

4 Assigning and Evaluating Transactional Writing

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Transactional writing is writing to get things done, to inform or persuade a particular audience to understand or do something. This most common category of school writing is also most commonly demanded in the world of work—in corporations, industries, and bureaucracies. In school such writing is exemplified by book reviews, term papers, laboratory reports, research projects, masters proposals, and doctoral dissertations; outside school, such writing takes the form of letters, memos, abstracts, summaries, proposals, reports, and planning documents of all kinds. Students who practice transactional forms of writing in their classroom will have lots of opportunities to practice it on their jobs. It is important, therefore, that students learn to do it well—clearly, correctly, concisely, coherently, and carefully.

We believe that all classroom teachers are, to some extent, language teachers. They all play a role in how students view writing; they play this role subtly when they make writing assignments and more obviously when they evaluate those assignments. How teachers assign and respond to transactional writing has a lot to do with whether or not students value it and how well they learn to produce it. Consider, for example, the following situations:

A paper is written as extra credit in a geography class; it is due at the end of the semester and has as its subject “The Forests of North America.” The paper is mechanically competent (spelling and punctuation are fine), but the five pages of writing are unfocused, generalized, and superficial.

A take-home examination in history is handed in after being assigned the previous day. The paper has numerous spelling mistakes, misused commas, and a few fragment sentences. The answers, while not wrong, are general and wordy.

A technical report is turned in by a sophomore enrolled in a chemistry class; it is her first such report, and much of the information is presented incorrectly: the conclusion is at the end; the "discussion" is written in first person; no "abstract," "table of contents," nor "sub-headings" is provided.

For instructors under time and workload constraints, the easiest response to each "poor paper" is a low grade. However, while 'D' and 'F' are easy and common responses, they are not necessarily effective in changing behavior, nor really efficient—if succeeding papers show no improvement.

Grading poor writing has about the same effect as grading poor test answers; it measures the specific performance, but does not result in improved learning. Since writing is a skill which takes a long time to master fully, simply assigning low grades cannot be very effective writing pedagogy. Instructors who want to be more helpful in their responses to poor writing might begin by asking themselves questions about each writing assignment. The preceding three examples suggest some possible lines of inquiry.

The geography instructor might ask: (a) Did I ask the student to explore his topic with me in advance? (b) Did I (or anyone else) see or critique a first draft? (c) Did I ask for a first draft? (d) Have I explored the nature of library research with my class or this student? (e) What options have I left for the student, now that the semester is over?

The history professor might ask: (a) How long did the student spend writing this paper? (b) Are the mistakes due to ignorance or carelessness? (c) How many spelling mistakes, such as "thier" and "hisory," are really typos? (d) Is my best response an "F," a conference, or a request for revision? (e) Do I want to "test" the student's knowledge, "teach" academic discipline, or "motivate" the student to learn more history?

The chemistry teacher might ask: (a) Does this student know how science reports differ from history term papers? (b) Did I explain the requirements for this report orally or in writing? (c) Do my students know the logic behind scientific reporting? (d) Is the first person always forbidden in report writing? (e) Is my best response a low grade, a conference with the individual, or a conversation with the whole class?

Serious instructors *do* ask questions about the causes of poor student writing. They do not often find simple answers, though, because writing and the teaching of writing involve complicated processes. Teachers interested in better student writing must begin with questions such as these: What do I want my students to learn? How can I prepare my students to write better? How should I evaluate a piece of writing?

The following sections are intended to show how these questions might be answered.

Writing and Learning

We are all familiar with student writing problems, problems due to poor composing skills, insufficient knowledge, immature thinking, and lack of interest—to name a few. But what about the problems caused by teachers? Is it possible that some of the problems are teacher-centered rather than student-centered? We're thinking here about vague or poorly explained directions on a writing assignment; exam questions which make false assumptions about what students know or should know; assignments which do not challenge students and are perceived as dull, repetitious, or tedious; incomplete or harmful responses by teachers to student writing; and poor planning, timing, or sequencing of assignments. These are but some of the ways that teachers, without malice and with good intentions, may affect the quality of student writing by poor assignments and ill-considered response to that writing.

Teachers often spend days in preparation and even weeks (or units) talking about, demonstrating, and explaining information to students; the same teachers, however, may not spend much time thinking about how writing can assist in both the learning and evaluating of that information. For example, one social studies teacher told me that she made "essay question" assignments when she didn't have time to compose a good objective test. This is not necessarily a poor or lazy decision on the teacher's part—depending, of course, on class context, among other things. In fact, the decision to ask for a long student answer from a brief teacher question seems to be a simple time trade-off when compared to a short student answer in response to a long teacher question. The objective test, so long in the making, is short in correcting; the essay test, short in the making, will be longer in correcting. But, of course, this decision involves something more complex than merely juggling time.

Asking for the student's answer *in writing* should be an important pedagogical decision, not simply a trade-off in time. In the objective test the teacher does most of the careful conceptual work, thinking through how best to create choices and how to word those choices. In the essay test, the situation is reversed, with the student being asked both to make choices and to choose the words. To *compose* something is a more demanding task—coordinating knowledge with both logic and rhetoric—for the student than simply *deciding* (or

guessing at) something. Asking for a piece of writing involves students more profoundly in the learning process; they must demonstrate not only "knowledge" but also the ability to organize and explain that knowledge.

The teacher who asks "What do I want students to learn" will assign writing that is most likely to generate a specific form of learning. For example, different question types call for different kinds of responses. If we ask the "date" on which the Vietnam War started, the answer ought to be a matter of simple *recall*—something learned somewhere and now recalled. If we ask for a list of the chief "causes" of the war, recall is involved but also some choices and some *analysis* ("This cause is more important than that cause"). Third, if we ask about the relationship between the war and the women's movement, a great deal of information must be *synthesized* to arrive at a coherent, believable answer. Finally, if we ask whether it was right or wrong that America became involved in Vietnam, a *judgment* based on some standard or other is called for.

These four different test objectives—recall, analysis, synthesis, judgment—suggest in concrete terms the manner in which the teacher's question determines the kind of thinking students must do. If it is important that social studies students learn to analyze, then teacher questions ought to reflect that; if humanities students must learn to express and defend value judgments, their teachers may aid that process by asking judgmental questions. Only in the area of simple recall would the essay seem to have little advantage over the short answer.

Preparing Assignments

Most teachers realize through personal experience that most acts of writing represent stages in a larger process: that is, whether the writing is an answer to an essay question, a preliminary draft of a formal paper, or a response to a class question, it represents only one point along a continuum. The poet William Wordsworth said that poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of emotion recollected in tranquility," but he still revised some of his poems dozens of times. Though we cannot ask for twelve revisions of a piece of student writing, we can learn an important principle from Wordsworth's practice: Any act of writing involves a multistage process of thinking, rethinking, writing, re-writing, and editing. We can and should provide an academic environment where students see this clearly.

General principles for making good assignments evolve directly from understanding the *process* of composition—what happens when human beings put words on paper. While each specific assignment

depends on course content, teacher personality, student skills, and everybody's time and energy, teachers who keep the writing process in mind will help their students learn to write better.

When we stop to think about it, we quickly realize that the act of writing is complicated, certainly more involved than simply putting down on paper what's already in the writer's head. We seldom begin writing with well-formed sentences and paragraphs in our heads already. To understand the word "process" as applied to writing, it is only necessary to think through all the thoughts and activities associated with our own formal writing activities: we need to have (1) a purpose for writing in mind and (2) an audience to write to. We further need to (3) find an idea, (4) refine and incubate that idea, (5) write it down in words, (6) organize and reshape it, (7) try it out on a trial audience and receive feedback, which often necessitates (8) rewriting or revising that idea, (9) editing, and finally (10) proofreading—then sometimes starting all over again because new information now modifies our prior assumptions. Of course, the writing process is not "Ten Steps" as this list implies, nor is it sequential and orderly, but these hypothetical steps do indicate some of the factors common to school writing tasks.

Teachers aware of the composing process use this knowledge in making, intervening in, and evaluating writing assignments. Consider the following suggestions:

1. Find out in advance how much students know and don't know about the kind of writing you are asking for. Do they know what a research paper is and how it differs from a book report or personal opinion paper? Discuss these differences.
2. Lead up to assignments with deliberate invention techniques, including oral brainstorming, free writing, and journal writing. Most of us who have graduated from college have learned, often the hard way, to write notes to ourselves, outline, and talk with others to get our writing started in the right direction; we can teach our students to use these techniques to start their writing assignments.
3. Try to stimulate personal involvement between writer and writing assignments. This can be done not only by giving a variety of choices in topics but also by engaging students in dialogues about potential topics and asking them to keep journals—dialogues with themselves—about what is important to them and what not.
4. Create class contexts for writing assignments so that the topic grows from a prepared culture. For example, bring in outside speakers on the topic, take context-producing field trips, assign

and discuss relevant readings, and engage in a lot of clarifying class discussion.

5. Pose problems to the class—or ask the class to help pose problems. Use the blackboard or overhead projector liberally in this process so that problems in need of written solution are visually clear and precise. Ask students to consider papers as “solutions” to these problems. This approach exemplifies what a “thesis” is and how it may be supported or proven.
6. Assign several short papers during the term rather than one long one at the end. You can find out an enormous amount about the students’ grasp of conventions and organizing abilities in a two-page paper (300–500 words); assigning it means you will have more time to respond to each paper and to make suggestions that can be followed up in the next assignment.
7. Ask for multiple drafts of papers, if you have the chance—even short two-page papers become more effective learning projects when students are asked to (or allowed to) revise them according to specific critical suggestions.
8. Explain what you expect from each writing assignment in advance and evaluate accordingly. If you are concerned that students do a particular kind of research on an assignment, how well they report and explain that research ought to be the primary trait determining the students’ grades. In an assignment meant to be carried through several drafts, the teacher can sequence these expectations: first draft is most concerned with organizing and structuring an idea; second draft is more concerned with use of supporting examples, and so on. Students should always understand clearly what is expected of them.
9. Show students models of student-written papers. This will give them a concrete sense of how the assignment might be fulfilled. Some teachers create files of good samples from previous classes; others use published examples; a very few show their own writing about the assignment to students. Models give students confidence that the assignment *can* be done because it *has* been done and show them that there might be several solutions to the writing problem.
10. If you get bored by sameness and dullness when reading a pile of student papers, make it clear when making an assignment that students who take some risks to be original will be rewarded—or at least not penalized. Some students will not trust you the first time on this, but passing out samples of successful “risk” papers may encourage the cautious to try new things.

This discussion has been concerned primarily with formal writing assignments which students do outside of class. While the manner in which the teacher structures the assignment plays a significant role in how well the student handles the assignment, the students' responsibility is considerable; we expect their papers to display an organized knowledge of the topic in clear, concise, correct, and coherent prose. We must modify those expectations when we ask students to write in class.

Essay Tests

The essay examination is a common way to use writing in liberal arts classrooms. It provides teachers with a means of checking the student's knowledge and ideas while also determining whether the student can express them in a well organized manner. Though essay answers are usually first draft efforts, we often treat them otherwise. Professional writers do not expect correct error-free writing on first drafts. Neither should we. Essay examinations can be a sound educational tool, but, like more formal assignments the students must be prepared to take them.

Teachers can provide students with the opportunity to practice answering the questions and establish models and standards by which the writer's work will be evaluated. We would not expect the piano student to perform and be evaluated without practice and a chance to hear the piece played correctly. Yet many of us simply assume that our students know intuitively how to write clear answers to complex questions.

The following suggestions, based on work with teachers in various disciplines, are designed to help students understand better what is expected on essay examinations.

Sample question. Provide a few minutes of class time occasionally to write an answer to a sample essay question. If the essay examinations you give are based on class discussions, this practice can match the overall goals for any given course. For example, an ecology class may have been discussing the conflict of pollution and progress in a town which suffers from acute unemployment. Asking the student to take a few minutes to organize in writing the particulars of each position not only helps them clarify their perceptions of the conflict, but also helps them master the facts involved. Do they recall what studies have shown? Are they arguing from the facts rather than from the situation or *ad hominum*?

Peer groups. Ask students to share practice essay questions either in pairs or in small groups of three or four. Pairing and grouping of students encourages active learning. Too often lecture and textbook

are our students' only access to information. When students can share ideas in small discussion groups, they are often more willing to inform, persuade, and challenge each other than they would be before an entire class.

Homework. Give a question as homework and then briefly go over the answers, making few comments. Without actually grading the paper, you can in a nonthreatening way simply acknowledge that a student has completed an assignment. You need not stress the same types of comments on each set of papers. Tell the students one time that you're looking closely at organization, another time that you are concerned with sentence construction. Over time the students will receive much needed practice in writing, which subtly enhances grammatical and mechanical competence as well as composition proficiency.

Model answers. Write an answer to a sample question before asking the students to answer it and share your effort with the class. Students are fond of this practice for several reasons. First, they see that you are willing to do the assignments that you require of them. Second, they get an idea of how a professional responds to this type of assignment; thus, they follow a model which demonstrates the fusing of both information and acceptable form. Third, they have a chance to critique the teacher's work, while the teacher has the advantage of seeing the assignment from the student's perspective. (Was the question clear? How hard was it for you to answer? Did you spend longer writing the answer than you expected?) In short, taking the role of the writer benefits both teacher and student.

Student samples. Show samples of student writing which exemplify strengths and weaknesses. Especially when viewed on an overhead or opaque projector, these papers provide a strong focus for comments from students and teacher. Moreover, you can clearly label strengths and note such problems as redundant words or ideas. Overhead projection of sample papers saves time because you don't have to create and pass out dittoed papers.

Expectations. Discuss with the students how different questions call for different kinds of reasoning; point out that "what" and "when" questions usually demand recall, while "how" and "why" questions usually demand more complicated types of thinking—analysis, synthesis, or judgment. Clarify to both your students and yourself what you want when you ask students to "discuss" or "explain"—each of these directions can be ambiguous.

The essay examination is a good means of testing students' knowledge, but without adequate preparation it can also be a source of frustration to both teacher and student. As the student becomes better prepared to write a soundly developed, clearly written answer, that

frustration lessens. One last caution: No matter how much we prepare our students to write sound answers to essay questions, those answers will seldom match the quality of ones on which the students can spend more time revising and editing. The essay question asks for certain reasoning and writing skills; but it does not provide writers with a chance to demonstrate their comprehensive writing abilities as do more formal writing assignments.

Preparing students to write better by attending to the writing process both inclass and out goes a long way toward improving student writing. However, viewing writing as a "process" also modifies some traditional notions of evaluation. In the final section of this chapter we consider a variety of evaluative responses.

Evaluating Student Writing

Like "assignment making," the concept of "evaluation" makes a different kind of sense when placed in the context of writing as a process. Just as writing makes more sense when conceived with a variety of *audiences* in mind, from oneself through peers and the distant public, so too does evaluation make more sense when related to the various audiences that a piece of writing might have.

1. Students can learn certain response techniques to evaluate their own writing. (Teacher provided guide sheets, regularly required revision, etc.)
2. Students can learn to respond in nonthreatening, nonjudgmental ways to each other's writing. ("I was interested in this . . . I want more information on that.")
3. Teachers can explore nongraded responses to help students through different phases of the writing process. ("Can you elaborate on your argument on page two?")
4. Students can write for real public audiences and receive "evaluation" through an editor's acceptance or rejection. (Letters to the editor, essays in a school publication, professional newsletters, etc.)

Another way of looking at responses to writing, again suggested by a study of the whole composing process, is to consider what *function*, exactly, a piece of writing is meant to serve. Depending on what assignment a teacher makes, evaluation might take one form rather than another. For example, a teacher who asks for a research project due late in the term may incorporate evaluative responses at various steps along the way, as different aspects of research are undertaken by the

students: library search techniques, information categorizing, documenting procedures, presentation of evidence, and so on. Each step in the process may suggest one critical intervention rather than another, including, for example, self-paced library worksheets, teacher review of research proposals, and peer critique of rough drafts. Or, by contrast, a teacher response to pieces of writing produced by an examination situation might require (traditionally) a single grade marked on the paper or (experimentally) a request for individual or collaborative revision and resubmission. In other words, a writing task suggests evaluative response.

The two major determiners that shape a piece of writing, audience and function, should determine the response to that piece of writing. Teachers who are aware of other parts of the composing process can also discover other appropriate points of intervention. At the conceptual stage, for example, large group brainstorming and small group critiques can help individual student writers get started. At the terminal stage of "proofreading," paired paper exchanges immediately prior to paper submission can help students eliminate annoying small errors. This helps (speeds) teacher reading and also teaches a valuable real-life writing technique, sharing a piece of writing with a colleague or spouse before sending it to a professional editor.

At the Michigan Tech writing workshops we commonly discuss principles of response and evaluation which teachers should keep in mind as they comment on and grade student papers. The following list of guidelines is the result of a discussion among a group of college teachers representing different disciplines across the campus:

1. Give positive feedback wherever possible. Even the most error-filled paper usually has something redeeming about it, a place where the writer, once encouraged, can get a new start. None of us feels like reworking a piece when *nothing* good is said about it.
2. Do not grade early drafts of a writing assignment. Putting a grade on a paper you want students to keep working on shuts down the incentive to revise; they read that shorthand evaluation ("D") rather than your written words. Grading something suggests finality and almost guarantees that the learning process, in this situation, has stopped.
3. Respond with specific suggestions for improvement wherever you can. "AWK" or "OUCH!" or "YUK" go only so far in telling the student what to do to make it better.
4. Create simple guidelines or self-critique sheets to help students respond more critically to their own writing—this may save you

time in the long run if they become adept at catching some of their own errors. Such sheets might ask, for example: What is your point? What is your pattern of organization? Have you supported all generalizations with specific examples? Do you avoid wordy construction, repetitious phrases, and clichés? Have you proofread for errors in spelling, punctuation, or typing?

5. Plan personal conferences for difficult or sensitive problems. In some cases, no amount of written commentary will bridge the gap between you and a misunderstanding student. The personal conference creates a human dimension to evaluation that writing cannot duplicate.
6. Give students some responsibility for evaluating each other's work; remember that each writer also benefits from becoming a critic and editor. (Guideline sheets similar to those in no. 4 work for pairs and small groups too.)
7. Don't separate form from content. Most writing is all of a piece; when a proposition is awkwardly stated it is often poorly understood. Consider the written expression as an integral part of the mental process; that way students will learn how the real world will, in fact, respond to them. (Consider also the appearance of a piece of writing as, to some extent, analogous to that which the writer personally presents to the world: sloppy and smudged or careful and clear?)

This chapter suggests that there is an important relationship between what we know about the composing process and (1) what we ask for on writing assignments, (2) how we prepare students to write our assignments, and (3) how we evaluate the writing that results. We feel confident that teachers who explore these relationships and translate them into solid pedagogical strategies will help their students write better formal papers and, at the same time, increase their students' abilities to reason and understand.