learn what is going on in the minds of your students, and hand the writing back to them. Not all learning has to be graded, supervised, or mediated. The mind is a natural learner and we can learn to write the way we learned how to speak our first language. All of us continue to learn new skills through unmediated exploration, refining those skills through private practice. Students doing a lot of informal writing is infinitely better than students not writing at all. If the students are writing in any way, you are helping to teach writing.

There are, of course, a number of other issues. "What about plagiarism?" some might say. Personally, I feel that plagiarism is a very manageable problem, but I will leave this issue to another Forum article. "What do you do when the writing is full of grotesque errors?" another asks. My feeling is that we have to tolerate some sloppiness in writing with in-class assignments, where students have much less time to prepare and little or no time to edit and proofread, but out-of-class writing is different. Students usually write out-of-class essays the night before, and if the paper in your hands looks extremely careless, simply turn it back unread and demand a more careful resubmission. We can insist that anything written outside of class is carefully revised, edited, and proofread. If we all demand this kind of quality, the students will respond with better work. Anyone who accepts less than the students' best writing on out-of-class assignments encourages all students to see how little they can do to get by.

Finally, remember the Composition Conditional grade at the end of the semester and the Writing Center. The Writing Center is very well equipped to handle students who need extra help. Go the Writing Center homepage at <http://www.wcu.edu/writing center> and you will find a number of teaching aids, including a link called Everyone Can Help Teach Writing.

Demand good writing in every class and the students will respond. It might take a few years to build a tradition, but imagine how much better the student learning will be and how much more fun we will have as teachers.

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*The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.*