

Handling the Paper Load

Consider this:

Does the basketball coach isolate every error that each player makes and point them all out?

Consider this:

Do you recall any of the specific comments your teachers made on your compositions?

Consider this:

How many times have you corrected the spelling of a word on a student's paper only to see it appear misspelled again and again?

Consider this:

How often do you return a set of carefully corrected papers only to have to spend additional time justifying a grade or explaining the markings to students?

Consider this:

When you spend hours editing students' papers, who learns how to edit<you or the student?

Consider this:

You are a student. As such, You are probably extrinsically motivated. Your self-esteem is somewhat shaky and you have already decided that you aren't very good at writing. If you believe you don't have talent, then you probably don't see much hope for improving, and you probably don't feel that the teacher can really teach you much about writing.

Every time you have to write, you hope that you will get lucky and impress the teacher. You keep searching for the magic key that will insure that you will get a good grade on every paper. If you are that student, how will intensive marking of your paper help you?

Consider this:

How many times has a comment come back to haunt you? You praise something a student does once and he/she does it every time from then on even when it is totally inappropriate to do so. When you note this as a weakness, the student says, "But on the other paper, you said that was good."

Being able to handle the paper load means that you must reject the idea that you have to mark every paper intensively. It may even mean rejecting the idea that you have to read every piece of work students write. Until you accept these two premises, you will continue to have difficulty with paper load.

There is also another point to be made here. If you do not have lots of skill-drill exercises to check, spelling tests to grade, and grammar/usage quizzes to mark, your paper load will decline. While it is useful to consider ways to make composition correction more efficient and effective, you also need to look at other sources of paperwork too and make some adjustments there as well. Should we grade everything students do? Isn't there a time for making mistakes and learning from them without being penalized?

But on to the matter of handling the composition paper load. Basically there are 10 ways of coping with composition paper load:

1. Don't give grades of any sort at all.
2. Reduce the amount of writing students do.
3. Reduce the number of students you have.
4. Hire additional people to grade papers.
5. Reduce the number of papers you grade, but increase the amount of writing students do.
6. Change the design of tasks assigned.
7. Involve students in grading.
8. Streamline the method of grading
9. Increase the impact of marking.
10. Improve the quality of the writing you grade.

For most of us, options 1, 2, 3, and 4 simply are not feasible. Most schools require that grades be given and students need feedback on the quality of their work. In general, students need to do more, not less writing, and few of us are in control of our class sizes. Budget cuts are forcing us to accept more students, not fewer. With limited funds the possibility of hiring external graders is unlikely. Besides, the use of such graders interferes with the teacher's knowledge of students' writing.

That still leaves six options that we can experiment with. The trick, of course, is to become not only more efficient but more effective at the same time. Any plan that reduces your load but doesn't improve student writing doesn't work. Let's look at these six options and share some ideas about them.

Item 5 - Reduce the number of papers you grade, but increase the amount of writing students do.

Possibilities:

- * Use various kinds of journals.
- * Have students write fewer but longer papers.
- * Assign more writing tasks as prewriting building up to the actual assignment.
- * Use a writing folder system in which students write many papers. You grade the collection as a whole not separate papers.
- * Use a portfolio system wherein students select only certain papers for evaluation.
- * Have students write and revise several papers. On an appointed day collect from their folders only one of these papers (draw a number at random or choose a paper you want to read) for grading (See English Journal, Feb. '86, pp. 102-3 for a description).
- * Involve other teachers in assigning more writing across the curriculum.
- * Have small groups produce collaboratively written papers, one from each group. All students are involved in writing, but you grade only one paper from each group (See English Journal, Jan. '94, pp. 60-61 and 71-74 for a description).

Item 6 - Change the design of tasks assigned.

Possibilities:

- * Assign real world tasks for real audiences (e.g., children's books which will be bound and placed in a classroom library, school newspaper, pen pals correspondence, etc.)
- * Assign tasks which serve a useful purpose as is without revision (e.g., summary of lecture for personal recall, a report of the day's work for absentees, questions submitted to the teacher for response, etc.)
- * Assign some short tasks that serve a specific purpose while developing some particular writing skill (sentence combining practices, short story summaries to check comprehension prior to taking a test, writing directions for playing a game student created, etc.)
- * Assign writing tasks that act as preludes to oral activities (e.g., scripts which are performed, speeches, stories which are then told orally, etc.)

Item 7 - Involve students in grading.

Possibilities:

- * Have students select which papers you are to grade.
- * Have students develop grading criteria.
- * Have students participate in response and editing groups.
- * Have students mark certain items on each others' papers.
- * Have students set writing goals for themselves and grade according to these goals.

- * Have students specify the kind of feedback they want on a particular paper (e.g., general response and comments, a specific assessment of something particular he/she was trying to do, intensive marking, etc.)
- * Each writer writes an explanation of what grade his/her paper deserves and why.
- * Give students copies of an anonymously written paper which they are to correct and grade the way an English teacher does. The results are compared and discussed. (This activity helps students grasp the time and effort and difficulty of grading.)

Item 8 - Streamline the method of grading.

Possibilities:

- * Use holistic evaluation techniques.
- * Use a checklist of items.
- * Look only for a limited set of problems and grade only on this basis.
- * Grade intensively only a specified part or aspect of each paper depending upon the preceding focus of instruction (i.e., opening paragraph, vivid detail, spelling of homonyms, etc.).
- * For every negative comment you make and every error you mark, write a positive comment or note a correct item of value equal to the negative. (This is likely to cause you to cut down on the negatives you mark.)
- * Read the paper aloud. Mark an X in the margin every time you have to reread or pause to figure out the meaning. Mark a check every time the writer makes you think about content in a positive way (i.e., triggers a memory, presents a new idea, makes you laugh intentionally, etc.). Comment only on some of your X's and checks.
- * Put a check mark next to the line in which an error occurs. This forces the student to examine the entire line, find the error, and decide how to revise it.

Item 9 - Increase the impact of marking.

Possibilities:

- * Provide specific feedback about what works and what doesn't. Offer suggestions and ask questions. Avoid general comments.
- * Look only for patterns of errors not isolated mistakes.
- * Mark and comment with an instructional purpose in mind. Focus on what students are likely to be able to apply the next time they write. If the problem is related to a particular genre (e.g., the use of quotation marks in dialogue), you didn't teach it, and students didn't master the concept, then ignore it; you can give another assignment and teach the item then.
- * Focus on those skills and problems that students are developmentally ready to handle.

Item 10 - Improve the quality of the writing you grade.

Possibilities:

- * Spend more class time preparing students to write better final papers by teaching them various revising and editing strategies, focusing on prewriting, and providing more in-class aid through group responses, one-on-one conferences and so forth.
- * Provide checklists for students to use.
- * Predict potential problems and teach mini-lessons ahead of time.
- * Focus on a few persistent problems and try to eradicate them.
- * Focus attention and energy on responding effectively to students' work during the writing process.
- * Encourage students to use computer checkers for spelling, grammar, style, and so forth. Be sure they know how to use these devices. Provide time for their use.
- * Institute an editing council, a group of students who review all papers before you get them. Each person checks for a particular feature. If they note problems, the paper goes back to the writer for improvement.
- * When you get a set of papers, skim through them. If you see some common problems, return the ungraded papers the next day and teach a lesson on the problems. Students are to check their work and make any necessary changes before submitting again.

Some concluding remarks

We don't want to penalize students for being inexperienced writers. If we mark every error, we may discourage them from taking risks and learning language the natural way by trial and error. Remember that some errors are actually signs of growth. Finally, be sure to communicate openly with students and parents about how you grade and why you use this method.

Recommended Further Reading:

- * Brockman, E. (1994). "English isn't a team sport, Mrs. Brockman": A response to Jeremy. *English Journal*, 83 (1)@ 60-1.
- * Calkins, L. (1986). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- * Hillebrand, R. (1994). Control and cohesion: Collaborative learning and writing. *English Journal*, 83 (1), 71-4.
- * Mitchell, K. (1986). W.E.E.D. - Writing essays every day (A guide for the overburdened English teacher.) *English Journal*, 75 (2), 102-3.
- * Stanford, G. (Chair) (1979). *How to handle the paper load*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- * Zemelman, S. & Daniels, H. (1988). *A community of writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.