

Evaluating Writing

Lee Odell

Of all the tasks confronting composition teachers, the chore of evaluating student writing sometimes seems the most difficult, the least exciting, the easiest to ignore, postpone, or slight. And yet we must evaluate. Our students deserve to know how well they are writing and what they need to do in order to improve. Moreover, we as teachers need to know about these matters; otherwise, we will have no way to assess the effectiveness of our own teaching, no way to focus our efforts with a particular group of students. Since evaluation is so important to both teachers and students, my part of **Workshop '81** will be solely concerned with this topic.

At the outset, I will ask participants to accept some assumptions about what evaluation is not:

1. "Evaluation" is not a synonym for "grading." Indeed, assigning grades to students' papers is, at most, only the last stage of a complex process that begins not when students turn in their papers but when we formulate a writing assignment.
2. Evaluation is not some mysterious activity that only teachers can engage in. Quite the contrary: Effective evaluation requires that we devise explicit, reasonable criteria which our students can apply to their own and their classmates' writing.
3. Evaluation is not simply a matter of praising or finding fault. We must, finally, make some sort of value judgement about students' work. But we must do so only after we have described their writing accurately, fairly, nonjudgmentally.

Everything we do in the **Workshop** will be guided by the preceding assumptions and by three additional beliefs about our role as evaluators of writing:

1. When we ask students to write, we must help students understand the audience and purpose for which they are writing;
2. We must grade students' work with criteria that are specifically appropriate to the audience and purpose for which they are writing;
3. We must assess the intellectual and rhetorical demands of the assignments we give.

The emphasis on audience and purpose reflect a combination of current theory, research, and common sense. All three sources tell us that 1) good writers vary diction, syntax, and content to suit the audience and purpose for which they are writing; 2) astute readers do not judge a personal letter by the same criteria they use in evaluating a formal, impartial report.

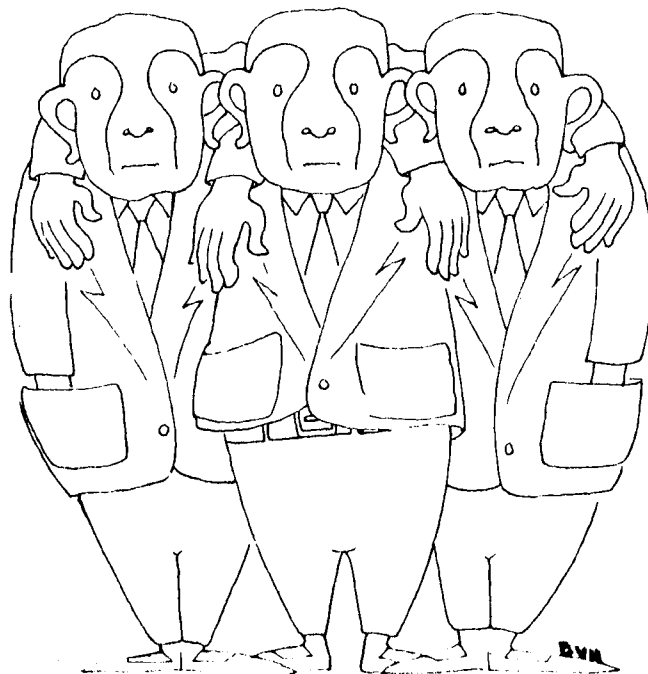
My third assumption, about the need to assess the demands of our assignments, arises from my experience as a teacher of writing. I have too often assigned topics far more complex than I imagined, topics presupposing skills which my students either did not have or did not know they should use. Upon evaluating students' writing about these topics, I

learned only that they performed badly when I had no reason to expect them to do well.

As evaluators of writing, we have access to at least three different procedures for evaluating writing: Holistic scoring, analytic scales, and primary trait scoring. We shall read and talk about all three procedures, but most of our **Workshop** time will be spent on the third — primary trait scoring. In the course of our meetings we shall

- use one particular set of primary traits to describe and evaluate a set of student papers;
- devise sets of criteria that would let us describe and evaluate the writing students have done in response to several different assignments;
- formulate writing assignments that specify audience and purpose;
- assess the intellectual and rhetorical demands of those assignments by trying to do them ourselves.

We will spend comparatively little time talking about "mechanics." We will, however, examine students papers with serious conventional problems, and I will describe one approach to assessing students' mastery of the conventions of standard written English.



Three Additional Beliefs