

Pruning Too Early: The Thorny Issue of Grading Student Writing

by

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The tiny garden I have planted around my house grows larger in my mind as I order from winter seed catalogues, unable to resist Easter Egg Radishes and Green Envy Zinnias. In spring I squeeze new seedlings into the small space left among the herbs and perennials. All summer I tend my garden lovingly, watering and weeding, and then stepping back to admire it. Sometimes I fantasize that I am a pedestrian coming upon my garden with delight on a hot North Carolina afternoon. It is usually bursting with color, and I love it.

Imagine my horror when I receive a notice from the city one July, saying that if I don't "remove the overgrown weeds" from my yard, the city will do it and charge me for the job. My garden is "an eyesore." I rage to all my friends about the stupidity of the city inspector who can't distinguish a garden from a mess of weeds.

Before I changed my approach to grading student writing, my high school English students regarded me the same way I saw the city inspector. When papers they thought were just fine earned only a C- or worse, my students considered me some kind of idiot not to recognize the value of their work. After all, my students had spent a lot of time completing their assignments, and they thought their pieces sounded great. To my students, the grade at the end was as demoralizing as the letter from the city was to me. Many girls wiped tears from their eyes and boys

launched their balled-up papers into the trash, flashing their eyes at me. If looks could kill, I would have been a dead woman years ago.

It appeared that they did not even read my carefully phrased comments, but simply scanned for the grade and reacted emotionally. I didn't think I was giving unreasonable grades, either. I'd spend hours agonizing over the grades, taking into account the rubric we had established for the assignment, the individual student's progress, and the student's effort as I perceived it. Sometimes I'd put two grades on a paper, content and mechanics, but the disappointment in the students' eyes was the same. Myopically confronted by a B+ over a C-, my students only saw the C-. I would justify their bruised feelings to myself. I'd reason that the students would not get better at writing unless I was honest about their grades. But in the cold light of dawn, I'd realize that they were not showing much progress.

My students at a competitive independent day school have a history of poor grades in English class. Some carry labels like "learning disabled" and "ADD," and most have little interest in English for whatever reason. They come to my class with bags loaded with past failures and feelings of inadequacy. To encourage my students, I offered them the opportunity to revise their papers at any time for a higher grade, but I myself have been discouraged when few papers would be resubmitted and fewer yet significantly improved.

The few changes made would often be limited to corrections of the mechanical problems I had already pointed out and halfway corrected myself. Even though I had written many suggestions for ways to restructure the papers or even suggested starting in a different place or on a different topic, the revised papers hardly differed at all from the earlier drafts. Conferences with me might have led to substantive revision, but students were often “too busy” to show up, and as a result I got to read miserable papers several times each.

When the revised paper still did not receive the coveted “A,” students would often turn belligerent. “But I corrected what you said to correct! What else am I supposed to do?” My suggestion that they reread my comments didn’t mollify them. I had just confirmed for them what they already “knew”: they couldn’t write, so why bother trying?

I was asking the same question: “Why bother trying?” I did not want to spend the rest of my teaching career meeting anger and tears every time I returned a set of papers, particularly when those emotions seemed to block student progress. I was looking for a way out. I decided to implement a portfolio assessment, an idea I had acquired several years before in the writing project. I still graded papers but now students saved them in a folder, noting strengths and weaknesses, finding patterns, and finally choosing work to be polished for portfolio submission. I was pleased with their improved commitment to the writing and the enthusiasm the portfolio seemed to create. Their choices, however, were dictated by the grades they had seen on the drafts as they worked on them. Students would say, “You gave the paper a pretty good grade, so I chose it for my portfolio.”

It seemed to me that the grades were standing in the way of students’ progress with their writing. Not only were the weaker students discouraged to the point where they stopped trying, but also many students relied on my grades as the standard by which they judged their own work. I knew I had to think harder about how to overcome these problems. So two years ago I tried an experiment: I decided to postpone my grading until the portfolio was completed. I continued to comment on papers, encourage revision, and urge students to meet with me for conferences. I would simply wait to grade the papers until the portfolio was complete.

When I started school that August, I bounced my idea off several colleagues and got back worried looks and cautions. Ours is a school where grades matter a great deal, and students are accustomed to knowing where they stand. Some colleagues said that students and their families would panic if they didn’t see a grade at the bottom of each paper. Others wondered how much effort students would put into writing if there was no grade. We know that the only way to make sure that students do their reading is to quiz almost daily. Would they see writing as less important if it was not graded along the way?

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It took time for the students to stop leaving to the end of their papers looking for the grade. Gradually they stopped saying, “You forgot to put a grade on my paper!” The students who grumbled the longest and loudest about not seeing a grade were predictably those who had always seen excellent grades on their work. One boy wrote on his reflective letter that he did not like the new grading system at all because, “Even though I got an A in English, I was nervous about my grade all year. I wasn’t sure you liked my writing and didn’t know which papers to choose for my portfolio because none were graded.” I guess he didn’t know it, but his discomfort was my satisfaction.

The majority of the students seemed to flourish. The first change I noticed was that they actually started to read my comments and make the changes that I suggested. The kinds of comments I wrote were more global than those in the past. Instead of marking every little mechanical problem and flaw I saw (to justify the grade?), I wrote my reactions as I read. I emphasized those places where the paper really worked for me, wrote in the margin “Do you really need this part?” beside extraneous passages, and suggested ways to totally restructure a paper: “Why not start with this last paragraph and see what happens?” Often I would rave about a paragraph that contained a good, but

undeveloped, thought and suggest that the writer develop that idea more or add more information about that idea.

The story of Andy illustrates that now that drafts were going ungraded, students were putting more effort into their work than ever before. Andy, a ninth grade student, built a sketchy glimpse of a character into a vivid story. The first draft of the piece was inspired by a man he had seen the previous summer in Taos. He read it to his writing group and was pleased that they responded with laughter and enjoyment. I instructed him to go back to the group and ask for their help in selecting those parts of his draft that they could visualize most clearly, and then to work those details into a first draft of a narrative featuring this character, who came to be known as Rico. He wrote a lively but rambling draft. I advised him to highlight those parts of the story that he and his group seemed to like best, cut the rest, and start the narrative with one of the most vivid passages.

In the past I would dread grading papers, procrastinating with chores that seemed pressing and more desirable, like stripping the wax off my kitchen floor and applying a fresh surface or cleaning out the basement.

The cutting was difficult. Like most writers he had fallen in love the entire work. Each time he thought he was finished, I urged him to trim just a little more. Finally, we sat together and looked at the construction of the paper. Since he has strong mechanical skills, we focused instead on varying his sentence patterns. Many of his sentences were long compound sentences and I reminded him of other possibilities. We practiced a few sentence-combining activities, and he went back to work.

Andy's final draft now jumped off the page. It begins:

Rico awoke, as usual, late in the morning and alone. The sun shone through the bed sheets hanging over the window. Thick smog from the street below had already begun to drift into his apartment. Rico lay in

his bed, a mattress on the floor, eyes half open. With a groan he opened his eyes wider and stared at the ceiling wondering what he was going to do that day.

It was a struggle for him to build up the strength to swing his stubby legs around and off the mattress. Finally, though, he was ready to start the day, and as he stood the rolls of fat around his gut straightened out to reveal his tattoos, and the beads of sweat that had accumulated in the folds of skin evaporated.

Placing his hands on top of his head, Rico could feel stubble. He ran to the bathroom to inspect his scalp, and saw that after the few days he had stayed in bed, his hair and perfectly groomed goatee had given way to tangled whiskers and facial stubble.

Taking out his dull razor, Rico frantically tried to remedy his image. The blade couldn't slice hot butter, though, much less hair, so Rico resorted to using his switchblade. He repeatedly nicked his face and the top of his head, and he placed corners of toilet paper over the raw flesh to stop the bleeding. He looked like a honey baked ham ...

On Sunday afternoons I usually sit down with a stack of papers. In the past I would dread this activity, procrastinating with chores that seemed pressing and more desirable, like stripping the wax off my kitchen floor and applying a fresh surface or cleaning out the basement. When I was no longer confronted with the responsibility of coming up with a grade for the papers, a load seemed to be lifted from my shoulders. I still read with a pen in hand, but wrote thoughts as they occurred to me in the margins.

My remarks became more like those an editor might make to a reporter: "Refocus this paper. You're going in too many directions," or "Your thesis just doesn't work. Try again with this interesting idea in the third paragraph." In the past I had bled red ink all over the papers, but instead of helping students revise, my marks had the opposite effect. The corrections seemed to signal to the student that if he or she just fixed what I marked, the paper would be great. They didn't attempt more sweeping changes.

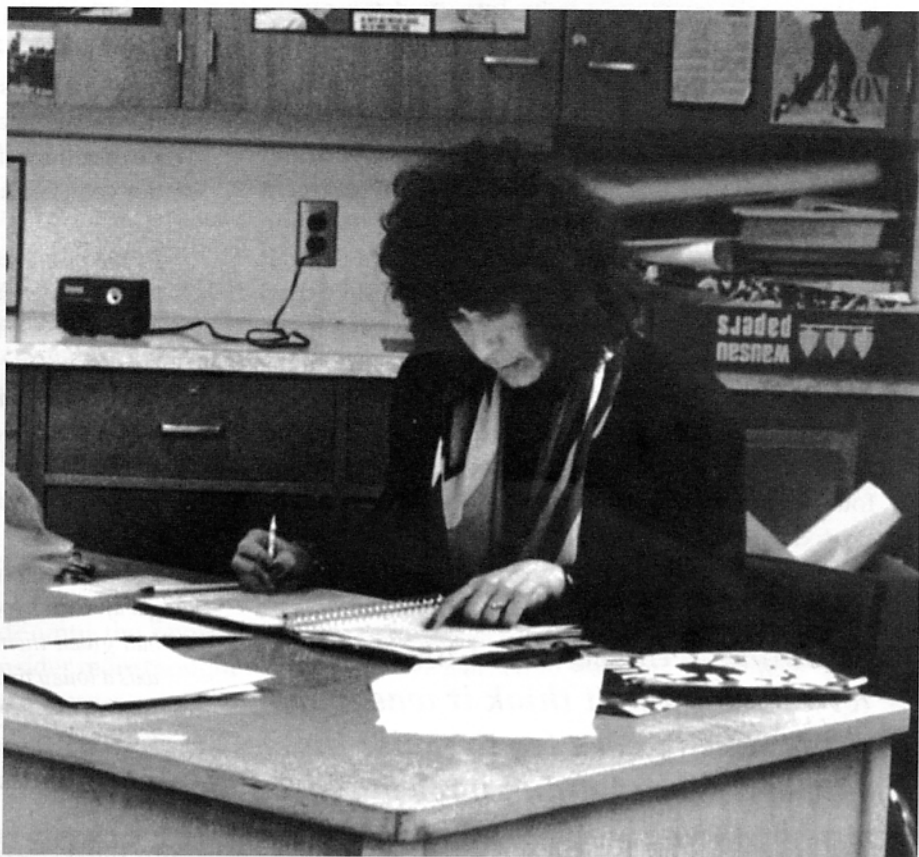
Once grades were postponed, students began looking at the bigger picture instead of getting stuck too soon in editing. I downplay the mechanical problems of

early drafts, commenting instead on content, organization, and development of papers. Later, when that work has been done, we can focus on remaining mechanical problems.

Students have reacted positively to the comments they have found on their papers. I find, though, that they can still feel a bit wounded when the comments are not gushing with praise. Ashley, a ninth-grader, expresses this ambivalence in her reflective letter.

I was always frustrated when I got my papers back because you had always written so many suggestions, especially, 'Put more details in this part.' This past week as I looked them over, though, I realized you were right. My stories had great potential, but I got tired of writing them and put on a lame ending. When you are a procrastinator like me, a good ending is not as important as finishing a paper. In fourth grade I always ended my stories, 'To be continued...' I feel that most of the work in my writing folder needed 'to be continued.' I'm glad I had the chance to be able to do that.

Without the specter of a grade to scare them, shy and weak students felt liberated to write longer pieces and to take more risks. One such student was Juliet, a Korean-speaking student with limited English. At the beginning of the year, Juliet was so shy that even her writing group couldn't hear her when she spoke. I put her in a group of very kind girls, however, and they encouraged her by listening carefully, helping her think of words when she couldn't think of them, and teaching her when to use articles. On one occasion, Juliet wrote a personal essay about her love of music. Her group pointed to places that were very clear to them, and they asked her to explain herself more thoroughly in others places. She showed me her revision and mentioned that she was thinking about putting it in her portfolio. I was impressed by the power of her images, so I suggested she rework the piece as



a poem. She did so and brought me a piece that was good but had problems with structure. I reminded her that the first and last words of each line are most important, and that short lines carry more weight than long ones. She restructured her work, we reviewed it together for mechanics, and it was ready:

*My friend
He doesn't speak a word
In any language of this world
Yet he makes
His presence known
When we are together.
He speaks of passion
Love
and
Hate
He suffers
It is his fate
To come to me
When I am lonely.
He makes me
Be with power crowned
Which disappears like a mist
When I leave him.*

*I speak through him
We combine in melody.*

Graham was a senior who had given up on English years before. His work was so hard to read and understand that teachers couldn't give it a decent grade. Most of the time he didn't even bother handing a paper in, although sometimes he started a draft. It seems he would rather fail because he hadn't tried than get a D after spending time working on papers. He had a million excuses for why papers early in the year were not handed in, but when he realized I was not grading draft writing, he started showing me his work. As we sifted through his papers together, we found glorious passages. I was delighted, and he started showing me more.

"I simply believed that I was a lousy writer, so I didn't think it was worth my time to even try to revise the papers. When I didn't have my face rubbed in a low grade, I was more willing to try again with a paper."

Graham is a talented artist with an eye for detail and, as a result, an unusual and fresh view of the world. Once he gained confidence in himself as a writer and began to internalize some ideas about how to tell when a sentence or a paragraph should end, he was on his way. By the end of the first semester, one of his essays was chosen for the school literary magazine.

In "A Room Square as a Tissue Box," he writes about the day his family went to the funeral home to view the body of his dead grandfather, and "memories started flashing through my head like an out of control slide projector." Using his artist's eye, he sees the family

flock to the adjoining room like ducks. My family became a living smoke screen which let me catch only glimpses of the other room through the negative space their bodies did not shield. I could see a piece of wallpaper here and a picture on the wall there, but no whole images. ... When I saw the crest of my grandfather's big nose and his eyebrow and a little bit of his mouth, I turned away.

I shared in Graham's pleasure as he found his voice and gained the self-confidence to try new ways of expressing himself. He gained a sense of when his writing worked and when it did not, and continued to write in college. In his reflective letter at the end of his senior year, Graham explained why he made progress.

In the past I was discouraged about my writing. I knew I wasn't stupid, but seeing all those C minuses and worse on my papers made me feel like a moron. I knew I should try harder and revise my papers, But I just didn't have the heart to look at them again after they had gotten such low grades.

Bryan, another senior, echoes Graham's sentiments.

I got to the place with my writing that I would rather get an F than look at the papers again after the teacher had given them low grades. I simply believed that I was a lousy writer, so I didn't think it was worth my time to even try to revise the papers. When I didn't have my face rubbed in a low grade, I was more willing to try again with a paper.

Now that I had relinquished the power to judge early drafts, the students' writing groups became more important to them. They began to see for themselves, and to help others see, when the writing worked and when it didn't. My grade was no longer a factor in whether or not they included a piece in their portfolios, but instead they made their own assessment of the value of each piece.

I see the change even in the quality and content of their reflective letters. When I was still grading every draft, the reflective letters were defensive. They were of the "I think you'll see that even though my paper is not as good as some people's, it's pretty good. I worked hard on it, even though you might not be able to tell that. I have been really busy this week, and really didn't have a chance to work on it." Here in North Carolina we call this kind of defensive introduction "Southern Biscuiting."

Early in the year I get letters like this one from Gary:

It was hard for me to start this paper. Every idea I had sounded stupid once it was written down on the page. I filled my trash can with crumpled papers and finally wrote this one. You'll probably hate it.

Now that I wait to grade the writing, students write more introspectively and show growing confidence in their work. They talk about what they know they do well and what they still must work on. They see writing as a process, and they see themselves as writers.

Grading student work too early stifles their growth as writers. It seems to give students a false sense of closure. The work has been graded; the teacher thinks it is either good or bad; the teacher has marked the mistakes in red ink. At this point the highly motivated student corrects the mistakes and resubmits the paper, believing that the paper is now perfect. The discouraged student feels like a failure, and stows the paper in a bulging backpack if he keeps it at all. They have learned to distrust their sense of when their writing works, relying on the teacher to judge.

Because I wait to assign a grade until the revision process is complete, students consider more thoughtfully what their strengths and weaknesses are, when

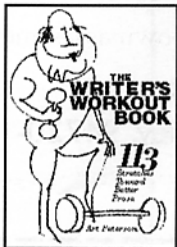
to get help, and what they must do themselves to polish and improve their work. I ran into two of my recent seniors this summer, both of whom took writing tests for waiver of freshman writing classes in college. One said, "I kept telling myself, 'Be brief, get to the point.' And guess what? I'm exempt from Freshman Comp.!" The other was less enthusiastic. He said, "You know how I can get carried away with details? Well, I ran out of time and couldn't go back and choose the most effective ones. I haven't heard from college yet, but I'm worried that they'll think my work rambled. I certainly do." Both boys approach writing with confidence and maturity. Both have learned to judge when their work is good and when more work is needed.

I am as proud of my students as I am of my beautiful garden. They have blossomed as writers as brightly as my red azaleas on a summer March afternoon now that I have learned to wait until the time for pruning is right.

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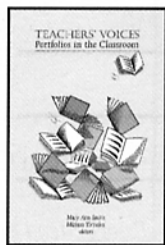
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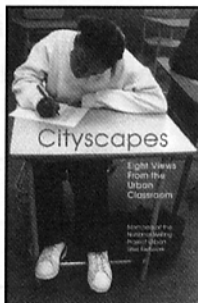


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