News Roundup—Sybil Priebe, Editor, “TYCA to You”

Tips for Grading a Wee Bit Less

Hopefully, by the time this is published, the extremely cold tundra of the upper Midwest will have thawed into spring, and we’ll come out of hibernation and use these wonderful tips and tricks and suggestions (for reducing/managing the time spent grading while still providing the feedback students need to improve as writers) as we prep for summer and/or fall courses.

Here is a collection of my own tips and tricks and suggestions.

1. Once an “issue” becomes repetitive, I make an executive decision to create a meme regarding said “issue.”
2. Acronyms.
3. Emojis.
4. I copy and paste directly from the rubric as I grade online.
5. I keep a “Common Responses” document on my desktop with items such as:
   > End citations should ALWAYS be more than a URL.
   > Unfortunately, late work is not accepted. Watch for bonus points and complete the rest of the required work for this course.
   > For technical issues, …
   > From the Syllabus: “Students will not be allowed to use computer problems as an excuse as to why their work is late. They are responsible for backing up their work. You are strongly encouraged to back up your work […] Strange things can happen when technology is involved. Be prepared.”

The collection above is, of course, just the beginning. I’ve used writing conferences—both online and face-to-face—to ensure that students’ essays are on
the right track before the deadline. I’ve implemented grading conferences, where the students take me through their essay alongside the rubric and essentially “grade themselves” after the deadline. Like others, I’ve tried a whole host of writing workshops and “interventions” and concepts. I suppose the best assessment tool for me right now is the Redo. Students in my Engl110 are allowed a redo with their large projects; this allows them to hand in something and then revise from there.

**TYCA-Midwest Report from Alan Hutchison**

Everyone who teaches composition has their own set of survival skills and strategies for balancing the time spent grading while still providing feedback to students. Here are a few responses:

Colleen Richardson from Metropolitan Community College wrote: “Rubrics really help. Also, and this may sound weird, but taking a class and seeing what you find as an acceptable response really helps to illustrate what your response needs.”

Rob Ryder, adjunct professor of English, Columbus State Community College, comments:

Managing my grading workload has been made considerably easier by using a technique I designed call Unlocking the Power of Micro-Conferences.

Micro-conferences are held one to two weeks before a major paper is due. I have students sign up for a four-minute conference in the class session before conferences are held. Students are asked to bring a printed copy of their current draft and one question or concern they have about their paper. While conference days move fast and are exhausting, they’re worth the effort. I get a quick look at ideas students are developing in their papers, make note of things that students are struggling with, and hear from students about the issues they’re having with their writing.

The one-on-one interaction with students is valuable to both students and their instructor. In the past, the written feedback I’ve provided on student papers have not been addressed in the revised writings. However, when errors (or suggestions on how to improve the paper) are pointed out in the micro-conferences, students quickly fix their mistakes and make the needed changes. Pointing directly to what needs to be fixed and offering a quick suggestion on how to correct the error seems to really get through to students in a way that time-consuming written feedback doesn’t. The students and I make a few quick notes on their printed papers and I offer them a few extra credit points if they hand in the printed copy of the paper from the micro-conference when they hand in their final drafts.

When the time comes to grade the final drafts, the micro-conferences I held earlier are invaluable to lightening my grading load for the following reasons:

> I’ve already seen how effectively each student is organizing their writing
> I’ve heard from each student about the writing challenges they are experiencing
I’ve pointed out a few key things each student can do to strengthen their writing.

Micro-conferences help me confidently assign grades with the tools necessary to fairly assess the quality of each student’s work. This teaching strategy has helped me turn the tsunami of student writing that I receive several times each semester into a busy but vastly more manageable workload. In addition, the micro-conferences allow students to better understand expectations and come closer to meeting the goals of the writing assignment.

For my colleague Eden Pearson and me, it is a case of training our students how to respond to a draft and modeling the process. We call it “Drafting in a Post-Process World.” The training is a whole class endeavor, not an individual conference. We move through this process as a group, and we do not grade individual drafts. The end result is making students aware of their own process and ultimately making them better and more reflective writers.

Here’s how the workshop functions:

1. Student writers read their drafts aloud to the class.
2. Students are asked to comment on the content and structure only; the writer listens but does not comment. I facilitate the process, and students may not repeat comments others have made.
3. A volunteer “scribe” jots down the student comments.
4. After all participants comment, we summarize and comment directed to the class, not just to the writer.
5. The writer is invited into the conversation.
6. All students are then asked to write a reflection. It begins, “As a result of this workshop, I will . . .”

For this type of workshop to work, the students must be trained. (Students are uncomfortable responding to each other’s work and try to default to surface comments about grammar and punctuation.) In order to get them to delve deeper into the essay, they must be taught what to look for.

Benefits include the following:

> Students focusing on content and structure
> Forces a unified analysis
> Fosters collaborative learning
> Fosters reflection

Students learn how to take control of their own learning, as opposed to dutifully doing (or not doing) what teachers suggest in their draft comments. It is based on what Kathleen Blake Yancey calls “reflective transfer,” which she defines as “a writer’s ability to gather knowledge and apply that knowledge to similar problems” (51). Everyone has their own set of survival skills in the composition classroom. The beauty of a TYCA conference is having an opportunity to get together and talk shop. I have been immeasurably enriched by this process.
Work Cited


Alan Hutchison may be reached at ajhutchison@dmacc.edu.

**TYCA-Northeast Report from Leigh Jonaitis**

How do we grade when we have more students and less time than ever? It’s a question that plagues us all, from the novice instructor to the seasoned one. Here are some examples from the many useful suggestions provided.

- I ask students to submit assignments via Google Drive and provide feedback via its commenting and “suggesting” features. I also use Google Keep as a repository for frequently used comments, since it incorporates well with Drive. I like that I can copy and paste in explanations that may be lengthy and time-consuming to type. I can even include links to YouTube videos or websites in my saved comments. With Google Drive, too, students can respond directly to my comments with further questions, and I get an email notifying me that they’ve responded to my comment; from that email, I can respond directly to the students’ questions or concerns.

- Using rubrics helps a lot. Mostly, I like to mark online. I download the papers to Word and then use the editing tool on Word to make comments and make some grammar corrections. I can make comments on Word easier than when I did so in Blackboard, and for some reason, it goes faster than writing on papers.

- I’ve set the auto-text in Word to work like autocomplete on a phone. If I type “comma” it replaces the text with a few sentences about comma splices and a link for resources online to read more. Doing so for the top 10 or so issues saves a lot of time, gives students more targeted feedback, and makes space for the deeper commenting while helping me manage my time across five sections a semester.

- I create grading checklists and rubrics. I will circle in red the errors I see; then I will use assignment-specific checklists and rubrics to grade. I check boxes such as “contained sentence fragments” or “lacked organization” and provide a space at the bottom of the checklist for comments. I also then circle the appropriate domains on the rubric and have five-minute conferences with each student when I hand back the paper. I review the checklist and the rubric, point out some errors that have been circled, and review my comments with them.

- I ask students to submit drafts along the way, for which I provide feedback. That way, by the time they submit the final draft, hopefully they have revised and edited per my comments. If so, the paper is fairly easy to grade.

- I use grading conferences. Rather than conferencing and then taking the papers home to grade, my conferences end with the project grade. Each
conference is a discussion of the writing process, strengths/weaknesses, and strategies related to affective issues. My students mention this practice as being something they appreciate most about my teaching, the turnaround time is within five days of submission, and I don’t grade at home.

Many thanks to those faculty who shared their ideas about grading: Jeffrey Breitenfeldt, Margot Edlin, Gwen Guerke, Jerry Kavanagh, Cheri Lemieux Spiegel, Susan Lewis, Kimberly McFetridge, Alison Randall, Sarah Snyder, Robin M. Strom-Mackey, Nicole Truitt, Jessi Ulmer, and Mark Zockoll.

Leigh Jonaitis may be reached at ljonaitis@bergen.edu.

TYCA-Pacific Coast Report from Sravani Banerjee

Most composition faculty struggle with time management when it comes to student feedback. What is most effective? What is most efficient? How do we manage our time while grading stacks of essays? Providing effective feedback is as important as teaching in the classroom. Many instructors feel that students rarely read the comments on their papers, so individual conferencing is the most effective method of providing feedback. However, that might not always be possible. Even experienced instructors struggle with providing effective and timely feedback.

Instructors use a variety of methods to provide feedback. One faculty suggested audio feedback for assignments submitted on CMS, which might reduce the time spent on writing comments. Another faculty suggested setting a timer for each paper. The time spent on each paper would vary depending on whether it’s a 10-page research paper or a much shorter in-class writing assignment. She suggests never taking a break while reading a paper, but definitely doing so after every five papers. She also suggests responding immediately and not repeating the same comment twice. For online submissions, she suggests having a Word document open and copying and pasting the comment, if one is writing the same comment more than once. This also helps her see patterns in the comments. While commenting, she focuses her efforts on one repeated grammatical error, one issue with clarity, and a couple of comments concerning thesis and analysis. The end note is a formula, and she recommends memorizing a stock of statements such as: “you stuck to one topic per body paragraph,” “I could hear your voice, which is an advanced skill,” “Well organized and clearly written. Your process is working,” “I can tell you’re practicing concepts (topic sentence, information/evidence, analysis, thesis) learned in class. Great.” She suggests never saying “good” or “needs work” without adding something specific.

Another effective method is to follow the rubric that should be introduced to the students early in the semester and used for peer evaluations as well. Some instructors may just circle the relevant information on the rubric and attach it to the paper, while others add additional notes within the paper or on the rubric. An
An effective feedback strategy can be to create an in-class activity rather than marking the same comments on 25 papers. Students remember more from classroom activities than they do from marginal comments or end notes. If the majority of students wrote in the passive voice, it’s time to teach the passive/active voice lesson. This will save time in not marking the papers but teaching the lesson in class and using the papers as part of the activity. If most students did not explain their points, it’s time to teach or review analysis. This will help instructors save time while facilitating an important revision and editing activity.

Self-evaluation is a great learning tool and cuts back on grading time. The day the first paper is due, one instructor gives students a survey of questions that requires them to write their own feedback in the margins before they turn in the paper. Then they turn it in with their own comments. This way, if they identified what was wrong or right with their work, the instructor only has to write “ok,” or a check mark next to their own comment. If they got it wrong, she writes how they need to revise their feedback on their writing.

Finally, repetition of terminology can speed up the grading process. One instructor repeats terminology in class and uses it as shorthand in the comments. She tries to be consistent with her terminology, which speeds up the grading process because she has stock phrases/sentences that echo what she has discussed in class. Marginal comments and end notes are places to remind students what they’ve learned or what strategy they can use to practice what they are learning. In fact, reinforcing terminology and concepts helps tailor it to each student’s essay while writing comments.

Sravani Banerjee may be reached at sravani.banerjee@evc.edu.

**TYCA-Pacific Northwest Report from Teresa Thonney**

I asked colleagues in the Pacific Northwest for their time-saving tips for responding to student writing. Instructors from Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Canada offered the following suggestions.

When responding to drafts:

> Have students identify what they would like feedback on; then focus on what the student has requested.
> Provide feedback on sections of papers rather than full drafts.
> Display several drafts in class and discuss what works in them and what could be improved. Then have students evaluate each other’s papers using a rubric.
> Have students use different colors to mark a thesis, a topic sentence, a specific example, and so forth, so they can “see” what’s missing in their drafts.
> Devote class sessions to meeting individually with students to give feedback.
> Record 5–10 minute audio feedback using the voice memo feature of a smart phone.
> Identify patterns of problems in drafts from an entire class and write a letter to the class about how to address those problems. Ask students to reflect on which suggestions apply to their papers and think critically about what changes to make.

When grading papers:
> Type generic comments for recurring problems or assignments; then use macros, ShortKeys, or copy and paste to insert the comments into papers where they apply.
> Record comments and attach a digital file in Blackboard or use Dragon NaturallySpeaking to turn talk into text.
> Refer to course handouts instead of repeating information already provided to students.
> Provide links to explanations of grammar or documentation issues.
> Use rubrics.
> Limit feedback to what students can use in their next paper instead of mentioning everything they need to improve on.
> Note patterns of grammar or punctuation errors but not every error.
> Model revision for the first instance of a recurring problem and ask the student to locate additional occurrences.
> Give feedback on drafts but only one comment and a grade on final papers.
> Set a timer!
> Assign short writings (1–2 pages), which students can later combine to create a longer paper. Short papers allow teacher and students to focus on a limited number of skills at one time.
> Respond to a “bundle” of assignments (e.g., drafts of essays, seminar participation, presentations) at the same time, providing extensive feedback on the assignment needing it most and briefly commenting on the others.
> Require a meeting with any student who submits a paper needing significant revision to discuss a revision plan.
> Don’t provide written feedback if students can’t revise (on a final paper, for instance). If students want feedback, offer to meet in person.

My colleagues offered many good suggestions, but one recurring idea is summarized in the following response: I’ve tried it all: minimal marking (directly on the paper), a variety of editorial abbreviations so that students refer to a key, margin writing, end note writing, circling prefab remarks on rubrics, one-point rubrics, marking in Speedgrader, writing in the margins in Speedgrader, using a rubric in Canvas, audio feedback, and once even video feedback. It seems very little of it is faster or slower (not to mention what is empirically efficacious for student and teacher).

We may not have “the answer” to providing feedback in a time-efficient way, but it’s not for lack of trying!

Teresa Thonney may be reached at tthonney@columbiabason.edu.
TYCA-Southwest Report from Liz Ann Báez Aguilar

What tips, tricks, or suggestions have you discovered for reducing/managing the time spent grading while still providing the feedback students need to improve as writers?

After eliciting some feedback from several of my colleagues, I realized that there could be an ongoing list of time savers, but what I found to be the most unique is the focus on the student-teacher exchange; this superseded all of the various methods to becoming more efficient in grading papers. Professor Michael Berberich of Galveston College shared some meaningful advice:

Years ago, I realized that there was no end to the efficiency game. Or perhaps more aptly put, the real end game of efficiency was to become so fantastically efficient that I would squeeze out of teaching the very things I most enjoyed. And what I most enjoyed was all that danged time-consuming interacting with students amidst their struggles with writing. So, I made a philosophical decision: no more of that coded “6d” or “chpt 9” or “exercise pg. 87” marginalia […]. I rejected efficiency in principle. I write out all comments. Thereby I enjoy the job more. Relationships may be work, indeed, but to me they are not even a “job” really. In this manner, I have refused to let my teaching become simply a “job.” That having been said, let me offer one other thought. An “A” piece of writing generally takes less time to grade than a “C” or “D” piece of writing. So, if students learn well enough to write “A” papers at the end of the semester, the time teaching in a course is front-end loaded (to borrow a term from my number-crunching accounting friends) at the beginning of the semester. Papers at the end of the semester take far less time to grade because they are far better, taken as a whole. Ta da!

Thus, I provide you with some favorite methods toward initiating conversation with the students about papers to share with you:

> Require a tutor review for every paper—this will allow you to save time and focus your attention on the major issues affecting your students’ writing process.
> Provide an essay checklist for your students with the requirements for each essay—this does sound rather prescriptive, but it will allow students to focus on all of the components that you require for their writing, and you can initiate a conversation with this student in this regard.
> The essay workshop implemented several weeks prior to a deadline will definitely address specific needs for all papers if you target specific areas such as introduction, conclusion, unity and coherence, and so forth.

On February 12, 2018, The Chronicle of Higher Education published Professor Michael Millner’s essay entitled, “Why I Stopped Writing on My Students’ Papers.” Millner began to open the doors to conversing with his students about their papers...
for a period of about 20–30 minutes as opposed to making the comments on their papers. He realized that the conversation led to a much more profound understanding of the student’s self-reflection. Millner stated, “I came to have a better sense of my students’ lives and experiences and how all of that might connect with the work we do in the classroom. I didn’t blame them anymore for quickly glancing at the grade on their papers and skimming my comments. They were making a point about this way of communicating, which was on a perfect continuum with their worlds of work schedules and bureaucratic managers. When the written comments disappeared, and a more relational dynamic developed in its place, student and professor alike discovered something new.”

In the end, as educators, the amount of endless hours of grading, conferencing with students, or attributing new methodology into the classroom experience is very much a representation of what we love to do—to teach, to learn, and to help students become more effective writers.

_Liz Ann Báez Aguilar may be reached at laguilar@alamo.edu._

**TYCA-West Report from Robert Lively**

Anyone teaching in the two-year college knows the burden of teaching somewhere between four and six classes a semester. What’s even more daunting is the grind of grading and giving substantive feedback to our students. Over the years people have developed many techniques for trying to give substantive feedback in time-saving ways to help ease the weight of the paper load.

Beyond simply using rubrics, scholars have tried various ways to give substantive feedback. Haswell’s “Minimal Marking” suggests avenues for alleviating the workload that is still generative. Haswell’s minimal marking “1) facilitates rather than judges, 2) emphasizes performance rather than finished product, 3) provides double feedback, before and after revision, and 4) helps bridge successive drafts by requiring immediate revision” (600). This style has been modified by many faculty who develop hierarchical systems of commenting focusing on more global issues, usually prioritizing two to five elements on the writing assignment to add deeper, more thorough feedback. Since many first-year writing students can’t prioritize comments about organization or minor surface-level mistakes, the instructors can, by use of their focused feedback, teach the students priorities in revision.

Other instructors I talked to indicated that they created their own form of markup shorthand. Most instructors are familiar with the typical editing marks, but instructors have developed their own shorthand for discussing revision strategies. They codify the shorthand in either the syllabus or provide a handout they discuss with the students. The shorthand marks are then followed up with a detailed letter at the end of the draft, with further explication about possible revision strategies.

In online platform environments, such as responding in Canvas, responding can seem even more time-consuming. The digital environment sometimes seems like the students are really disconnected from instructor’s comments. Some instructors create macros of the most common mistakes they see in student writing,
where they can easily add in “canned” comments on minor issues, and then save the more substantive revision suggestions for their comments. Faculty who use this say it saves them time by letting them focus on the major issues in organization, idea development, and rhetorical strategies.

The last idea on giving substantive feedback in ways that may save time is by working through electronic media for giving comments. Our online platform contains an audiovisual program where instructors can leave either verbal or visual comments. Many programs exist that are similar. Instructors I interviewed suggested that setting up the software may initially seem like it takes longer, but once you are set up, the programs allow you to record revision ideas in much more detailed ways since talking is so much faster than typing. While this may sound rather retro, à la Don Murray’s student conferences, instructors who use this suggest it is a great way to humanize yourself as an instructor to your online students, and it gives nuance to suggestions that written comments sometimes fail to achieve. Student feedback also suggests they appreciate the instructor’s voice in feedback and revision advice.

**Works Cited**


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*Robert Lively may be reached at rob_lively@sbcglobal.net.*