

Grading with an Attitude

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Of marking errors, writing comments in the margins, and assigning grades, Mark Gellis concludes: “I was wasting my time.” With the support of other experienced writing teachers he was reading, Gellis adopted a system of responding to student writing that involves less marking and more conferencing. In this essay published in *Pedagogy* (Fall 2002), he reports on the results of this approach. Gellis teaches at Kettering University in Flint, Michigan.

I have a bad attitude about grading.

Actually, I have a bad attitude overall. It’s sad but true. I think that what I do as a teacher is important, but I think that my family and my own interests are even more important. And I have come to see the wisdom of the saying “No one ever put ‘I should have spent more time at the office’ on his tombstone.” It may be a cliché, but we really do get only so many heartbeats. So I try to keep things in perspective and use my time wisely.

One of the areas in which my attitude has surfaced is the grading of papers. I used to spend a great deal of time responding to each paper, reading carefully and identifying fully any possible flaw by writing extensive comments in the margins. I would then hand the papers back to my students, hoping that they would read my responses and learn from them. I was very much in tune with the tradition of composition that Edward M. White (1996: 13) critiques, hoping that “an individual personal response will lead a student to revision or, more likely, to better work on the next paper.”

I have come to realize that, for the most part, I was wasting my time. In his landmark essay “The Listening Eye,” Donald M. Murray (1979) does writing teachers a great service by sharing his experiences and insights on the subjects of grading and student-teacher conferences. I suspect that Murray is right when he suggests that most students read our comments only to learn what grades they have received and, briefly, why. Once their curiosity has been sated, they seldom use their papers as tools for improving either their writing or their understanding of the subjects on which they have written. Unless revision is required, it is highly unlikely that they will work through their errors, learning by producing improved versions of their papers. How often, after all, do we go back to a conference paper that we have written and work on it if we are not trying to prepare it for publication (or another conference)?

There are other reasons that providing feedback to students through written comments is often a waste of time. According to a study by Nancy Sommers (1999), the time-consuming nature of grading forces many teachers to rely on generalities, such as “Pay attention to your reader” or “Avoid passive voice.” Such comments are so vague that they have only limited usefulness even when students do pay attention to them. Furthermore, students sometimes misunderstand or are even misled by our comments; for example, some may focus on more frequently marked but often less important surface-level errors rather than on more serious problems with development, tone, and organization. Since we are not available in person to emphasize what we wish to emphasize or to correct any misunderstandings, forcing students to rely primarily on written comments can steer them in the wrong direction.

In short, much of the time we spend carefully explicating problems in our students’ writing might be spent watching HBO for all the good it does. This does not mean that providing feedback is useless. Students have a right to know how well they did on a project, and grading probably motivates many students to work harder than they would if they knew their papers

would not be graded. But what we want above all is for our students to learn, and most of the learning takes place while they compose their papers.

Murray (1979) does not doubt that we should give students feedback; he questions how we should do it. So how do we make grading and responding more useful? What I have done is to emphasize different tasks. I still spend about the same amount of time on each student and each paper, but instead of handing papers back to students in class, I require them to meet with me for conferences, either one-on-one or in small groups.

This is not a new idea. Twenty years ago Alan Rose (1982) described a similar method of using face-to-face conferences as opposed to simply providing students with written feedback. What is surprising is how few of us have taken advantage of such conferences as a pedagogical tool. When I grade a paper now, I do it quickly. I look for the big picture. What does it deserve, overall, and what are the main reasons—the biggest strengths and the biggest weaknesses? To identify and explain them, I rely on an evaluation system similar to the one developed and outlined in *Four Worlds of Writing* (Lauer et al. 1991), using the categories of focus/ideas, development/tone, organization/format, style, and conventions. I write few comments in the margins, although I do underline and circle a lot of things and use proofreading symbols to identify some specific errors. But I am not writing for the students; I am writing for myself. Because I know that I will be meeting with them and going over their papers with them, I do not have to explain every error in writing in the kind of detail that I would use if written comments were my only way of providing them with feedback. All I need to do is to make sure that I have identified those errors, so I can find them again when I talk with my students. In other words, I have streamlined my written comments into my notes for student-teacher conferences.

I also use what I call “Just in Time Grading.” (I teach at a university where roughly 75 percent of the students are engineering majors, so jokes that refer to trends in business and industry tend to go over well.) My students do not simply drop by to get their papers back. I ask them to sign up in advance for conferences. Since I know which students will be coming on which days, I plan my grading around the conference schedule, trying to grade papers no more than forty-eight hours before my conferences with the students who have written them. That way, the papers remain fresh in my mind. Furthermore, since I see only six to twelve students a day (any more and my ability to offer useful commentary drops off; the meetings start to blur into one long generic conference), I can pace both the grading and the conferences so that I do not tire or burn out. Every student gets more of my attention, both when I am grading papers and when I am talking to the students about those papers.

My advice about how to conference is simple. First, tell your students what they did well before you explain what they did badly. It boosts their morale and makes them more willing to listen to the “bad news.” Second, offer constructive criticism. Focus on solving problems. Discussing problems for their own sake is a dead end. Third, focus on only a few things. Know before you meet with a student “what is most important for that student to discuss” (Sperling 1992: 70). I sometimes tell students that one aspect of good writing is to do one thing well instead of ten things badly. The same is true for conferences. If you tell students about every single error in their papers, most of them will be overwhelmed; they will shut down and stop listening to you (Harris 1979; Shuman 1979; Horvath 1984).

Spending more of my time speaking with my students has proved beneficial. Looking them in the eye and telling them that this sentence needs work because of this problem, or that these paragraphs lack development, and working them through the solutions to these

problems are concrete, active forms of teaching and learning that can improve their future performance. This approach also communicates to students that the instructor cares about them and is serious about quality, and both points will motivate most students to work harder. Moreover, general comments already written in the margins become concrete and specific when applied to papers while the students are there to follow along. Students who are still confused then immediately have a chance to ask for further clarification. Thus, conferences increase the chances that our students will understand what we want them to do. Finally, conferences give us an opportunity to know them as individuals, and vice versa, which is not only good in and of itself but almost certainly improves the attitude of some students in the classroom.

In short, I have retained the part of grading that strikes me as useful—individual, personal responses—but in the form of active, engaged dialogue, rather than static comments and recommendations that may or may not be read or put into practice. While the system is hardly perfect (sometimes students miss conferences; sometimes there is no way to avoid having twenty conferences in a day; sometimes students are tired and are not going to listen or learn much, no matter what I do; sometimes I just don't know how to help them with a particular writing problem), it has eliminated many of the problems I have had with grading papers.

Some may ask whether it is possible to grade quickly and accurately assess a student's performance. Can less be more? I think so. Usually, we know quickly whether a paper is an A, a B, or a C and why it deserves that grade. What takes the most time in grading is explaining this in writing. But again, these explanations probably do little good; either our students do not read much of what we write, or we overwhelm them with commentary.

The time I spend on grading—responding to papers, identifying their major strengths and weaknesses, and determining the letter grades—is greatly reduced; instead, I focus my energy on having productive discussions with my students in conferences. I also have to make fewer compromises in my personal life. I can have my cake and eat it, too, doing as good a job as I ever did before as a teacher (and quite possibly a better one) while spending more time with and on my family, friends, and interests. I make no apologies for having improved my pedagogy so that I could improve the quality of my life.

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