

A Semi-Painless Way to Improve Student Writing

By Gordon Clanton

Improving student writing is the key to improving student thinking. The ability to write at college level empowers students. Those who graduate without learning to write well have very little advantage over those who do not complete college. The help we give our students in improving their writing is as important as our very important subject matter.

Student writing will not improve unless students are required to write college-level papers in many different kinds of courses, not just English and writing courses.

But many professors have given up. Either they view their students as hopelessly poor writers, or they feel reading student papers takes too much time—and is largely unrewarded.

Other faculty believe that most students cannot improve their writing, over one semester's time, without the constant feedback and coaching that busy faculty simply

do not have the time to give.

"We don't ask our students to write," one community college department chair told me. "Most of them are very poor writers and asking them to write just makes things awkward for everyone."

Throughout my teaching career, I have required students to write in all my courses. This does add substantially to my work load. Still, I am persuaded that a course without a challenging writing requirement is a disservice to my students, most of whom tell me that they have done little writing in college.

Any serious effort to improve student writing, of course, requires commitment, hard work, and patience from the professor. I have attempted to craft a semi-painless approach that helps the student improve without overwhelming the professor.

Although I am an appreciative alumnus of a Writing Across the Curriculum ("WAC") seminar, my approach differs in some important

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ways from that approach. I endorse the WAC goal of encouraging students to write more, and I appreciate the emphasis on writing as the key to developing the ability to think abstractly, to organize, and to solve problems. I note below some disagreements with WAC, especially on feedback and grading.

I assign my students three one-page papers (250-word maximum) that are to be written according to carefully prescribed guidelines (see Appendix). I do not give essay questions on exams because most of my students do not write very well. They do better writing outside of class, where they have the time and opportunity to revise and polish.

Writing three papers over the course of the semester often produces substantial improvement—and some students make a conscious commitment to further efforts to improve their writing.

One-page papers demand that students prioritize and condense. They must identify, organize, summarize, and support the most important ideas or findings on the assigned topic. This is difficult for most of my students. Many first papers use up all of the allotted space on the first one or two points of the assignment. Others are accumulations of particulars that reveal no larger point, no overview, no con-

nection to earlier course material.

Some students complain about the space limit and insist they could write much better papers if given more space. At the same time, many of the papers are vague and hazy, padded with empty lists and riddled with assurances that randomly selected topics are “interesting” and “important.” They announce that there are “many different ways” of looking at things—and, this being America, we are each entitled to our own opinion.

One-page papers reduce the burden on the professor. They take about five minutes each to read and evaluate—a commitment of about 15 minutes per student over the course of a semester (plus, of course, the time spent during office hours talking with students about their papers).

Most semesters, I teach three courses with a total of about 150 students. Reading the papers of these students takes just under 40 hours per semester. Spread over a 15-week semester, this averages less than three hours per week—not a high price to pay for all the benefits to students of a challenging writing requirement. The papers also provide valuable feedback about what students do and do not understand.

Of course, the papers are *not* spread evenly over the semester. They tend to come in batches of 50

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or 100. To relieve this burden, I plan courses so that papers are due in different weeks for different courses. Usually, I can keep up by reading 10 papers a day. For the sake of staying fresh and being fair, I try never to read more than 20 a day.

By scheduling the third paper for the second-to-last week of each course, I give myself an extra week for reading the 150 papers that come at once at the end of the semester. For almost half the weeks of the semester, there are no papers to read.

All papers must be written on assigned topics that reflect a sociological viewpoint and integrate materials from previous lectures, as well as the new reading assignment. With each successive try, students get better at locating the most important points in a reading—even when those points have not yet been treated in lecture.

My one-page paper approach allows students some latitude in the choice of topics, so that all the successful papers are not exactly alike. But because the choice of topics is not open-ended, students are challenged to make good judgments about content.

Unlike the Writing Across the Curriculum proponents, I do not encourage my students to write on

“anything that interests you”—because the result often is trivial and undisciplined. If students do not get college-level critique of both content and the clarity of the presentation, their writing does not significantly improve.

I also part company with the WAC movement on collaboration. I don't allow students to work together in planning their papers—because too many students will get the outline of their paper from another student.

More than a few students have naively told me that they did not really understand what was being asked of them in these papers, so they asked another student what to include. This, of course, defeats the purpose of the assignment.

Some students feel that the obligation on them to decide what to include in the paper is too burdensome. They complain that it is “not fair,” that I will not tell them “what I want” in the papers and will not provide, in advance, samples of successful papers.

I find that much of what my students have previously written was directed at answering specific questions. The students were rarely required to prioritize or propose and support a thesis or theme.

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tions” that are included in the course syllabus (see Appendix), I can point out the strengths and weaknesses of the papers. I attempt to mark 90 percent of the errors, whether spelling, punctuation, grammar, logic, or fact. A brief note on the back of the paper offers suggestions for improvement. The notes usually include, “Let’s talk” or “I can help you improve.”

I disagree with some in the WAC movement who argue that we ought to mark only a few of the problems in a student paper because pointing out too many errors is depressing for students and bad for their self-esteem. In my opinion, most students are unlikely to improve very much unless they are made aware of all the errors they are making. I tell students that I am their writing coach and that part of my job is to tell them what they are doing wrong.

High standards require tough grading. With only a few exceptions, the grades on first papers range from C+ to D. Later, students receive their course grade on the basis of a generous curve, which allows those in the top half of the class to earn a B– or higher. The use of such a curve allows me to be brutally honest in the assessment of student writing. Indeed, separating the paper grade from the likely course grade seems to me a necessary prerequisite for improving

student writing.

I do not use student readers; most masters-level students do not write well enough to provide the quality of feedback that is required if students are to improve.

My criteria for a B– or higher (before any curving of the grade) are: The paper must be clearly college level, the paper must contain at least 80 percent of what I judge to be the most important content, and the paper must be good enough to convince me that the student is ready to write a one-page essay to win a job or qualify for graduate school.

Very few of my students achieve this last level, even on the third try. But most do improve over the course of the semester.

I also disagree with those in the WAC movement who argue that students should do a lot of ungraded writing and that those papers that are graded should be given high grades to “encourage” students and to protect them from blows to their self-esteem. Most of the students I teach see a need for improvement only if they get low grades.

Most of my students are in the C range by any reasonable college standard, but they are used to getting Bs and even As on papers because standards are so low. Like a good coach, a professor must let

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students know where they stand both relative to likely competitors and the college-level standard that the professor is paid to uphold.

We do our students no service if we tell them they are ready when they are not. We betray our students if we do not ask of them what we know they can do. One of the best things we can do for the self-esteem of our students is to push them to improve their writing.

The syllabus materials for the courses include a review of *Elements of Style* by Strunk and White and some amusing "Guidelines for Good Writing," in which each statement of a rule violates that rule. For example: The passive voice should not be used. No sentence fragments. Don't use no double negatives.

In class, I offer suggestions before and after each paper on content (prioritizing) and on basic writing skills: organization into tight paragraphs, starting each paragraph with a clear statement of a main point (topic sentence), and building up a paragraph of supporting evidence and elaboration by using simple, direct sentences with clear, strong verbs.

I discourage the use of empty introductory paragraphs, unwieldy lists of terms, and repetitive concluding paragraphs. I discourage the use of extensive direct quotations and urge students to state

conclusions in "your own words." I don't accept secondary sources, especially dictionaries and encyclopedias. I encourage students to edit and revise their papers so the final product is tight, clear, and polished.

I am available outside of class to go over the graded papers line by line, showing students how to improve both content and form—and how to prepare for the next paper. I assume that conscientious students will correct marked errors and avoid them in the future, and, as a result, I do not ask students to rewrite and resubmit papers. Their time is better spent making the next paper better.

A challenging writing requirement and a tough grading policy probably increase the number of students who come in during office hours. About one-third of my students visit me at least once during a semester. Of these, a substantial majority come primarily to discuss their papers.

These sessions are useful. I learn what students do and do not understand. Conversation often reveals that they understand a topic better than they were able to convey in their writing. Students appreciate these sessions and many appear to benefit from them.

I reward improvement by counting paper number three as two papers and dropping the lower

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of the first two paper grades for those students who write all three papers on time. I also drop the previous paper grade if the student shows substantial improvement on paper three, although I don't announce this bonus until the return of paper two.

In other words, student performance on paper three—when students should be doing their best work—can determine all or most of the course grade for the papers.

To reduce grade anxiety, I base two-thirds of the course grade on objective quizzes and only one-third on papers. This works because most students do better on the quizzes than on the papers. If students do better on the papers, I weight the papers more heavily.

To encourage students to write more (a WAC goal that I strongly endorse), I urge them to write practice papers for classes for which no paper is required. These practice papers are not graded, but the student receives the benefits of practice, plus extra credit and some feedback.

In most human activities, most people welcome the chance for a practice swing. But, despite my encouragement, only a small fraction of my students choose to make the effort of writing even one more one-page paper than is required. In a recent introductory class, only

three of 53 students wrote practice papers.

Most have written very little, so they do not write very well. They find writing a great burden and approach it fearfully.

Throughout the course, I present my lectures as models for organizing and condensing new material. Each paper should attempt to do what a good lecture does: locate the most important ideas and findings, organize them, state them clearly, support them with particulars, and apply them.

Over the course of the semester, students get better at anticipating what I will say in the lecture—and their papers reflect this.

My strategy in a nutshell:

- Assign three one-page papers, that are to be written according to carefully-prescribed guidelines, on assigned topics, that require integration of old and new material.
- Give detailed feedback and grade papers according to tough standards.
- Provide syllabus materials and suggestions in class to help students write better papers.
- Encourage students to go over their graded papers with the instructor during office hours.
- Use grades to reward improvement and reduce grade anxiety.
- Encourage students to write practice papers for extra credit.

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- Present lectures as models for organizing and condensing new material.

The essential features of this strategy are the one-page limit, the thorough critique, and the tough grading.

The one-page limit makes possible the thorough critique. The combination of thorough critique and tough grading appear to me to be necessary conditions if students are to improve substantially over the course of one semester.

There is, of course, nothing sacred about the one-page limit, but, in my experiments, two- and three-page limits did not yield better papers—just lots more pages for me to read.

One page is enough to determine if students understand the main points and sufficient to determine if they can write clearly and at college level. If students can write orderly, clear one-page papers, they can probably expand and elaborate, producing longer papers.

A short paper allows more feedback—and most students need the feedback.

Tough grading is “tough love” in the classroom. Most students will not improve unless they are given grades they consider unacceptable. I view content and logic as more important than form, but I take off

for every mistake—and I warn that some errors of form, especially fragments and run-on sentences, are devastating to clarity.

In my undergraduate courses, the tough grading of papers is cushioned by the policy of grading on a curve: The students in the top half of the class are guaranteed a grade of B– or higher on the papers. Student papers usually improve over the course of a semester, so that the gap between the raw grade and the curved grade narrows—but it does not disappear.

A few colleagues have questioned my practice of “bailing students out” by grading on a curve. They argue that a “tough grading policy” ought to result in lower course grades for the majority of students who do not write at college level.

They may have a point, but I think it is more important to avoid giving students appreciably lower grades than they get normally because they chose a course with a challenging writing requirement. My lower-division courses are demanding enough that a student who finishes in the top half of the class deserves a B– or higher.

My writing requirement is demanding enough that a student whose papers are in the top half of the class deserves a B– or higher on that part of the course grade determined by the papers.

The strategy presented here can be modified. Some professors will find the energy to read more than three papers from each student. In upper-division and graduate courses, one-page papers can be combined with a longer term paper.

But, for most undergraduates, additional one-page papers, rigorously graded and with thorough feedback, represent better use of the time of both student and professor. Longer papers encourage the undisciplined piling on of mere facts, without a clear statement of the larger point. Longer papers from “library research” invite plagiarism and inappropriate collaboration.

I urge my students to aim high, work hard, and let me help them improve. I assure them that they can do what I am asking of them because other students before them have. I tell them that if inner-city high school students can learn calculus, then my college students can write a solid page of college-level sociology.

I invite students to write a note on the back of their papers to let me know how they feel about the paper and their work in the

course—or even to relate a personal experience or ask a question. I urge students to commit themselves to continuing to improve their writing after the course ends by taking additional courses with me, taking other courses that require them to write, and by looking for other opportunities to write—diaries, journals, correspondence, or letters to the editor. We learn to write by writing.

We learn to write as we learn everything else—by modeling, practice, and feedback. Students learn to write by reading good writing, attempting to write, and getting evaluation and suggestions from others. Professors are especially important to the process because they can provide models of good writing—both their own and the books they assign.

Professors can also set the conditions under which students practice by the nature of their assignments. And they constitute the definitive source of official feedback: the grade.

The professor, in short, is coach and referee—and a bit of a cheerleader as well. ■

Appendix

Excerpts from the Syllabus

Reading and writing. In every course you take, you should seek to improve your ability to read effectively, to think clearly, and to write coherently. All learning and all communication of what you have learned depend on these skills. Two books that will help you

improve your writing are *Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White and *Writing for Social Scientists* by Howard S. Becker. . . .

One-third of your course grade will be based on three one-page papers. See the assignment sheet for due dates and topics. Guidelines for the preparation of the papers are provided below under the heading, WRITING SHORT PAPERS.

I strongly suggest that you test your understanding of each assignment by writing for EXTRA CREDIT a one-page PRACTICE PAPER on the main points. . . .

Writing short papers. Each required paper is a test of your ability to locate and summarize that which is most important and/or distinctive about the assigned material or topic. You must also relate that material to what has gone on in the course so far. . . .

Your paper should answer these general questions: (1) What does sociological inquiry reveal about the topic under consideration? Summarize the most important findings and ideas. (2) What evidence supports these conclusions? (3) So what? What are the implications of these findings? What *use* can be made of this knowledge?

Your papers must be 100 percent your own work. Do not discuss the planning or writing with anyone else. Do not give or receive help. Type and proofread your own paper. Do not use sources other than those assigned in the course. Do not quote from dictionaries or encyclopedias. Write your paper from the assigned readings and from your growing knowledge of the sociological way of looking at the world.

To make the flow of papers as smooth as possible, the following GUIDELINES must be observed.

Use opaque 8.5 × 11" paper. Please do NOT use paper torn from a spiral notebook or any paper that will be difficult to stack or turn.

Please type (double-space) with a margin of at least one inch all around.

Give your paper an appropriate title. Start the paper with a clear statement of a main point. Don't

waste time on peripheral concerns. The paper should be consistently sociological in content and tone.

Organize your paper into coherent paragraphs. Begin each paragraph with a clear topic sentence. Then elaborate with evidence, examples, and implications.

Make each sentence clear to a NAIVE READER—a person who does not know what you know about the topic and who, therefore, depends on your paper to learn about it.

Summarize the author's main points in YOUR OWN WORDS. Avoid long direct quotations. Avoid unnecessary jargon; define unfamiliar terms. Include proper citations.

Your paper must not exceed 250 words. Getting down to the essentials is part of your task. Be concise. Edit and rewrite until your paper is tight and clear.

Put your name on the BACK of the paper—along with the number and title of the course, the day and hours the class meets, and the due date. (If your word processing equipment cannot print on the back of the page, use a second sheet, facing backward and attached with a single staple.) ABOVE your name, please give full bibliographic references in proper form for materials cited in your paper. BELOW your name, I encourage (but do not require) personal reactions to the readings or topic, including any questions you may have. Please also indicate how long it took you to read the assignment and prepare the paper, how you are feeling about your work in the course, how I can help you learn more, etc.

If you have questions about these directions, talk with me before you write. I am available after class, during office hours, and

by appointment to talk with you about your work in this course.

Symbols and abbreviations.

This is the shorthand I use for feedback on student papers. Use this as a checklist for improving your paper before you turn it in.

ORG	Needs better organization.	?	Unclear
SWC	Start with a clear statement of the main point (topic sentence).	??	Confusing
SDS	Use simple, direct sentences.	¶	Paragraph
YOW	Say it in your own words.	○	Something wrong: Spelling, word usage, punctuation, etc.
NR	Naive reader (uninformed, dependent on your paper)	⊏	Fragment (incomplete sentence)
NAT	Not assigned topic	⊙	Run-on sentence
WSP	See directions for Writing Short Papers	↓	Condense: Say more with fewer words.
+	Good, yes	↑	
		SOC	Sociology, sociological
		POV	Point of view
		VF	Value-free
		Let's Talk	Talk with me about your paper as soon as possible. I can help you improve.