

TEACHING WRITING: THE ART OF PROVIDING FEEDBACK

by Joan Casey, IECA (MA)



Until I took a course called “Teachers as Writers: Teaching Writing Across the Disciplines” I taught writing as product not process. The product, the 500-word college essay, took precedence over what the late writer and teacher Donald Murray described as “the process of discovery through language,” the thinking, the drafting and the revision which is required to produce one’s best writing. Process required time of which my students—with their sports and drama schedules, and AP course demands—had little. Looming deadlines were often the enemy and electronic feedback via e-mail became the norm. My students knew their first drafts would need work when they hit the send button. And my feedback did little to inspire their confidence.

So what is the best way to provide feedback and to help students not only write a college essay, but also become better writers? It starts with building a relationship with the student where he feels that there is someone who cares about what he has to say and is interested in reading his work. Here are a few ideas to make that happen:

Writer’s Portfolio and Conference. Rather than waiting until the traditional summer essay season, begin to discuss writing at the beginning of the working relationship by asking each student to provide four to five samples of writing from school, a collection of personal, opinion, and analytical work—even poetry. Schedule a writer’s conference and read everything, taking notes on the positive aspects of the work prior to the meeting. The goal is to

get to know the student both as a person and as a writer. This initial conversation should focus on asking the student questions about his topics and highlighting strengths such as vivid, descriptive sentences, effective use of anecdotes or a strong thesis. Save the criticism for another day. By creating a safe place for a student to take risks with the deeply personal art of writing, the hoped for outcome is that the student begins to trust his consultant—and believe in himself.

One Lesson at a Time.

When a student returns a first draft there is a tendency to mark up the entire document, correcting every grammatical and spelling error while also writing comments to improve content as in the following example:

The kids ~~which~~ *students that* I taught were constantly pushing me, constantly forcing me to expand my knowledge of the subjects as to give them adequate explanations—*Could you give a concrete example?* The same student asked, “why?” every morning for four weeks. *Why did he ask? Was he confused?* This constant need for explanation forced me to truly understand the animation which I showed. *What exactly is the main point you are trying to get across?*

A mixed message is being sent to the student in this example. In the final comment above the editor seems to be saying that the thesis is not clear, implying that the draft should be reworked. However, by making grammatical corrections and asking questions, the student might

conclude that since he is being asked to edit sentences, then the paragraph must be worth keeping in his draft. The student is being asked to do too many different things with this set of comments. Students should be asked to focus on one aspect of writing at a time.

Comment and Conference. A better approach is not to mark on the first draft at all except to underline a strong sentence or interesting keyword. The purpose of the



first phase of feedback should be to move the student toward further developing the idea and overall content. Consider writing a brief paragraph that begins with a positive comment such as “Zack, I did not realize that you were so skilled at animation and had experience teaching young children” for our example above. Rather than writing, “What exactly is the main point?” which is a challenging statement, consider asking a few questions: What does it mean to be a teacher of animation? What kind of questions do young children ask? What are the joys, the frustrations? Discussing these comments in a meeting or phone conference is more apt to help the writer toward a better thesis than simply telling him he is off the mark.

Be specific. Many comments frequently used by editors such as “develop more” or “how can you SHOW not TELL here” leave

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students frustrated and confused as confirmed in a 1990 study. When teachers wrote, “be more specific,” students reacted this way:

You be more specific.

It’s going to be too long then.

I’m frustrated.

When a teacher wrote, “You haven’t really thought this through.” Students responded this way:

That is a mean reply.

How do you know what I thought?

That makes me madder than you can imagine.

The lesson here is that negative comments are hurtful and vague comments are confusing. Neither will lead students to better writing. Consider creating definitions for the common feedback terms that you use and share those with your students. You might even invite them to provide feedback on your glossary.

Be Clear about the Plan. Let students know up front the writing and editing plan. Make it clear that you will focus on ideas and content in the early stages. Convey the necessity of doing multiple revisions (after all, writing is revision) and that grammar and spelling lessons will come at the end of the process.

Writing opens ideas to students if they can get beyond the fear of the blank page, the criticism, and the notion that their own lives are not rich enough to share. Approaching editing and feedback as if it is major surgery all but guarantees a less than optimal outcome, but an exchange of ideas done right is often embraced and can lead to better essays and a new appreciation for the written word.

For further reading:

Because Writing Matters, Improving Student Writing in Our Schools by National Writing Project and Carl Nagin

Engaging Ideas, The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom by John C. Bean

A Writer’s Reference, Sixth Edition, with Writing in the Disciplines by Diana Hacker

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Eric Rosenberger (NH) joined IECA in 2007 as an Associate member, and has worked as an educational consultant for 10 years. He focuses

on junior boarding schools, boarding schools, and college placements. He also helps scholar athletes with the college athletic recruiting process, and works with students from Korea and other Asian countries. Prior to becoming an educational consultant, Eric served as a senior administrator and faculty member at Avon Old Farms School in Connecticut and at St. Paul’s School in New Hampshire. He previously worked at The White House under presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan, and as executive director of the Fudan Foundation. Eric is a board member of The Concord Boys and Girls Club and Child and Family Services of New Hampshire.

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