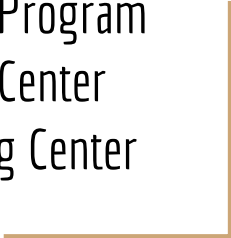# Assign More Writing—Without More Grading

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George Gopen article (2005)

"Why So Many Bright Students and So Many Dull Papers?: Peer Responded Journals as a Partial Response to the Problem of the Fake Audience"

http://wac.colostate.edu/journal/vol16/gopen.pdf

Do students enjoy writing essays? Do we enjoy reading and grading them?

How do students read our comments?

To write is to think, but much of the student's "thinking" goes into figuring out "what the professor wants."

Grading Peer Writing

I will collect all the journals and responses and read them, but I will not grade them individually in the traditional manner. You will get a grade at the end of the semester for the totality of your work, according to the following guidelines:

- If you produce a sufficient quantity of prose on a weekly basis in the manner requested, it will be hard for you to get below a B–.
- If, in addition to (1) above, you are engaged, you struggle, you open up, and you deal with the difficult, it will be hard for you to get below a B.
- If, in addition to (1) and (2) above, you demonstrate significant improvement from the beginning of the semester to its end, it will be hard for you to get below a B+.
- If, in addition to (1), (2), and (3) above, you demonstrate intellectual imagination, it will be hard for you to get below an A–.
- If you want an A, do all the above in the extreme.

Students get feedback elsewhere

"**I think it is interesting that you stated that the Bible is used as a political power**. I agree that it does serve as a political power in addressing many issues and conflicts that can arise in our current society **but I find myself disagreeing with its use as a political power in the argument between Christians and Jews about the validity of Christ.** This may sound absurd but the more we read about Jesus in both the Old and New Testament, the more it almost becomes null in helping me to discern matters between whether the Jewish or Christian beliefs are correct about who Jesus was and is. If Christian believe one thing, they will interpret the scripture to mean what they hold to be true and the Jews do the exact same thing, making the truth ambiguous and up to interpretation and belief! For example, I will use Isaiah 52 and 53. The text is the same, no matter which belief you hold but the interpretation changes depending on your choice of faith. Jews find "the servant" to be Israel, while Christians find that Jesus is the only piece to complete the puzzle of the prophecy in Isaiah.

As a Christian, I find myself seeking ways to prove my belief over the Jewish one, which I believe is naturally something that we all do. BUT I find it hard to justify my beliefs against the Jewish faith simply because they believe the New Testament to be null and most of my belief and reasoning comes from the New Testament."

"One question I have to start is **what do you mean when you question why God has ceased to speak to humans** directly through prophets or dreams. I got a little confused because it sounds like you jumped from the story to real life. If you were indeed making the jump to real life, there are people who claim to have been reached by God through their dreams. It's not a rare occurrence either. There are also people that claim to be prophets in churches today that deliver messages to people in the church and outside of the church. And as far as miracles, there are plenty of people that attribute miraculous events in their lives to God. In these instances, the faith of people is significantly strengthened. Overall, **I think it's just important to recognize that people still believe in these things happening, you may just have to look around you with more open eyes to recognize them.**

        I am also not so sure that Judaism believes that Jesus has yet to come, but better yet I think it is the case that Judaism thinks that the Messiah has yet to come. I think it is important to clear that up because it makes it seem like Jewish people would believe that their Messiah is some form of Jesus. However, I understand that this was probably something that was natural to type out because growing up believing that Christ is the Messiah can make it second-nature to write that out. I wouldn't be surprised if I did the same thing. **It's hard to think outside of our bias and our past."**

"**I know it may sound like a stretch at first, but just think about it.** A relationship starts off due to something that two people share and/or have in common. Things progress over time between the two people, but then one day things get ugly. The abuser lashes out on the abused. After that instance of abuse, things might go back to normal for a while, but eventually a cycle of violence and okayness is formed, with the instances of violence getting worse over time and sometimes going back to a previous level of violence. In the instance of Christianity and Judaism (institution-wise, not religion-wise), **Christianity has been the group that has had the upper hand** and more power in the relationship with the ability to oppress and overpower Judaism in society. As a result of this, Jewish people have suffered the abuses of Christians in history such as genocide, being victims of scapegoating, and a lot more.

What I am not saying is that Christians are evil abusers of Jewish people, but I am drawing parallels between the relationship of an abuser and the abused and the historical relationship of Christianity and Judaism."

Results from the Genre Project

- genre.web.unc.edu
- What kinds of writing (genres) do instructors assign?
  - Most instructors expect students to learn to write using the genres and methods of their discipline, taking on the role of a researcher or professional in that field
  - Assignment sheets do not always cue students to those genres, methods, or roles
- What do instructors value in student writing?
  - Instructors often expect students to apply course content (theories, methods, concepts) their assignments
  - Students often struggle to make that transition, and end up falling back on reporting or summary instead of engaging a particular disciplinary theory or method
- Result: both students and instructors get frustrated
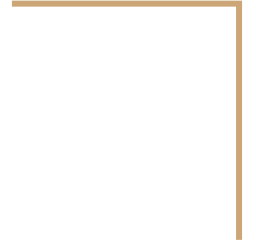
Solution 1: Make Your Expectations Explicit
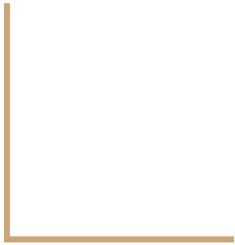
Solution 1: Make Your Expectations Explicit

- Identify a specific genre:
  - For each assignment, ask yourself: "When would someone write this outside of a classroom? What genres do I write?" ex. conference paper, policy report, affidavit, journal article
  - Name the genre on your assignment sheet
  - Note: "research paper" or "essay" is not specific enough
- Identify the audience students will address:
  - scholars in a discipline? policymakers? readers of a specific publication? grant reviewers?
- Identify the role students are to take on:
  - e.g. undergraduate researcher in biophysics, research assistant working on a funded study, marketing manager, policymaker?
- Identify the purpose and method students should use:
  - empirical research? secondary research? applying a theory or concept to a case? etc.

Sample Assignment #1

Purpose of Paper: I want to encourage you to read the recent primary literature and synthesize what you learn there with what you have learned in this and other courses. I also want to give you the chance to take "ownership" of part of the course instead of simply studying the topics I have deigned important. **Assignment**: You will write an original 8-10 page paper. The paper will be on a topic of your choosing. The paper must contain a significant synthetic discussion. Papers that are nothing more than literature reviews or whose synthesis relies entirely of what is presented in articles will receive a sharply lower grade.

Sample Assignment #2

This literature research and writing assignment will allow you to explore a specific topic using recent primary scientific literature. The process is similar to the way that a scientist in most research areas establishes a contextual framework, essentially a baseline, of current scientific knowledge that the investigators attempt to extend through contribution of their own experimental findings. You will select a topic related to the fields of molecular biology. You will obtain and read current primary articles. The proposal for your assignment will be due on January 31. You will then prepare an annotated bibliography that briefly summarizes, evaluates and critiques your primary articles in your own words. Next you will write a review of the literature, which will take the form of **an Introduction to a scientific paper**. After obtaining instructor and peer review of your literature review, you will revise the literature review and submit it for final grading.

Solution 2: Use Low Stakes Writing to Scaffold Assignments

Scaffold Assignments – Use Models

- Provide examples of the genre you want students to compose
- Help students identify its features--spend 5-10 minutes in class or have them analyze and post to Sakai
- Refer students back to the models when they have questions

Scaffold Assignments – Build a Knowledge Base

- Use low-stakes writing to help students understand content necessary for the assignment.
- Can use in class or online (using Sakai Discussion Boards or Forums)
- Sample tasks to help students with content:
  - Write a two sentence definition of [key concept.] Then share with a partner. Invite students to share examples of their definitions with the whole class.
  - Explain [concept, theory, or process] in one paragraph to someone who has not taken this course. Share with a partner, then share best examples with the class.
  - Write a summary of today's reading. Post to Discussion Board on Sakai. Then, describe how you could apply this concept or theory to your writing assignment.

Scaffold Assignments - Identify Milestones

- Break longer assignments into a series of smaller tasks or milestones. Consider what students will need to do to complete the assignment, such as:
  - Develop a research question
  - Choose a method or methodology
  - Find and evaluate relevant sources, or conduct an experiment
  - Develop an organization plan or outline
  - etc.

Scaffold Assignments – Identify Milestones

- Then, consider how you can support those tasks (either in class or online)
- Sample tasks:
  - Write a one paragraph proposal for your paper topic. What will you be writing about? Why have you chosen this topic? Why do you think readers in [discipline] will care about this topic? What will they already know, and what information will you need to provide? Post your proposal to Sakai. Then comment on at least two other proposals.
  - Write down your research question (or three possible research questions) for your assignment. Then share with a partner. Does the research question seem specific enough? Is it a question you can answer using this research method? Call on students to share a few examples with the class.
  - Write one paragraph in which you apply [concept] to analyze your case/text/reading. Post your paragraph on Sakai, then comment on at least two other posts. Does the student apply [theory] to the case effectively, or are they simply reporting or summarizing

More Ideas for In-Class Writing

- http://writingcenter.unc.edu/faculty-resources/tips-on-teaching-writing/in-class-writing-exercises/

Grading Low Stakes Writing

Options:

- Don't grade it at all - for in class exercises, especially
- Count toward a general participation grade
- Assign a +/- or simple point system (2 points for completion)
- For online posts, simply check for completion. Sakai offers tools for grading Forum posts.
- Spot check to see if students are getting it--then address in class.

Train students to give effective feedback

- In class, discuss what kinds of feedback students have received in the past

    - What helped? Why?

    - What didn't? Why?

- Talk about your own writing process and how you use feedback

- Position students as curious readers, not as experts

- Remind them that feedback is just information

Provide focus and guidance

- Use rubrics, worksheets, etc. (they can be brief)
  - Worksheet for writer to request feedback
  - Worksheet for readers to offer feedback

- Sample items for a reader worksheet
  - What was the strongest aspect of this paper?
  - Mark any places where you got lost
  - What question would you like to ask the writer?
  - If this were your paper, what would you do to improve it?
  - Summarize the writer's argument
  - What was the most effective section?
  - What did you learn?
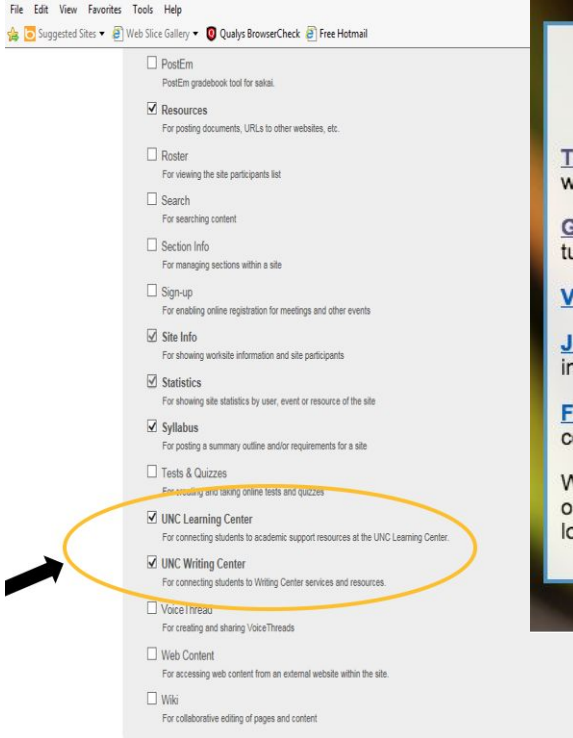
When you or your TAs give feedback, make it count

- Choose your battles: prioritize
- Reinforce successes
- Ask questions
- Create a conversation: ask the writer to include a reflection (or some questions for you) along with the draft
- Proofreading is rarely worth it
  - It's time-consuming
  - It can put you in a bad mood
  - Students may ignore your marks, not understand them, become overwhelmed and discouraged, and/or conclude that sentence-level errors are what matter most
- Make any comments legible and clear
  - awk, ?, ¶, etc. won't be understood

Resources for you and your students

- Writing Center: writingcenter.unc.edu
  - Appointments
  - Online coaching
  - Handouts and videos
  - ESL support
  - Consultations for faculty

- Learning Center: learningcenter.unc.edu
  - Academic coaching
  - Tutoring for many subjects
  - LD/ADHD services
  - Time management, test-taking, reading skills, etc.

Adding tabs to your Sakai site

Sakai Peer Review Tool

Enable students to review and critique each other through the **Assignments Tool**

Questions?