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FOREWORD BY

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Engaging Ideas

The Professor's Guide
to Integrating Writing,
Critical Thinking,
and Active Learning
in the Classroom

PART FOUR

Reading, Commenting On, and Grading Student Writing

Coaching the Writing Process and Handling the Paper Load

Part Three focuses on a variety of strategies for promoting active learning and for coaching students as thinkers and writers. In Part Four, we turn to strategies for coaching the writing process and for commenting on and grading student papers. As teachers, our goal is to maximize the help we give students while keeping our own workloads manageable. Chapter Thirteen offers ten timesaving strategies for coaching the writing process without becoming buried in paper grading. Chapter Fourteen focuses on ways to write revision-oriented comments that guide students to make significant, global revisions of drafts. Finally, Chapter Fifteen offers ideas for grading student writing using analytic or holistic scales or other kinds of scoring guides tailored to the individual teacher's needs and the demands of subject matter.

The goal of the present chapter is to help instructors work efficiently with their students on the development of their writing skills. Because college professors are busy people—with heavy teaching loads, many committee responsibilities, and obligations for scholarship and professional development—they have only limited time to spend on student writing. This chapter gives you ten timesaving strategies for coaching students through the process of writing an essay. These strategies will help your students produce high-quality work, while keeping your paper-grading load manageable.

The general theory behind these strategies is to get students on the right track early in the writing process before serious

problems begin cropping up in drafts, to take advantage of the “summarizable” nature of thesis writing, to enlist other students in the class as first readers of drafts, to make efficient use of student conferences, and to develop timesaving methods for marking and grading student essays. Some of the following strategies, though moderately time intensive the first time you try them (for example, developing scoring guides keyed to assignments), produce materials that can be reused for years. Together, the following ten strategies will help you promote your students’ growth as writers and thinkers without burying you in endless stacks of papers.

1. Save Time by Designing Good Assignments _____

One of the best ways to make efficient use of your time is to consider carefully the kinds of writing assignments you give. Much of the writing you assign can be behind-the-scenes exploratory writing, which can be integrated into a class in a variety of ways and often requires only moderate teacher time (or even none at all). (See Chapter Six for ways to use exploratory writing.)

Another highly efficient use of teacher time is to assign a sequence of microthemes that are graded using “models feedback” (Bean, Drenk, and Lee, 1986). (See Chapter Five for a discussion of microthemes, pages 79–83; models feedback is described in this chapter on page 236.)

When assigning longer papers, you can save time and frustration by steering students from the start toward thesis writing or toward an alternative that you desire. Effective assignments usually indicate the task, the rhetorical context (including audience and purpose), instruction about length and manuscript form, and a description of your grading criteria. Students always appreciate a handout sheet that explains the assignment in writing. (See pages 83–86 for further discussion of assignment handouts.) If your goal is thesis-based writing, consider giving the assignment in one of the three ways suggested in Chapter Five (pages 87–90).

Clear assignments prevent problems later on, when students might otherwise barrage you with requests for clarification or submit drafts that need complete dismantling because the assignment did not adequately steer them toward your desired goals. When you explain the assignment in class, allow plenty of time for questions and, if possible, provide an example of an A paper. This is also a good opportunity to stress the value of multiple drafts. Consider asking students to staple to their final drafts all their rough

drafts, notes, and doodles (a good defense against plagiarism as well as a way to stress process).

2. Save Time by Clarifying Your Grading Criteria _____

The more clearly you define your criteria at the outset, the better the final products you will receive. The more students get a feel for what you are looking for, the more help they can give one another during peer review sessions. Here are two effective ways to clarify criteria.

Develop Scoring Guides or Draft Checksheets

Some teachers develop scoring guides or checksheets that can be attached to the assignment as a reminder of the criteria. The following checksheet was developed by a philosophy professor for an assignment on the film *Blade Runner*.



Draft Checksheet for *Blade Runner* Essay

This assignment asks you to defend one of the following theses: "The replicants in the film *Blade Runner* should/should not be granted minimal human rights."

1. Is the thesis being supported clearly stated in the introduction?
2. Does the draft explain the criteria a creature would have to meet in order to be granted minimal human rights? After reading your essay, could someone list your criteria?
3. Does the draft include a rationale for these criteria—that is, arguments showing why the criteria should be accepted?
4. Does the draft show how the replicants do or do not meet these criteria?
5. Does the draft include sufficient details and examples from the film?
6. Is the draft clearly written, well organized, and free from errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar?

(For additional examples of scoring guides, see the discussion of analytic and holistic scales in Chapter Fifteen, pages 257–259.)

Hold an In-Class Norming Session

A particularly effective learning strategy is an in-class norming session in which students work in groups to reach consensus on the relative ranking of four or five student essays, ranging from excellent to weak, written for a similar assignment. After student groups have "graded" the papers, the instructor leads class discussion with the aim of clarifying his or her criteria and explaining the grades that he or she would give. (See Chapter Nine, pages 158–159, for additional discussion of norming sessions.)

3. Save Time by Using a Class Hour for the Generation of Ideas

If a writing assignment is directly linked to key concepts in the course, class time spent generating ideas for the assignment will not detract from course content. The more students can brainstorm for ideas early on, the more detailed and complex their papers will become. Here are some suggestions for stimulating rich talk about ideas.

Collaborative Small Group Tasks

When all students in the class are given the same assignment (say, to support or attack a given thesis or to respond to the same problematic question), collaborative groups could be asked to develop a series of reasons supporting and opposing the thesis or to create possible solutions to the assigned question. Later in the hour, the instructor could lead a discussion about the kinds of evidence and argumentation needed to support various theses.

An alternative is to have the whole class work together on a related topic; then, outside of class, they could apply the same thinking processes to their own topics.

Paired Interviews

Another useful strategy, especially if students are working on different topics, is to have students interview each other about their work in progress. Place students in pairs (or groups of three) and ask them to “talk through” their ideas with their partners. I guide the discussion by having interviewers ask each writer the following series of questions.



What problem or question is your paper going to address?

Why is this question controversial or otherwise problematic? Why is it significant? Show me what makes this a good question to address.

What is your one-sentence answer to this question? (If the writer hasn't a good thesis statement yet, go on to the next question and then come back to this one. Perhaps you can help the writer figure out a thesis.)

Talk me through your whole argument (or through your ideas so far). As you interview your writer, get him or her to do most of the talking; however, you can respond to the writer by offering suggestions, bringing up additional ideas, playing devil's advocate, and so forth.

During these discussions, I ask writers not to look at their drafts or notes. I do not want them reading what they have already

written but rather reformulating their ideas conversationally in this new context. I generally require each student to hold the floor for fifteen to twenty minutes of active talking; the interviewer's job is to keep the talker on task by asking probing questions or playing devil's advocate.

4. Save Time by Having Students Submit Something Early in the Writing Process

I personally dislike reading students' rough drafts (I allow rewrites instead), yet I find it valuable to "check in" on their progress early in the writing process. Rather than asking for drafts, teachers can ask students to submit something else early on—something that can be read quickly and that helps identify students who need extra guidance.

Before offering some suggestions on what to ask for, let me suggest something not to ask for: outlines. Although teachers have traditionally inspected students' outlines, recent research and theory suggest that requiring outlines is not as effective as teachers imagine. First, asking for outlines early on distorts the composing process of many writers who discover and clarify their ideas in the act of writing. As discussed in Chapter Two, the "think first, then write" model implied by early outlines seriously undervalues drafting as a discovery process. The tradition of requiring outlines perhaps holds over from the days of "all about" reports ("Write a report on a famous mathematician of your choice"). It is relatively easy to make a preliminary outline of an "all about" report because the outliner, like the writer of an encyclopedia article, merely divides up a large topic area into chunks. In contrast, the outlinable parts of a thesis-governed paper often cannot be discovered until complex meanings are worked out through composing and revising.

Another disadvantage of requiring outlines is that the word *outline* bears unfortunate baggage for many students—their memories of teachers who treated outlines as finished products with their own peculiar rules about placement of periods, hierarchies of numerals and letters, and so forth. Once graded down for getting a period in the wrong place, students forever after think of outlines as foes, not friends. Finally, research in cognitive psychology suggests that the traditional outline may not be as powerful an organizing tool as the more visual tree diagram (see the discussion of tree diagrams later in this chapter).

Rather than asking for outlines, then, teachers might consider asking for one or more of the following items.

Prospectus

For long writing projects (such as research papers) for which students select their own topics, students can submit a prospectus in which they describe the problem they will address and the direction they intend to take. (For a more detailed description of what to ask for in a prospectus, see Chapter Twelve, page 207.) An effectively designed prospectus assignment can guide students toward a problem-thesis structure and steer them away from “and then” or “all about” writing.

Two Sentences: Question and Thesis

For shorter papers, students can be asked to submit two sentences: a one-sentence question that summarizes the problem the paper addresses and a one-sentence thesis statement that summarizes the writer’s argument in response to the question. These two sentences can reveal a surprising number of problems in students’ drafts, enabling teachers to identify students who need extra help. I require these two-sentence summaries for all of my short formal essay assignments. I can read and respond to thirty of them in less than an hour, dividing them into three piles: a “looks good” pile, a “promising but here’s some brief written advice” pile, and a “come see me in my office and we’ll talk” pile.

Abstracts

An alternative to asking for question-plus-thesis summaries is to ask students for 100- to 200-word abstracts of their drafts. Writing abstracts is a classic exercise for developing reading skills, especially the ability to distinguish main ideas from subordinate material (see pages 128–129). The act of summarizing one’s own argument helps writers clarify their own thinking and often reveals organizational and conceptual problems that prompt revision. By asking writers to submit abstracts of their drafts, rather than the drafts themselves, teachers cut down on their own reading load while assigning a salutary exercise for students.

5. Save Time by Having Students Conduct Peer Reviews of Drafts

Another timesaving strategy is to have students review each other’s drafts. Unfortunately, as all teachers who have tried them know, peer reviews often have disappointing results. Unless the

teacher structures the sessions and trains students in what to do, students are apt to give each other eccentric or otherwise unhelpful advice. Peer reviews are worth the trouble only if they result in genuine substantial revision. Fortunately, there are ways to make peer reviews work effectively.

First, teachers must decide which philosophy of peer review best fits their teaching style: response-centered reviews or advice-centered reviews (a full explanation of the differences follows shortly). Writing teachers disagree on which of these methods is superior, and there seems to be no empirical research that would settle the matter. Both types have their characteristic strengths, and each approach probably works best with certain kinds of students or writing tasks. However, they require teachers to structure the review sessions differently.

Second, a teacher must decide the process for exchanging drafts. Some teachers prefer that writers read their drafts out loud to the peer reviewers—the experience of hearing one's language read aloud helps writers discover problem areas. Other teachers ask students to bring copies of their drafts for peer reviewers. Still others have students exchange copies of drafts prior to class in order to make class time more efficient. Again, no single way seems best.

Response-Centered Reviews

This process-oriented, nonintrusive approach places maximum responsibility on the writer for making decisions about what to change in a draft. Classroom procedure is as follows:

1. Divide the class into groups of four.
2. The writer reads the draft out loud (or provides photocopies for group members to read silently).
3. Group members are given several minutes to take notes on their responses. (I ask listeners to divide a sheet of paper into three columns headed +, –, and ?. In the + column, they note aspects of the draft that worked well. In the – column, they note problem areas and any negative reactions, such as disagreement with ideas. In the ? column, they note questions that occurred while listening, such as places that need clarification or more development.)
4. Each group member, in turn, explains to the writer what he or she liked or did not like, what worked and what didn't work, what was confusing, and so forth. Group members do not give advice; they simply describe their personal responses to the draft as written.

5. The writer takes notes during each response but does not enter into a discussion. (The writer listens, without trying to defend the piece or explain "what I meant.")
6. After each group member has responded to a writer's essay, the next group member reads his or her essay. The cycle continues.

In this method, no one gives the writer advice. Respondents simply describe their reactions to the piece. Often the writer receives contradictory messages: one reader might like a given passage, while another dislikes it. Thus, the group sends the writer equivocal, ambiguous messages that reflect the truth about how real readers respond to real writing, leaving the writer responsible for deciding what to do. (For more detailed advice on conducting response-centered peer reviews, see Spear, 1988, and Elbow and Belanoff, 1989.)

Advice-Centered Reviews

This approach is more product oriented and more directive: peer reviewers collaborate to give advice to the writer. This method works best when students have internalized criteria for an assignment through norming sessions or teacher-provided scoring guides. What follows is a recommended process for an advice-centered peer review.

1. Divide the class into pairs, and have each pair exchange drafts with another pair.
2. The two students in each pair collaborate to compose a jointly written review of the two drafts they have received. I ask pairs to use a checklist like the following:
 - a. Write out the question, problem, or issue that this draft addresses.
 - b. Write out the writer's complete thesis statement. (Note: If you have trouble with a and b, concentrate on helping the writer clarify the problem and thesis.)
 - c. Note with a wavy line in the margins all places where you got confused as a reader.
 - d. Write out your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the writer's ideas. Assuming that the teacher is interested primarily in the quality of thinking in a paper, how will the teacher respond to the ideas in this draft? Where do you disagree with the writer?
 - e. Reread the draft, looking for quality of support. Does the writer offer sufficient details to support the argument (data, statistics, quotations, textual references, personal examples)? Does the writer need to do more research?

- f. Write out at least two things that you think are particularly strong about this draft.
 - g. Make three or four directive statements recommending specific changes that the writer should make in the next draft.
3. The pairs then return the drafts to the original writers, along with the collaboratively written reviews. If time remains, the two pairs can meet jointly to discuss their reviews.

Because advice-centered reviews take quite a bit longer than response-centered reviews, I usually ask writers to supply copies of their drafts to their peer reviewers the night before class so that the reviewers can read the drafts carefully and come to the review session with critiques already in mind. Because the reviews are collaboratively written by two students, they are usually well considered and thoughtful. Of course, the writer should take the reviews as advisory only and make his or her own decisions about how much of the advice to use.

Out-of-Class Peer Reviews

A variation on the above approach can be used for out-of-class peer reviews, thus preserving class time for other matters.

1. Divide the class into pairs, and have each pair exchange drafts with another pair.
2. Each pair meets outside of class to write their collaborative reviews, based on the checksheet, and they return the reviews the next day in class.

The advantage for writers in this out-of-class method is that the reviewers can spend longer than an hour on task. The advantage for the teacher is that no class time is needed.

Some General Principles for Conducting Peer Reviews

- Do not expect students to give each other very good advice about sentence structure or style. For some reason, they are not good at seeing stylistic problems in other people's drafts, and they tend to make impressionistic comments ("This doesn't flow . . ." "This sounds funny . . .").
- Train students to engage each other at the level of ideas.
- Train students to back up comments with specific examples from the draft; stress the importance of precision when giving advice.

6. Save Time by Referring Students to Your Institution's Writing Center (If Your Institution Does Not Have One, Lobby to Get One) _____

Writing centers, whether staffed by professional tutors or student peers, perform an enormous service for writers from any discipline and at any skill level. Most contemporary writing centers help students at any stage of the writing process—working with the student to clarify an assignment and brainstorm for ideas, to make substantive revisions in drafts with attention to the quality of ideas as well as organization and development, and to edit for style and sentence correctness.

At many institutions, writing centers support writing across the curriculum and are not simply places for weak or remedial writers. Nor are they “fix-it shops” where students go to get their grammar and spelling checked. Writing centers try to create for students the same kind of environment that professional writers create for themselves: a community of helpful readers who will listen to one another's ideas and respond to drafts in progress. Going to a writing center does not guarantee that the writer will immediately improve the paper, but it does ensure that the writer has talked about his or her ideas and had at least one careful reader respond to them.

If you are not sure of the kind of support the writing center at your institution can provide your students, consider calling its director for an appointment. If your institution does not have a writing center or if you would like to see your center's services expanded, make your desires known to the appropriate administrator. Writing centers are proven, cost-effective ways to help faculty members coach writing. Moreover, they help foster campuswide attention on writing as a critical thinking process central to the academic enterprise.

7. Save Time by Making One-on-One Writing Conferences As Efficient as Possible _____

The art of conferring with students on their writing requires good listening skills supplemented with the ability to provide timely, appropriate guidance. This section offers some advice on how to conduct an individual writing conference.

Distinguish Between Higher-Order and Lower-Order Concerns

Conferences are most productive if you concentrate first on the higher-order concerns of ideas, organization, development, and overall clarity as opposed to the lower-order concerns of style,

grammar, and mechanics. The lower-order concerns are lower not because they are unimportant but because they cannot be efficiently attended to until the higher-order concerns have been resolved. (There is little point to correcting the comma splices in a paragraph that needs to be completely reconceptualized.) Conferences should focus primarily on helping students create good, idea-rich arguments and wrestle them into a structure that works.

Start a Conference by Setting an Agenda with the Student

Conferences work best when students are encouraged to do most of the talking—rehearsing their papers' arguments while the teacher listens and coaches. Too often, though, conferences become dominated by teacher talk. Try to avoid the tendency to tell students what to say in their papers. Although you might picture an "ideal essay" in response to your assignment, very few students are going to produce what you yourself would write. Conferences should be primarily listening sessions where the instructor asks questions and the student does 80 to 90 percent of the talking. Most students have never experienced a teacher's actually being interested in their ideas. Engaging them in genuine conversation, showing real interest in their work, respecting their ideas—these are enormous favors to a novice writer.

To establish a supportive listening tone at the beginning of a conference, the instructor can work with the student to set a mutual agenda. Here is a suggested sequence of stages for agenda setting.

Instructor

Ask the student to explain the assignment. How would you summarize the assignment in your own words? Are there any parts of the assignment that you are fuzzy on?

Find out the student's expectations for the conference. How do you like your paper so far? What kind of help do you need from this conference?

Get the student to discuss his or her draft and writing process. How much work have you put into this draft? How far are you in the writing process? How much more time are you willing to put into the paper?

Student

Student reveals how well he or she understands the assignment.

Instructor learns something of the student's own assessment of the paper and attitude toward it. Instructor gets some sense of what kind of help the student wants.

Student begins to feel comfortable talking; instructor gets a better sense of the student and the paper as well as of the student's own unvoiced problems with the paper. Instructor gets insights into the student's writing process.

Instructor

Instructor reads the draft silently while giving the student a task: write out your thesis and main points; then write down the main problems you see with your draft.

Student

Student writes in response to the writing prompt. Student must take responsibility for making an initial assessment of the draft.

As you read the draft, take mental notes that will help you focus the conference later. One suggestion is to place symbols in the margins of the draft such as + (things that are well done), * (problem areas), and ? (things you want to ask questions about). (I usually ask the student's permission before writing on the draft.) From your marginal symbols, you can see the positive elements that you want to reinforce as well as problem areas and places to ask questions about. Decide the two or three most important things to work on, beginning with higher-order concerns first. Now the conference resumes:

Instructor

Begin with positive comments. I really like this part (be specific). You do a good job here.

Inform the student honestly of your own assessment. You are definitely on the right track here. You do a great job with Jones. But there are some places where you lose focus on your thesis, and sometimes you have too much summary of different points of view but not enough analysis and argument. You also seem to misunderstand Wheeler.

Reassure the student that it is common to have such problems with rough drafts. It's normal in a first draft to wander from the thesis. This happens to me all the time. That's why I have to go through so many drafts.

Collaborate with the student to set an agenda for the conference. Choose a limited number of problems to work on. You don't have to solve every problem for your next draft. Should we just work on clarifying your thesis and getting your argument better organized?

Student

Student, who sits in agony waiting to hear what you say about the paper, receives reinforcement.

Student gets a sense of your assessment right away. Student does not have to guess what you are thinking. Student sees strengths in the draft but gets a sense of the kinds of problems you think should be worked on.

Student sees writing as a process, starts to see comments less as criticism and more as guidelines for improvement. Student feels less "dumb" and gains confidence in the value of revision.

In response to your initial suggestion, student might say, "But I'd also like to see more clearly what you mean by analysis rather than just summary." Student becomes involved in deciding what to work on. Instructor and student have a plan for how to spend the rest of the conference.

Develop a Repertoire of Conferencing Strategies

After setting an agenda, you begin the actual conference. How you conduct the conference depends on where the student is in the writing process. Some students need help at the very highest levels—finding a thesis and a basic plan for an argument. Others might have a good overall plan but lots of confusing places along the way. In conducting a conference, you may wish to try one or more of the following strategies, tailored to each individual case:

If Ideas Are Thin

Make an idea map to brainstorm for more ideas (explained later in this chapter).

Play devil's advocate to deepen and complicate the ideas.

Help the writer add more examples, better details, more supporting data or arguments.

If the Reader Gets Lost

Have the student talk through the ideas to clear up confusing spots.

Help the student sharpen the thesis by seeing it as the writer's answer to a controversial or problematic question (get the student to articulate the question that the thesis "answers").

Make an outline or a tree diagram to help with organization (explained later in this chapter).

Help the writer clarify the focus by asking questions about purpose:

"My purpose in this paper is . . ."

"My purpose in this section/paragraph is . . ."

"Before reading my paper, the reader will have this view of my topic: . . . ; after reading my paper, my reader will have this different view of my topic: . . ."

Show the student where you get confused or "miscued" in reading the draft ("I started getting lost here because I couldn't see why you were giving me this information," or, "I thought you were going to say X, but then you said Y").

Show the student how to write transitions between major sections or between paragraphs.

If You Can Understand the Sentences but Cannot See the Point

Help the writer articulate meaning by asking "so what" questions: "I can understand what you are saying here, but I

don't quite understand why you are saying it. I read all these facts, and I say, 'So what?' What do these facts have to do with your thesis?" (This helps the writer bring the point to the surface. You can then help the writer formulate topic sentences for paragraphs.)

Throughout the conference, try to make "readerly" rather than "writerly" comments—that is, describe your mental experience in trying to read the draft rather than telling the writer how to fix it. For example, say, "I had trouble seeing the point of this paragraph," rather than, "Begin with a topic sentence." This approach helps writers see that their purpose in revising is to make the reader's job easier rather than to follow "English teacher rules."

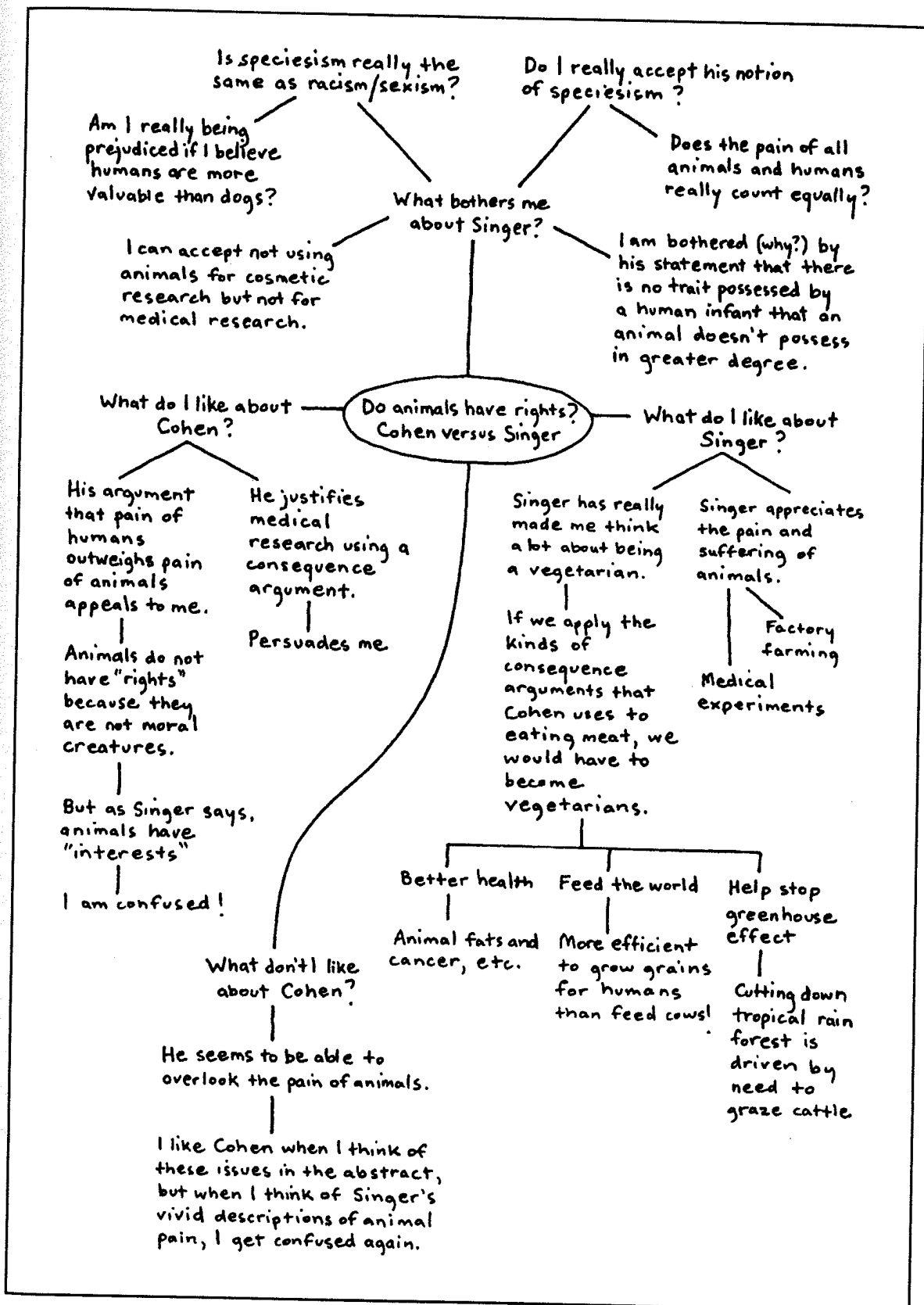
In conducting conferences, I like to have plenty of blank sheets of paper available; as the student talks, I jot down the student's ideas. At the end of the conference, I give the student my notes as a record of the conference. Sometimes the students and I work together to create either an idea map or a tree diagram. The next two sections explain these strategies.

Use an Idea Map for Brainstorming

Idea maps (sometimes called *mind maps* or *concept maps*) work best early in the writing process as a tool for generating ideas. To help a student make an idea map, you draw a circle in the center of the page and write a triggering word or phrase in the circle (usually a broad topic area, a question, or a thesis). Then, as the writer talks, you record his or her ideas on branches and subbranches that extend from the circle. As long as the writer pursues one train of thought, you keep recording the ideas on subbranches off the main branch. But as soon as that chain of ideas runs dry, you lead the writer to a new starting point and begin a new branch. Figure 13.1 shows an idea map that a student and I made for an assignment to evaluate arguments by Carl Cohen and Peter Singer for and against the use of animals in medical research.

As Figure 13.1 reveals, an idea map records a writer's emerging ideas in a visual format; notations are arranged randomly around the initial hub but hierarchically off each branch. This half-random, half-hierarchical pattern stimulates productive thinking, for it invites the writer to elaborate previously recorded ideas (by adding new subbranches off an existing branch) or to begin a new train of thought (by adding a new branch). The idea map thus stimulates open-ended brainstorming while simultaneously helping the writer discover the beginnings of an organizational structure. My goal is to have the student leave my office with idea map in hand, along with my cheery exhortation to write a draft.

Figure 13.1. An Idea Map.

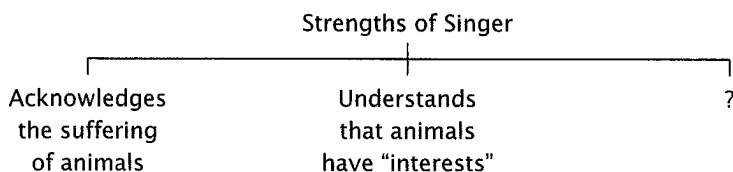


Use a Tree Diagram to Help with Structure

After generating an idea map, a student needs to develop the ideas further by writing a rough draft. At this point, most writers need some sort of plan, but how elaborate or detailed that plan is varies considerably from writer to writer. Some writers need to plan extensively before they can write; others need to write extensively before they can plan. But somewhere along the way, whether at the first-draft stage or much later in the process, writers need to concentrate on the shape of their arguments. At this point, I recommend the power of tree diagrams over traditional outlines.

A tree diagram differs from an outline in that headings and subheadings are indicated through spatial locations rather than through a system of letters and numerals. Figure 13.2 (produced by the same student who brainstormed the idea map in Figure 13.1) shows a tree diagram of an evaluative essay comparing two arguments on animal rights. The writer's thesis is shown at the top of the tree, with supporting arguments displayed vertically on branches beneath the thesis.

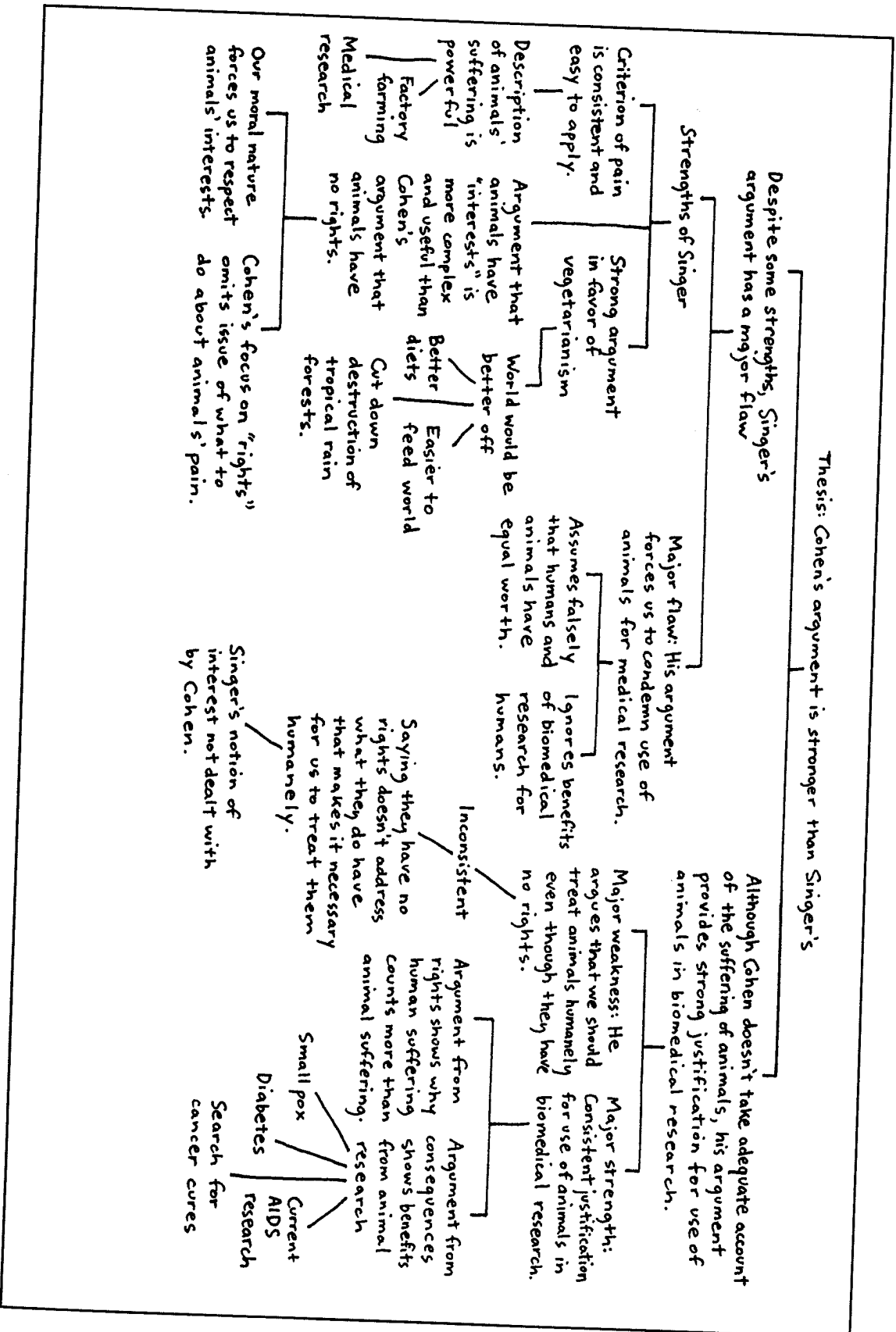
Although the traditional outline may be the more familiar way to represent an argument's structure, tree diagrams are often a more powerful device for planning and shaping. Their visual nature makes it easy to see at a glance both the skeletal structure of an argument and its sequential parts. Tree diagrams can also be powerful aids to invention because you can put question marks anywhere on a tree to "hold a space open" for ideas that you have not thought of yet. For example, early in his planning stages, the writer of the animal rights paper wrote a preliminary tree diagram with a branch that looked like this:



Using question marks as place markers allows the writer to visualize a large-scale structure for the paper while holding a slot open for parts of the argument still to be "discovered." The fluid, evolving nature of tree diagrams, in which branches can be added or moved around, makes them particularly valuable planning tools for writers.

I consequently use tree diagrams in student conferences to help writers with structure. Working together, we place the

Figure 13.2. A Tree Diagram.



writer's thesis at the top of the tree. Underneath the thesis, we add the main points the writer will need to support the thesis, sometimes adding question marks for additional points that may be thought of later. Underneath each point, we brainstorm ways to develop that section of the argument (subarguments, data, details, evidence, elaboration), again adding question marks to suggest that more ideas may be discovered in the act of drafting. I then give students their tree diagrams when they leave my office, confident that they have a "map" for drafting or revision.

When Working on Sentence Concerns, Focus on One or Two Paragraphs

Having helped a writer find ideas and get them focused, organized, and developed, the teacher has done the lion's share of the work of coaching writing. Many students, of course, will have additional problems with grammar, sentence structure, and mechanics, or they may have styles that are wooden, verbose, awkward, or choppy. If you have the time and the inclination to work with students on these matters, consider helping to edit one or two paragraphs and then asking the student to scrutinize the rest of the draft in the same way. It is important that you do not become the student's editor or proofreader. Writers need to learn how to find and fix their own grammatical and stylistic problems. (That is why I also suggest not circling or marking errors when you grade papers—see Chapter Four and also Chapter Fourteen, pages 246–248, where I suggest strategies for making students find and fix their own errors.)

8. Save Time by Occasionally Holding Group Paper Conferences

Although teachers usually work individually with students, group conferences can sometimes be more lively, more productive, and more efficient than one-on-one conferences. Whenever a group of students shares a common writing problem, consider inviting four or five students at once for a group conference.

Group conferences are particularly valuable at the idea-generating stage of writing. While listening to the teacher help student A focus a paper topic, students B, C, and D start thinking of ideas for their own papers. But more importantly, students B, C, and D often come up with great ideas for A. The back-and-forth dynamics of a group conference, in which the participants collaborate to help one another, make them especially useful at the early stages of writing.

3. Save Time by Using Efficient Methods or Giving Written Feedback

Perhaps the most traditional way to coach the writing process is to place comments on students' essays. Because commenting on papers is a major part of teaching writing, Chapter Fourteen is devoted entirely to this topic. However, a few suggestions about commenting are appropriate here. I also explain two alternatives to written comments: "models feedback" and scoring guides.

Consider Commenting on Drafts Rather Than Final Products or Consider Allowing Rewrites

The best strategy for improving student writing is to make comments not on finished products but on typed late-stage drafts. (An alternative is to permit rewrites of papers so that you treat "final versions" as if they were drafts in progress.) The purpose of the comments is to provide specific advice on what needs to be added, changed, or reconceptualized for the final version. Composition research suggests that unless students do something with the teacher's comments—by making the revisions suggested—the teacher's commenting time is largely wasted. Comments, in other words, do not transfer well to later papers; they need to be applied directly to the work in progress.

My own personal strategy is not to read drafts but to permit rewrites (except for the last course paper, which comes at the end of the term). This method allows me to comment on papers as if they were drafts in progress and yet assign a grade as if they were finished products. Students who are satisfied with their grades do not rewrite (thus cutting down on the number of resubmissions I receive). I have settled on this method because it has been more effective for me than commenting on drafts. The quality of writing I initially receive is higher (students, not wanting to rewrite, try to turn in their best work on the first try), and for some students, the desire to improve their grades motivates serious revision. Which-ever method you choose, the point of your commentary is to stimulate and guide revision.

Make Limited, Focused Comments and Avoid Marking Errors

Rather than commenting on everything wrong with the draft so that the student is overwhelmed with suggestions, consider limiting your comments to the major changes you would like to see in the next revision, focusing first on the higher-order concerns of

ideas, organization, development, and clarity. See Chapter Fourteen for a detailed discussion of how to write revision-oriented comments on student essays. See Chapter Four for a discussion of sentence-level errors.

Use Models Feedback on Short Assignments

When students write microthemes or other short essays in response to the same assignment, consider using "models feedback." With models feedback, you do not make any comments on the papers; consequently, you can grade them very rapidly (often taking no more than a minute or two per paper). You provide feedback through in-class discussion of selected essays. If you find a good A response in your set of papers, duplicate it for the class or put it on an overhead projector. If not, write your own A-worthy microtheme as a model. The models feedback comes from a discussion of what constitutes an A response as well as a discussion of typical problem areas found in weaker papers. This discussion accomplishes two purposes: it clarifies for students the writing and thinking skills exhibited in strong papers, and it reviews and clarifies recent course material (the content part of your assignment). Often students say they learn more about writing from models feedback than from traditional comments on papers.

Use a Scoring Guide or an Analytic Scale

Scoring guides and analytic scales are discussed in detail in Chapter Fifteen. Briefly, they allow you to score separate features of a piece of writing and then sum them up for a total score. Although analytic scales cannot provide as much information as individual comments, they are more informative than a single grade by itself. They are particularly useful when your workload prevents detailed commentary on papers.

10. Save Time by Putting Minimal Comments on Finished Products That Will not Be Revised

If you have been willing to comment on rough drafts or if you accept rewrites, switch your role at the end of the process from that of coach to that of judge. You need not feel obligated to write on the finished-product version of a paper at all. Simply attach a score sheet based on your evaluation criteria and give the paper a grade.

Students always appreciate a brief end comment about your reaction to the paper or your justification for a score in a certain area, but you need not feel obligated to make extended comments. This saves time particularly with papers due at the end of a term, when students will not be revising their work.

Conclusion: A Review of Timesaving Strategies _____

The traditional way to coach writing is to make copious, red-penciled comments on finished student products—almost universally regarded among composition specialists as an inefficient use of teacher energy. The comments seldom lead to improvement in student writing, and the thought of grading stacks of depressingly bad student essays discourages teachers from assigning writing. This chapter suggests ten different strategies for coaching writing, aimed at improving the quality of final products while reducing the amount of commenting time teachers need to devote to papers. Here is a nutshell review of the ten strategies discussed in this chapter.

1. Design good assignments.

Assign exploratory writing; consider using microthemes.

Create assignment handouts specifying task, purpose, audience, criteria, desired manuscript form (see pages 83–86 for details).

If your goal is thesis-based writing, consider using one of the three assignment strategies in Chapter Five, pages 87–90.

2. Clarify your grading criteria.

Create a scoring guide or peer review checklist.

Hold an in-class norming session (see Chapter Nine, pages 158–159).

3. Devote a class hour to generating ideas.

Create a small group brainstorming task.

Have members of pairs interview one another.

4. Have students submit something to you early in the writing process.

Consider asking for a prospectus, a question-plus-thesis summary, or an abstract.

Use these to identify students who need extra help.

5. Have students be the first readers of each other's drafts.

Require peer reviews (either response-centered or advice centered).

To preserve class time, consider out-of-class peer reviews.

6. Refer students to your writing center (or lobby to start one).

Recognize the value of writing centers for all writers, not just weak writers.

Stress the usefulness of writing centers at all stages of the writing process.

7. Make one-on-one conferences efficient.

Focus first on higher-order concerns (ideas, focus, organization and development).

Begin each conference by setting an agenda.

Develop a repertoire of conferencing strategies.

Consider using idea maps and tree diagrams.

8. Consider holding group conferences early in the writing process.

9. Use efficient methods for giving feedback on papers.

Comment on late drafts rather than final products (or allow rewrites).

Make revision-oriented comments, focusing first on higher-order concerns.

For microthemes, use models feedback in lieu of traditional comments.

When time is at a premium, use a grading scale or a scoring guide instead of making comments.

10. Put minimal comments on finished products that will not be revised.

Writing Comments on Students' Papers

Whenever I conduct workshops in the marking and grading of student writing, I like to quote a sentence from William Zinsser's *Writing to Learn* (1988): "The writing teacher's ministry is not just to the words but to the person who wrote the words" (p. 48). I value this quotation because all of us as teachers, late at night, having read whole stacks of student essays, sometimes forget the human being who wrote the words that currently annoy us. We lapse into sarcasm. We let our irritation show on the page. Perhaps nothing involves us as directly in the messiness of teaching writing as our attempts to comment on our students' essays. We know how we feel ourselves when we ask a colleague to read one of our drafts (apologetic, vulnerable). But we sometimes forget these feelings when we comment on students' papers. Sometimes we do not treat students' work in progress with the same sensitivity that we would treat our colleague's.

The best kind of commentary enhances the writer's feeling of dignity. The worst kind can be dehumanizing and insulting—often to the bewilderment of the teacher, whose intentions were kindly but whose techniques ignored the personal dimension of writing.

Imagine, for a moment, a beginning tennis class in which we ask George to give his first performance. In skill category 1, serving the tennis ball, poor George goofs up miserably by whacking the ball sideways into the fence. Here is the instructor's feedback: "You didn't hold the racket properly, your feet weren't lined up

right, your body was too stiff, you didn't toss the ball in the correct plane, you threw it too high, you didn't cock your wrist properly, and you looked awkward. Moreover, you hit the ball with the wood instead of the strings. Weren't you paying attention when I lectured on how to do it? I am placing you in remedial tennis!"

Although we are far too enlightened (and far too kind) to teach tennis this way, the analogy is uncomfortably apt for the traditional way writing teachers have taught writing. Ignoring the power of positive reinforcement, writing teachers have red-penciled students' errors with puritanical fervor. These teachers have of course aimed for the right goals—they want to produce skillful and joyful writers, just as the tennis instructor wants to produce skillful and joyful tennis players. But the techniques have been misguided.

Students' Responses to Teachers' Comments _____

Part of the problem is that our comments on students' papers are necessarily short and therefore cryptic. We know what we mean, and we know the tone that we intend to convey. Often, however, students are bewildered by our comments, and they sometimes read into them a tone and a meaning entirely different from our intentions.

The extent to which students misread teachers' comments is revealed in Spandel and Stiggins's study (1990), in which the investigators interviewed students about their reactions to teachers' comments on their papers. Students were asked to describe their reactions to specific marginal comments that teachers placed on their essays—either what they thought the comments meant or how the comments made them feel (pp. 85–87). When a teacher wrote, "Needs to be more concise," students reacted this way:

Confusing. I need to know what the teacher means specifically.
This is an obvious comment.
I'm not Einstein. I can't get every point right.
I muffed.
I thought you wanted details and support.
This frustrates me!
Define "concise."
Vague, vague.

When a teacher wrote, "Be more specific," students reacted this way:

You be more specific.
I'm frustrated.
I tried and it didn't pay off.
It's going to be too long then.
I feel mad—it really doesn't matter.
I try, but I don't know every fact.

When a teacher wrote, "You haven't really thought this through," students reacted this way:

That is a mean reply.
I guess I blew it!
I'm upset.
That makes me madder than you can imagine!
How do you know what I thought?

When a teacher wrote, "Try harder!" students reacted this way:

I did try!
You're a stupid jerk.
Maybe I am trying as hard as I can.
I feel like kicking the teacher.
Baloney! You don't know how hard I tried.
This kind of comment makes me feel really bad and I'm frustrated!

The conclusions of this study are worth quoting:

Negative comments, however well intentioned they are, tend to make students feel bewildered, hurt, or angry. They stifle further attempts at writing. It would seem on the face of it that one good way to help a budding writer would be to point out what he or she is doing wrong, but, in fact, it usually doesn't help; it hurts. Sometimes it hurts a lot.

What does help, however, is to point out what the writer is doing well. Positive comments build confidence and make the writer want to try again. However, there's a trick to writing good positive comments. They must be truthful, and they must be very specific [p. 87].

To improve our techniques at commenting on our students' papers, then, we need to remember our purpose, which is not to point out everything wrong with the paper but to facilitate improvement. When marking and grading papers, we should keep in mind that we have two quite distinct roles to play, depending on where our students are in the writing process. At the drafting stage, our role is coach. Our goal is to provide useful instruction, good advice, and warm encouragement. At the end of the writing process, when students submit final copy, our role is judge. At this stage, we uphold the standards of our profession, giving out high marks only to those essays that meet the criteria we have set.

The Purpose of Commenting: To Coach Revision

When we comment on papers, I have argued, the role we should play is that of coach. The purpose of commenting is to provide guidance for revision, for it is in the act of revising that our students learn most deeply both what they want to say and what readers need for ease of comprehension; revising means rethinking, reconceptualizing, “seeing again”—for in the hard work of revising, students learn how experienced writers really compose.

As mentioned briefly in Chapter Thirteen, there are two strategies for ensuring that your comments will help stimulate revision. The first is to comment on drafts a week or so before students are to submit their finished papers. When using this strategy, I prefer to comment only on late-stage drafts, after the writers have gone through peer review. Because I do not like to read handwriting, I ask for a typed late-stage draft.

The second strategy, which is my favorite method, is to allow rewrites after I return the “finished” papers. Because not all students will choose to rewrite, this method is less time consuming for me, and the quality of the writing I initially receive is higher. By allowing rewrites, I can gear all my comments toward revision and yet feel comfortable applying rigorous grading standards because I know that students can rewrite. Moreover, the opportunity to improve less-than-hoped-for grades inspires many students toward serious revision.

From a teacher’s standpoint, commenting to prompt revision, as opposed to justifying a grade or pointing out errors, may also change one’s whole orientation toward reading student writing. (Recall the difference between the revision-oriented and the editing-oriented commentary on the student paragraph in Chapter Four, pages 67–69.) You begin looking for the *promise* of a draft rather than its mistakes. You begin seeing yourself as *responding to* rather than *correcting* a set of papers. You think of limiting your comments to the two or three things that the writer should work on for the next draft rather than commenting copiously on everything. You think of reading for ideas rather than for errors. In short, you think of coaching rather than judging.

General Strategy for Commenting on Student Drafts: A Hierarchy of Questions

Commenting effectively on drafts requires a consistent philosophy and a plan. Because your purpose is to stimulate meaningful revision, your best strategy is to limit your commentary to a few prob-

lems that you want the student to tackle when preparing the next draft. It thus helps to establish a hierarchy of concerns descending from higher-order issues (ideas, organization, development, and overall clarity) to lower-order issues (sentence correctness, style, mechanics, spelling, and so forth). What follows is a sequence of questions arranged in descending order of concern. My recommendation is to limit your comments to only two or three of the questions; proceed to lower-order concerns only when a draft is reasonably successful at the higher levels.

As you read through the following discussion, you might find it useful to have at hand one or two student papers that you are currently marking and to try out the suggestions I will make, perhaps comparing them to your current practice.

Commenting on Higher-Order Concerns

Commentary should be aimed first at the higher-level concerns of ideas, organization, development, and overall clarity. Here is a hierarchy of questions you can ask to stimulate higher-order revision. (These questions assume an assignment calling for thesis-based academic writing.)

1. Does the Draft Follow the Assignment? If the draft is not fulfilling the assignment, there is no purpose in commenting further. Tell the writer that the draft is on the wrong track and that he or she needs to start over by rereading the assignment carefully and perhaps seeking help from you. I generally return such a draft unmarked and ungraded.

2. Does the Writer Have a Thesis That Addresses an Appropriate Problem or Question? Once you see that a draft addresses the assignment, look next at its overall focus. Does the draft have a thesis? Does the thesis respond to an appropriate question or problem? As discussed in Chapter Two, thesis writing is unfamiliar to students, whose natural tendency is toward "all about" reports, toward summarizing rather than analyzing, or toward the unfocused dumping of data or information.

Drafts exhibiting problems at this level may have no discernible problem-thesis structure; other drafts may have a thesis, but one that is not stated explicitly or is buried deep in the body of the paper, forcing you to wander about lost before finally seeing what the writer intends. Frequently drafts become clearer at the end than they were at the beginning—evidence that the writer has clarified his or her thinking during the act of composing. To use the language of Flower (1979), such a draft is "writer-based" rather than "reader-based"; that

is, the draft follows the order of the writer's discovery process rather than a revised order that meets the reader's needs. Thus, drafts that become clear only in the conclusion need to be revised globally. In some cases, you may wish to guide the writer toward a prototypical academic introduction that explains the problem to be addressed, states the thesis, and gives a brief overview of the whole argument. (See the discussion of academic introductions in Chapter Twelve, pages 207–209.) Composing such an introduction forces the writer to imagine the argument from the reader's perspective. Typical end comments addressing thesis and focus include these:

I can't find a thesis here, nor is it clear what problem or question you are addressing. Please see me for help.

Your thesis finally becomes clear by the end; for your next draft, move it up to the introduction to help your reader. Open your intro by explaining the problem your thesis will address, and then follow that with your thesis. Also, the reader needs a preview map of your argument.

3. If the Draft Has a Thesis, What Is the Quality of the Argument Itself? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas? Marginal and end comments for this level address questions about ideas. Is the argument appropriate to your discipline? Is the argument logical? Is there appropriate use of relevant and sufficient evidence? Are the ideas developed with sufficient complexity, subtlety, and insight? Is there adequate awareness of and attention to opposing views? Typical marginal comments addressing these concerns might be the following:

Interesting idea!

Nice comparison of X to Y here.

Good point—I hadn't thought of it in quite this way.

Expand and explain; could you give an example?

Aren't you overlooking X's point of view here?

I don't see how you got from X to Y. Argument is confusing.

This is too much a rehash of X. Move from summarizing to analyzing.

You have covered X well but haven't addressed Y or Z.

You need to anticipate and respond to opposing views here.

What's your evidence for this assertion?

4. Is the Draft Effectively Organized at the Macro Level? As writers, we all struggle with organization, often producing final prod-

ucts organized differently from our original rough drafts. Student writers have even greater problems with organization and often need our personal help. When commenting on organization, try considering questions like these: Can the draft be outlined or tree-diagramed? What should be added to the draft? What should be eliminated? What should be moved or shifted around? Are there adequate transitions between paragraphs and sections? Are all details tied to points? Are all points supported by details? Are the purpose, point, and structure of the essay adequately previewed for the reader through a good title and introduction?

Comment on the title, which should suggest the thesis of the piece. If the title is good, praise it. If not, suggest improvements (see pages 209–210).

Comment on the opening paragraph/introduction. The opening should engage the reader's attention and, in most academic writing, set forth a problem or question that the essay will address. If the opening has a good thesis, praise it.

Look at the opening sentences of paragraphs. These should be transition sentences with forward- and backward-looking elements. Praise good transitions. Point out ways to improve others. In academic writing, paragraphs typically have explicit topic sentences.

Although many students may need personal help in reaching solutions, you can draw students' attention to organizational problems by placing "readerly" comments in the margins. Typical comments include these:

How does this part fit?

You lost me in that last sentence; I'm getting confused.

What's the point of this section?

How does this paragraph relate to what you just said?

Your introduction made me expect to hear about X next, but this is about Y.

You're bouncing all over. I need a road map of where we have been and where we are going.

5. Is the Draft Organized Effectively at the Micro Level? Are paragraphs unified and coherent? Often readers first become aware of organizational problems when they get confused by the writer's paragraphing. What one often sees in student drafts is a series of short, choppy paragraphs (perhaps in imitation of the paragraphing in print advertisements or popular magazine articles) or, conversely, long

paragraphs that change direction midstream so that the last part of the paragraph seems to have nothing to do with the first part. Writing teachers consider a paragraph unified if all the sentences support or develop the controlling idea, often stated explicitly in a topic sentence. They consider a paragraph coherent if the sentences link to each other without abrupt leaps or gaps in the flow of thought.

To help students notice problems of unity and coherence in their paragraphing, you can get mileage out of marginal comments like these:

Why so many short paragraphs?

This paragraph wanders. What's its main point?

This paragraph has lots of details, but I can't see their point.
Add a topic sentence?

You seem to be making several points here without developing them. Break into separate paragraphs and develop each?

These sentences don't link to each other. Fill in gaps?

As an example of the kinds of paragraph-level revisions one hopes to promote, Exhibit 14.1 shows how a student revised a section of a nursing research paper in response to teacher commentary.

Commenting on Lower-Order Concerns

Lower-order concerns such as grammatical errors, misspellings, punctuation mistakes, and awkwardness in style are frequent sources of confusion and annoyance in student papers. If teachers try to note them all—especially if the teacher becomes a line editor and begins fixing them—commenting on these errors can be dismayingly time consuming. In Chapter Four, I argue for a philosophy of error that places maximum responsibility on students for learning to edit their own work. This philosophy follows Haswell's practice of "minimal marking" (1983), in which the teacher tells a student that his or her paper is marred by sentence errors and that the student's grade will either be reduced or unrecorded until most of the errors are found and corrected. To assist students, instructors can place an X in the margins next to lines that contain errors, but following the minimal-marking policy means that the errors themselves are not circled or marked.

The beauty of this policy, from a teacher's perspective, is that abandoning the role of proofreader and line editor saves substantial marking time. More importantly, it trains students to develop new editing habits for eliminating their own careless errors. Students learn to pore over their drafts with a "reader's eye," to use a grammar handbook, and to keep lists of their characteristic errors.

Exhibit 14.1. Student Writing Before and After Teacher Commentary.

Violence against women is a significant issue. Statistics vary on how many women are battered. Fifty percent of all women will experience battery at some point in their lives (Walker, 1979).

Choppy paragraphs

"One in every fifty pregnant women may be beaten, making abuse during pregnancy more common than the incidence of placental previa or gestational diabetes" (Campbell, 1986, p. 179).

Sexual frustration, mood swings, and general anxiety about the future often occur in pregnancy.

What does this have to do with nursing?

Connect to preceding paragraph?

Violence against women is a significant issue for obstetrical nurses. Although statistics vary, some researchers estimate that fifty percent of all women will experience battery at some point in their lives (Walker, 1979). There is no reason to believe that such violence diminishes when the women are pregnant. In fact, nursing research performed by Campbell (1986) estimates that "one in every fifty pregnant women may be beaten, making abuse during pregnancy more common than the incidence of placental previa or gestational diabetes" (p. 179). The causes of this abuse include sexual frustration, mood swings, and general anxiety about the future associated with pregnancy.

Students with severe sentence-level difficulties may even be motivated to take another writing course or to seek tutorial help. The point, in any case, is to make students responsible for their own editing. (See Chapter Four for a full discussion of this complex and politically charged matter.)

Even though I think it is important not to circle errors or to line-edit a student's draft, there are many helpful kinds of comments you can make on drafts to address lower-order concerns. The following questions can serve as guides for commentary.

1. Are There Stylistic Problems That You Find Particularly Annoying? Every teacher has pet peeves about style, so you might as well make yours known to students and mark them on drafts when they start to annoy you. What distinguishes stylistic concerns from grammar errors is that grammar errors are violations of the structural conventions of standard edited English. Relatively stable rules of correctness govern pronoun cases, subject-verb agreement, dangling modifiers, parallelism, and sentence completeness. In contrast, stylistic concerns involve rhetorical choices—matters of effectiveness and grace rather than right or wrong. Wordiness, choppiness, or excessive use of the passive voice are rhetorical or stylistic, not grammatical, matters.

I have my own set of pet peeves about style that I like to make known to students. (In fact, I distribute a little handout about them in my classes.) Here are my own personal top three annoyances. (I invite readers to make their own "top three" lists.)

Lazy use of "this" as a pronoun. Some writers (I think of them as lazy) try to create coherence between sentences by using *this* as a pronoun referring sometimes to a noun in the preceding sentence but more often to a whole idea. No grammatical rule actually forbids using *this* as an all-purpose pronoun (although some handbooks call the practice "broad reference" and frown on it), but its overuse can lead to gracelessness, slippage of coherence, and outright ambiguity. Here is an example:

Original Version

As a little girl, I liked to play with mechanical games and toys, but this was not supported by my parents. Fortunately, a woman math teacher in high school saw that I was good at this and advised me to major in engineering. But this turned out to be even more difficult than I imagined.

Improved Version

As a little girl, I liked to play with mechanical games and toys, but my parents didn't support such "boylike behavior." Fortunately, a

woman math teacher in high school noticed my talent in math and physics and advised me to major in engineering—advice that turned out to be even more difficult to follow than I had imagined.

Wordiness. Even though I am not always able to practice what I preach, I prefer a succinct, plain style unclogged by deadwood or circumlocutions. I urge students to cut and prune their drafts to achieve economy and tightness. Here's an example:

Original Version

As a result of the labor policies established by Bismarck, the working-class people in Germany were convinced that revolution was unnecessary for the attainment of their goals and purposes.

Improved Version

Bismarck's labor policies convinced the German working class that revolution was unnecessary.

Excessive nominalization. Powerful writers express actions with verbs. In contrast, writers infested with nominalization—often contracted through unsafe intercourse with bureaucrats, psychobabblers, and educational administrators—convert actions into nouns. Instead of saying, "Effective writers express actions with verbs," the suffering nominalizer prefers to say, "For the production of a prose style that utilizes the principles of writing that are most highly regarded as effective, the expression of an action through the use of a verb is the method most highly preferred." Not only are such sentences longer and deader, but they are also less clear. (For excellent advice on how to recover from nominalization, see Williams, 1985.)

To help students overcome my top three peeves, I usually line-edit an early occurrence of a flabby passage and then ask the writer to do the same sort of thing throughout.

2. Is the Draft Free of Errors in Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling? Although I have argued that teachers should not circle errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling, I do not mean that these errors should go unmentioned. On the contrary, they should be mentioned emphatically, and some stick-and-carrot strategy should be applied to motivate students to find and fix them. My strategy is to write an end comment like this: "Sally, your grade has been reduced for excessive sentence-level errors. Please find them and fix them; then resubmit paper, and I will raise your grade." (How high I raise the grade depends on how successful the student is in reducing the number of sentence errors.) If I think students need extra help finding the errors, I sometimes place X's in the margin next to lines with rule-based mistakes. Another

approach is to line-edit one or two paragraphs for a student and then ask the student to do something similar for the rest of the draft. If you line-edit, however, be careful to distinguish rule-based mistakes from stylistic choices. When you cross something out, for example, students often do not know if what they did was “wrong” or just stylistically unpolished. Therefore, in addition to line editing, you need to explain in a marginal comment why you made the changes.

Another strategy for helping students with sentence errors is to note characteristic patterns of errors. Shaughnessy (1977) demonstrated that what often looks like a dozen errors in a student’s draft may really be one error repeated a dozen times. If you can help a student learn a rule or a principle, you can often clear up many mistakes in one swoop. Sometimes teaching a principle is a simple matter (explaining the difference between *it’s* and *its*); at other times, it is more complex (explaining when to place a comma in front of *and* when not to). Even if you do not explain the rule or principle, helping students recognize a repeated pattern of error is a real service.

Sam, you have lots of sentence errors here, but many of them are of two types: (1) apostrophe errors—you tend to use apostrophes with plurals rather than possessives; (2) comma splices (remember those from English class?).

Some Suggestions for Writing

Revision-Oriented End Comments _____

On the last page of a student paper, a teacher usually writes a summarizing end comment. If teachers think of their end comments as justifying or explaining the grade, they tend to emphasize the bad features of the paper (“This is why I gave you a C”). But if they think of their purpose as guiding revision, their end comments can be more affirmative. A paper that deserves a C as a final product is often an excellent draft even though it has not reached finished-product standards. I sometimes tell my students that a good draft is to a final product as a caterpillar is to a butterfly: all that’s missing is the metamorphosis.

In making effective end comments, the teacher needs to imagine the butterfly while praising the caterpillar. The purpose of the end comment is not to justify the current grade but to help writers make the kinds of revisions that will move the draft toward excellence. The strategy I recommend is to follow a strengths–major problems–recommendations formula: I try to write an end com-

ment that sums up the strengths of the draft, that identifies the main problems to be worked on, and that makes a few specific suggestions for what to do next. Here are some examples of end comments that follow this formula:

Pete, you seem to be on the right track with quite a few very promising sections, but your ideas are thin, lacking both focus and development. Please make an appointment with me (or the writing center) to work on finding a better focus and a thesis for this paper.

Excellent draft, Sarah. Although I had trouble at first seeing your problem and thesis, along the way you present very interesting ideas. I especially liked your section on the Mapplethorpe photographs. But in many places I was lost. For your next draft, you need to do the following:

1. Rewrite your introduction so that it more clearly introduces the reader to your problem.
2. Work on organization. I could find your thesis, but many of your paragraphs have no topic sentences and aren't clearly linked to your argument. Also, as I have noted in the margins, many places need more development.
3. Rethink what you are saying about Sontag. I think you misread her argument, especially in paragraph 2.

Paula: When this essay is good, it is very, very good. I like very much your discussion of Diem's leadership and the rise of dissent in Vietnam. Your consideration of our fears of not being taken seriously by Diem is also strong. In these discussions, you set your ideas clearly and with strong evidence.

However, there are other hills and valleys here as well. You need to focus the reader on your primary concerns in an introduction. You need to expand your consideration of the military and bring in more evidence toward the end. For your revision, pay particular attention to my marginal comments, where I note the places that need more expansion and development. This is perhaps one draft away from an A.

Conclusion: A Review of General Principles _____

The following list summarizes the main principles of commentary discussed in this chapter.

General Procedures

1. Comment first on ideas and organization: encourage students to solve higher-order problems before turning to lower-order problems.
2. Whenever possible, make positive comments. Praise strong points.

3. Try to write an end comment that reveals your interest in the student's ideas. Begin the end comment with an emphasis on good points and then move to specific recommendations for improvement.
4. Avoid overcommenting. Particularly avoid emphasizing lower-order concerns until you are satisfied with higher-order concerns. If writing lacks focus or a thesis statement and a plan for supporting it, it is premature to worry about paragraphs or sentence structure.
5. As you read the essay, indicate your reaction to specific passages. Particularly comment on the ideas, raising queries and making suggestions on how the argument could be improved. Praise parts that you like.
6. Resist the urge to circle misspellings, punctuation errors, and so forth. Research suggests that students will improve more quickly if they are required to find and correct their own errors.

Marking for Ideas

7. The end comment should summarize your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the writer's ideas. Challenge writers to deepen and complicate their thought at a level appropriate to their intellectual development.

Marking for Organization

8. Use marginal comments to indicate places where structure becomes confusing.
9. Praise good titles, good thesis statements, good transitions, and so forth.

Marking for Sentence Structure

10. Although I recommend against marking or circling sentence errors, you might consider placing X's in the margins where they occur. When you return the papers, either withhold a grade or lower the grade until students who made substantial numbers of errors have reedited their work. Most students should be able to find and fix a majority of their errors. Students with severe sentence-level problems may need to seek personal tutoring.
11. Note places where sentence-level problems cause genuine unclarity (as opposed to annoyance). Marginal comments such as "Tangled sentence" or "This passage is garbled" help the writer see where problems occur.

Some Further Principles

12. Try to make comments as legible and as straightforward as possible. As anyone knows who has looked at papers graded by a colleague, teachers' comments are frequently difficult to decipher. They are often unintentional examples of first-draft writing—clear to the writer but baffling to others.
13. Whenever possible, use one-on-one conferences instead of commenting on papers. Perhaps my most frequent end comment is this: "You're making real progress. Please see me so that I can help you move to the next stage." An invitation for personal help is particularly useful when the student's problems involve higher-order concerns.
14. Finally, think of your commentary as personal correspondence with the student, something that makes your own thinking visible and permanent. Try to invest in your commentary the tone of a supportive coach—someone interested in the student as a person and in the improvement of the student's powers as a writer and thinker.

Developing and Applying Grading Criteria

Trying to decide the relative merits of a piece of writing can lead to a tangle of problems. Given a set of student essays, instructors frequently disagree, often vehemently, with one another's assessments. Because we teachers have little opportunity to discuss grading practices with colleagues, we often develop personal criteria that can seem eccentric to others. In fact, the first half-hour of a paper-grading workshop can be demoralizing even to the most dedicated proponents of writing across the curriculum. What do teachers actually want when they ask students to write?

Answering this question is not easy. Professional writing teachers grant that the assessment of writing, like the assessment of any art, involves subjective judgments. But the situation is not entirely relative either, for objective standards for good writing can be formulated, and readers with different tastes can be trained to assess writing samples with surprisingly high correlation. But the potential for wide disagreement about what constitutes good writing is a factor with which both students and teachers must contend.

The Problem of Criteria

The extent of this disagreement was illustrated by Paul Diederich (1974) in one of the most famous experiments in composition research. Diederich collected three hundred essays written by first-year students at three different universities and had them graded

by fifty-three professional persons in six different occupational fields. He asked each reader to place the essays in nine different piles in order of "general merit" and to write a brief comment explaining what he or she liked and disliked about each essay. Diederich reported these results: "Out of the 300 essays graded, 101 received every grade from 1–9; 94 percent received either seven, eight, or nine different grades; and no essay received less than five different grades" (p. 6).

Diederich discovered, however, some order in this chaos. Through factor analysis, he identified five subgroups of readers who correlated highly with one another but not with readers in other subgroups. By analyzing the comments on the papers, Diederich concluded that each subgroup was consistently giving predominant weight to a single criterion of writing. Sixteen readers were putting main emphasis on quality of ideas; thirteen on sentence structure, usage, spelling, and punctuation; nine on organization and development; nine on creative wording or phrasing; and seven on liveliness or committed voice, a factor Diederich labeled "flavor and personality." (Diederich counted one reader in two categories; hence these numbers add up to fifty-four rather than fifty-three; see his book, pp. 6–10, for details.)

Diederich's research enabled him to develop procedures through which a diverse group of readers could be trained to increase the correlation of their grading. By setting descriptions for high, middle, and low achievement in each of his five criterion areas—ideas, organization, sentence structure, wording, and flavor—Diederich was able to train readers to balance their assessments over the five criteria. Since then, numerous researchers have refined or refocused Diederich's criteria and have developed successful strategies for training readers as evaluators (see, particularly, Cooper and Odell, 1977, and White, 1992, 1994). Many of these strategies have classroom applications also, for training students as evaluators of writing greatly improves their ability to give high-quality advice in peer review workshops.

Providing Criteria for Students

Even though readers can be trained to apply uniform criteria to student essays, these criteria often vary from discipline to discipline (and from teacher to teacher), a phenomenon that often confuses students. Not only do styles vary widely across the disciplines, but there are also fundamental differences in the way arguments are structured and elaborated—a problem students feel acutely as they move through their general education courses.

To make matters more confusing for students, different teachers within the same discipline often value different kinds of writing. Some teachers, as we have seen in Chapter Three, want students to sound like professionals in the field. Others assign narratives, personal reflections, and other alternative assignments calling for voices other than the apprentice academic.

Because of such variety of expectations, instructors should describe their criteria for judging writing and, whenever possible, provide samples of successful student papers from previous classes.

Developing Criteria and Grading Scales

Criteria for writing are usually presented to students in one of two ways: analytically or holistically. The analytic method gives separate scores for each criterion—for example, ideas, ten points; organization, ten points; sentence structure, five points—whereas the holistic method gives one score that reflects the reader's overall impression of the paper, considering all criteria at once. Many instructors prefer analytic scales because the breakdown of the grade into components, when combined with the instructor's written comments, conveys detailed information about the teacher's judgment of the essay. Some people object philosophically to analytic scoring, however, on the grounds that writing cannot be analyzed into component parts. Can ideas really be separated from organization or clarity of expression from clarity of thought? Such people prefer holistic evaluation, which does not suggest that writing is a mixture of separable elements. Also, holistic grading is faster and so is often preferable when one's main concern is rapidity of assessment rather than precision of feedback.

Both analytic and holistic scoring methods can also be classified two ways: general description methods and primary trait methods. Proponents of general description argue that criteria for writing can be stated in a general or universal way (good organization, graceful sentence structure, and so forth). Proponents of the primary trait method, however, argue that criteria must be stated specifically in terms of the given writing task. For example, the criteria for a history paper detailing the origins of the electoral college would differ from those of a political science paper arguing that the electoral college should be abolished. A primary trait scale for the history paper might include criteria like these:

Does the writer make effective use of primary sources?

Does the essay explore the alternatives to the electoral college discussed at the constitutional convention?

In contrast, a primary trait scale for the political science paper might include these criteria:

Does the writer predict the consequences of abolishing the electoral college using acceptable empirical data?

Does the writer anticipate objections to these predictions and adequately respond to them?

Thus, a primary trait scale uses grading criteria keyed directly to the assignment. (Examples of different kinds of grading scales will appear later in this chapter.)

Developing Analytic Scales

Exhibit 15.1 illustrates a simple analytic scale using general description methods. Analytic scales normally list three or more criteria, almost always including quality of ideas, organization, and sentence structure. Many analytic scales are elaborate, with numerous additional categories and subcategories. Some analytic scales are dichotomous, meaning that the reader simply checks off "yes" or "no," depending on the presence or absence of certain features of the writing:

Is there a thesis statement? Yes _____ No _____

Other scales ask the reader to rate each feature of the writing along a number sequence:

Quality of thesis statement:

Low				Middle				High
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	

Many analytic scales weigh some criteria more heavily than others, depending on what the instructor wishes to emphasize. Thus, you might allot twenty-five points for ideas, fifteen points for organization, and ten points for sentence structure. But if you are particularly annoyed by careless spelling errors, you might give ten bonus points to papers with no misspelled words and deduct ten points for having more than, say, five misspelled words. Exhibits 15.2 and 15.3 illustrate analytic scales using primary trait criteria. Exhibit 15.2 is a scoring guide developed by an English professor for an assignment on Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*. The professor gives the scoring guide to students at the time she passes out the assignment. The scoring guide thus reinforces key features she expects in students' essays and serves as a checklist during peer review. Exhibit 15.3 is a scoring guide used by finance professor Dean Drenk to pro-

Exhibit 15.1. Simple Analytic Scale (General Description Method).

Scoring Guide for Essays**Quality of Ideas (_____ points)**

Range and depth of argument; logic of argument; quality of research or original thought; appropriate sense of complexity of the topic; appropriate awareness of opposing views.

Organization and Development (_____ points)

Effective title; clarity of thesis statement; logical and clear arrangement of ideas; effective use of transitions; unity and coherence of paragraphs; good development of ideas through supporting details and evidence.

Clarity and Style (_____ points)

Ease of readability; appropriate voice, tone and style for assignment; clarity of sentence structure; gracefulness of sentence structure; appropriate variety and maturity of sentence structure.

Sentence Structure and Mechanics (_____ points)

Grammatically correct sentences; absence of comma splices, run-ons, fragments; absence of usage and grammatical errors; accurate spelling; careful proofreading; attractive and appropriate manuscript form.

vide feedback on his thesis support microthemes in finance (see Chapter Five, pages 74–75). His scoring guide can be easily adapted to the needs of professors in other disciplines.

Developing Holistic Scales

Samples of holistic scales are shown in Exhibits 15.4 and 15.5. Exhibit 15.4 is a holistic scale for summary-writing assignments. Exhibit 15.5 is a holistic scale for grading physics microthemes. Holistic scoring depends on a reader's all-at-once assessment of a paper based on one attentive but quick reading. Research suggests that the correlation between readers actually increases if readers read quickly, trusting the reliability of their first impressions (White, 1994). Thus, holistic scales work best in conjunction with rapid grading and "models feedback" (see Chapter Thirteen, page 236; see also Rogers, 1995, for a discussion of holistic scoring in a chemistry course).

Conducting a Departmental Norming Session _____

A good way to improve one's grading practices is to join a conversation with colleagues about what constitutes excellent, good,

Exhibit 15.2. Analytic Scale (Primary Trait Method).

Scoring Guide for Assignment on <i>The Secret Sharer</i>					
Your essay is supposed to provide a supported answer to the following question:					
How has the experience with Leggatt changed the captain so that what he is at the end of the story is different from what he was at the beginning?					
In order to do well on this paper, you need to do these things:					
1. Have your own clear answer to this question.					
2. Support your answer with strong arguments and textual details.					
3. Make your essay clear enough for a reader to understand with one reading.					
Criterion 1. Does your essay have a thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph that answers the question regarding changes in the captain?					
no thesis or unclear thesis				clear thesis	
2	4	6	8	10	
Criterion 2. Is your thesis supported with strong argumentation and use of significant details taken from the story?					
weak argument and/or lack of details as support				strong argument and good details as support	
2	4	6	8	10	
Criterion 3. Is your paper easy for a reader to follow?					
Paragraphing and transitions	2	4	6	8	10
Clear Sentences	2	4	6	8	10
Accurate mechanics: grammar, spelling, punctuation, neatness	2	4	6	8	10

Source: Dolores Johnson

satisfactory, and poor papers. A surefire way to stimulate such conversation is to "staff-grade" with colleagues a set of essays written in response to an assignment within your discipline. One participant selects in advance four or five essays that seem to span the range of quality from excellent to poor, duplicates them for the department, and uses them to initiate discussion. In developing criteria, instructors are advised to use a number scale that does not translate directly into letter grades. A six-point scale ranging from 6 (best) to 1 (worst) is most common. Using a numerical scale tem-

Exhibit 15.3. Primary Trait Scoring Guide for Thesis Support Essays in Finance.

Grading Criteria	
Support of Theses	
A. Clarity of support:	_____
B. Logic (relationship of support to thesis):	_____
C. Sources of support	
1. Quantity	_____
2. Quality	_____
Total microtheme grade	_____
Specific Features of Your Microtheme	
_____	Grammmatical errors are numerous enough to interfere with understanding your response.
_____	The organization of your response is not clear.
_____	The logic of your support is confusing or does not make sense.
_____	Your conclusions are not warranted by your support.
_____	Your support is too imprecise or too general.

Source: Bean, Drenk, and Lee, 1982, p. 32.

porarily suspends the additional problem of variable standards for letter grades. Thus, a "hard grader" and an "easy grader" might agree that a particular essay rates a 4 on a six-point scale but disagree on how to translate that 4 into a letter grade. The hard instructor might give it a C+ and the easy instructor a B. Since standards for letter grades are a different issue from standards for ranking several pieces of writing, problems of devising criteria for writing are simplified if we separate the two issues, at least initially.

After an initial norming session in which department members reach agreement on the sample papers and develop criteria for each gradation on their scoring scale, members break into pairs to staff-grade the set of essays. Each essay is read independently by two readers, who meet periodically to compare scores and discuss discrepant grades. On a six-point scale, instructors should aim to come within one point of each other's scores. Differences of two or more points indicate a wide divergence of criteria. A departmental norming session every year or so can increase instructors' communal

Exhibit 15.4. Holistic Scale for Grading Article Summaries.

A summary should be directed toward imagined readers who have not read the article being summarized. The purpose of the summary is to give these persons a clear overview of the article's main points. The criteria for a summary are (1) accuracy of content, (2) comprehensiveness and balance, and (3) clarity, readability, and grammatical correctness.

- 6** A 6 summary meets all the criteria. The writer understands the article thoroughly. The main points in the article appear in the summary with all main points proportionately developed (that is, the writer does not spend excessive time on one main point while neglecting other main points). The summary should be as comprehensive as possible and should read smoothly, with appropriate transitions between ideas. Sentences should be clear, without vagueness or ambiguity and without grammatical or mechanical errors.
- 5** A 5 summary should still be very good, but it can be weaker than a 6 summary in one area. It may have excellent accuracy and balance, but show occasional problems in sentence structure or correctness. Or it may be clearly written but be somewhat unbalanced or less comprehensive than a 6 summary or show a minor misunderstanding of the article.
- 4** A score of 4 means "good but not excellent." Typically, a 4 summary will reveal a generally accurate reading of the article, but it will be noticeably weaker in the quality of writing. Or it may be well written but cover only part of the essay.
- 3** A 3 summary must have strength in at least one area of competence, and it should still be good enough to convince the grader that the writer has understood the article fairly well. However, a 3 summary typically is not written well enough to convey an understanding of the article to someone who has not already read it. Typically, the sentence structure of a 3 summary is not sophisticated enough to convey the sense of hierarchy and subordination found in the essay.
- 2** A 2 summary is weak in all areas of competence, either because it is so poorly written that the reader cannot understand the content or because the content is inaccurate or seriously disorganized. However, a 2 essay convinces the grader that the writer has read the essay and is struggling to understand it.
- 1** A 1 summary fails to meet any of the areas of competence.

confidence in their grading practices. For more detailed descriptions of this procedure, along with sample student essays and reader-developed scoring criteria, see White (1992). See also Bateman's discussion of scoring a set of sociology essays dealing with ethnocentrism (1990, pp. 110–116).

Determining Grades

Assigning a letter grade to a piece of writing always poses a dilemma, and I can offer no easy advice. Teachers who use analytic scales often add up each student's total score, rank the papers, and trans-

Exhibit 15.5. Holistic Scale for Grading Physics Microthemes.

- 6, 5** Microthemes in the category will show a confident understanding of the physics concepts and will explain those concepts clearly to the intended audience. A 6 theme will be clearly written throughout; will contain almost no errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar; and will have enough development to provide a truly helpful explanation to learners. A 5 theme will still be successful in teaching the physics concepts to the intended audience but may have more errors or somewhat less development than a 6. The key to microthemes in the 6, 5 category is that they must show a correct understanding of the physics and explain the concept clearly to a new learner.
- 4, 3** Microthemes in this category will reveal to the instructor that the writer probably understands the physics concepts, but lack of clarity in the writing or lack of fully developed explanations means that the microtheme would not teach the concept to new learners. Microthemes in the 4, 3 category are usually "you know what I mean" essays: someone who already understands the concepts can tell that the writer probably does, too, but someone who does not already understand the concepts would not learn anything from the explanation. This category is also appropriate for clearly written essays that have minor misunderstandings of the physics concepts or for accurate essays full of sentence-level errors.
- 2, 1** These microthemes will be unsuccessful either because the writer fails to understand the physics concepts, because the number of errors is so high that the instructor cannot determine how much the writer understands, or because the explanations lack even minimum development. Give a score of 2 or 1 if the writer misunderstands the physics, even if the essay is otherwise well written. Also give a score of 2 or 1 to essays so poorly written that the reader can't understand them.

late scores into letter grades by establishing a curve or by setting point ranges for levels of grades. Other teachers, using a more holistic method, try to develop an interior sense of what an A, B, C, or D essay looks like. If possible, it is best to read through a set of papers quickly before marking them and assigning grades, trying to get a feel for the range of responses and sizing up what the best papers are like. In grading essay exams or short papers, many teachers develop schemes for not knowing who the authors are until the papers are graded. (One method is to have students use their social security numbers rather than names; another is to have students put their names on the back of the last page.) Not knowing who wrote which essay eliminates any halo effect that might bias the grade.

To avoid grading on the curve, some teachers like to establish criteria for grading that are as objective and as consistent as possible. Although this is no easy task, the following explanation, written by Cornell University English professor Harry Shaw (1984), shows how one professor makes his decision. It is as good a guide as any I know.

How I Assign Letter Grades

In grading "thesis papers" . . . I ask myself the following set of questions:

1. Does the paper have a thesis?
2. Does the thesis address itself to an appropriate question or topic?
3. Is the paper free from long stretches of quotations and summaries that exist only for their own sakes and remain unanalyzed?
4. Can the writer produce complete sentences?
5. Is the paper free from basic grammatical errors?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," I give the paper some kind of C. If the answer to most of the questions is "no," its grade will be even lower.

For papers which have emerged unscathed thus far, I add the following questions:

6. How thoughtful is the paper? Does it show real originality?
7. How adequate is the thesis? Does it respond to its question or topic in a full and interesting way? Does it have an appropriate degree of complexity?
8. How well organized is the paper? Does it stick to the point? Does every paragraph contain a clear topic sentence? If not, is another kind of organizing principle at work? Are the transitions well made? Does it have a real conclusion, not simply a stopping place?
9. Is the style efficient, not wordy or unclear?
10. Does the writing betray any special elegance?
11. Above all, can I hear a lively, intelligent, interesting human voice speaking to me (or to another audience, if that's what the writer intends) as I read the paper?

Depending on my answers to such questions, I give the paper some kind of A or some kind of B [pp. 149–150].

Conclusion: Expecting Excellence

When students know an instructor's criteria for assigning grades—and when they have the opportunity to help one another apply these criteria to works in progress—the quality of their final products will improve gratifyingly. It is satisfying indeed to see how well many undergraduates can write when they are engaged in their projects and follow the stages of the writing process through multiple drafts and peer reviews. By setting high standards, by encouraging multiple drafts, by refusing to be the first human being to read a student's paper—in short, by expecting excellence—instructors can feel justified in applying rigorous criteria.

But it is important too that students never think of their writing as "finished." In the best of all worlds, students would be allowed to rewrite a paper if they wished to improve it further. The presence of grades should never override the more important emphasis on revision and improvement.

The point, then, of assigning writing across the curriculum is to engage students in the process of inquiry and active learning. Although one of our goals is to improve students' communication skills, writing is more than communication; it is a means of learning, thinking, discovering, and seeing. When teachers give students good problems to think about—and involve them actively in the process of solving these problems—they are deepening students' engagement with the subject matter and promoting their intellectual growth. By adding well-designed writing assignments to a course, teachers give students continued practice in critical thinking. Teachers know when their approach is working: the performance of their students improves.