

Improving Student Writing

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Andrade, H. G. (2005, Win). Teaching with rubrics: The good, the bad, and the ugly. *College Teaching*, 53 (1), 27-31.

This short article explains how and why to use rubrics not only for grading but also for teaching, including a discussion of peer- and self-assessment by students. The article describes the benefits and pitfalls of well-applied rubrics, and provides a sample rubric.

Anson, C. M. (1997, Spr). In our own voices: Using recorded commentary to respond to writing. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (69), 105-13.

This article describes the benefits of recording audio commentary to respond to students' writing. The author argues that such commentary can be more informative and more supportive than written comments and can help the instructor to relate to the student as guide and mentor rather than judge. Anson, writing in 1997, urges the use of tape recorders, but (as he predicts) his suggestions are even easier to implement today using computers.

Bender, T. (2003). *Discussion-based online teaching to enhance student learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

This book discusses how and why one can successfully make use of online teaching. The author addresses both courses that are conducted wholly online and hybrid courses that have both a traditional and an online component. The book's three sections are: (i) "Theory: an application of learning theories to online discussion-based courses," (ii) "Practice: suggestions and techniques, illustrated by real examples, for stimulating and managing online discussion effectively, and for improving on teaching practices," and (iii) "Assessment: methods for assessing the efficacy of discussion-based online courses."

Crannell, A., LaRose, G., & Ratliff, T. (2004). *Writing projects for mathematics courses: Crushed clowns, cars & coffee to go*. The Mathematical Association of America.

This text discusses writing projects that can be used in mathematics courses, including likely points of student difficulty and grading rubrics. The authors argue that writing projects are more engaging and motivating for students than traditional approaches to mathematics instruction.

Davis, B. G. (2001). *Tools for teaching*. (p. 205-229). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

The following chapters in Davis' comprehensive guide to university-level teaching are particularly helpful in thinking about student writing: (24) Helping Students Write Better in All Courses (which describes how to assign and prepare one's students for written work in any academic discipline), (25) Designing Effective Writing Assignments, and (26) Evaluating Students' Written Work. Each of these chapters offers both general advice as well as a number of specific suggestions, among which a reader may choose those that best fit his or her teaching style or classroom circumstances.

Elbow, P. (1997, Spr). High stakes and low stakes in assigning and responding to writing. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (69), 5-13.

This article urges instructors to distinguish between "high-stakes" and "low-stakes" writing. "High-stakes" writing is a relatively larger part of the student's final grade, is more formal, and is evaluated largely on the quality of the writing (rather than, for example, being evaluated exclusively on the student's understanding of the course material). "Low-stakes" writing is not a large part of the student's final grade and is less formal. The article argues that reliance on low-stakes writing is effective in helping students to become comfortable in thinking about the course material and confident in their writing.

Elbow, P., & Sorcinelli, M. D. (n.d.). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers*. In W. J. McKeachie & M. Svinicki (Eds.), (chap. 15: How to Enhance Learning by Using High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Writing). D.C. Heath and Co.
Goff-Kfour, C. A. (2004). Efficiency at the center of learning and teaching. ERIC Online Submission, 1-10.

The author, without arguing against the use of learner-centered approaches, argues that teacher-centered approaches to pedagogy are not inferior. What is crucial, in either approach, is to present material in a way that engages one's students. Toward that end, the second half of the article helpfully discusses how to effectively apply each of these approaches in helping students to write a research paper, including ideas about how to structure class time for discussion of research texts, as well as ideas for helping students to understand how to organize their thoughts and provide clear documentation of their sources.

Hobson, E. H. (1998, Sum). Designing and grading writing assignments. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (74), 51-57.

This article describes simple steps to help one generate an effective writing assignment (along with a brief argument that instructors should include such assignments in their courses). The author offers a case study of a pharmacy faculty collaboratively developing a writing assignment for a large course. The article helps to identify some of the blind spots that instructors often have with respect to their students' understanding of writing assignments. For example, students often know very little about the target audience of

their assignments or about the grading criteria that will be used to assess them. Tips (and concrete examples) are offered in these and other areas. Following these sorts of steps in developing a writing assignment can make the task much clearer to one's students, which will improve the quality of their work (and will thereby make grading easier as well).

Keim, M. C. (1991, Sum). Creative alternatives to the term paper. *College Teaching*, 39 (3), 105-7.

This brief article describes many of the drawbacks of the standard term paper assignment and discusses in detail the alternatives that the author has developed in her own classes. These are a series of smaller writing projects: abstracts and book reviews which are presented to other students in small groups; group papers and accompanying presentations; "thought papers" which focus more on creativity than on research; and a take-home final. The author's final, which she argues engages student interest and promotes creativity more than does a term paper, includes four parts: a written speech, a compare-and-contrast question, an additional thought paper of publishable quality, and a creative 5-minute presentation. The article includes an explanation of the content and benefits for each of these.

Nilson, L. B. (2003). *Teaching at its best*. Boston: Anker.

Two chapters of this text are particularly relevant to student writing. Chapter 20 discusses different types of learning-centered writing, such as varieties of low-stakes writing: free writes, one-minute papers, journals, one-sentence summaries, learning logs, letters, and others. Writing activities encourage students' learning, students' critical reflection on their learning, and students' peer learning and peer assessment on drafts of writing assignments. Chapter 21 offers ideas for how to teach writing across disciplines, including disciplinary differences in writing and how to deal with them in a way that improves your students' abilities to write in all disciplines.

Smyth, K. (2004, Jun). The benefits of students learning about critical evaluation rather than being summarily judged. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29 (3), 370-378.

The author argues that student assessment should be structured in a way that encourages the student to reflect on the assessment procedure. The paper includes an exploration of ways to help one's students approach feedback and assessment in an appropriately reflective way.

Speck, B. W. (2000). Grading students' classroom writing: Issues and strategies. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 27 (3).

The author attempts to provide a comprehensive guide to assessing students' writing; however, the focus is not purely on assessment but includes issues such as how to make one's writing assignments effective for student learning. (Furthermore, the text's treatment of assessment does not focus purely on grading; Speck argues that it is very helpful to the student's growth as a writer that some writing assignments not be graded.) The text addresses the relationship of the writing process to the grading process, ways to construct effective writing assignments, theoretical issues in grading related to fairness and professional judgment, ways to include students in the assessment of writing, and guidelines professors can use to provide effective feedback for students to revise their writing.

Sublett, M. D. (1993, Win). A model essay: One way to improve students' writing. *College Teaching*, 41(1), 11-14.

In this short article, Sublett argues for the effectiveness of a model essay in preparing one's students for a writing assignment. In his case, Sublett has taken the information he used to provide in a one-time lecture and has put it into his model essay. And so he gives his students an essay on how to write essays, which exemplifies its own advice. He argues that this is a highly effective means of improving students' writing, which is much appreciated by students. His article includes recommendations for components of a model essay.

Tchudi, Stephen, ed. (1997). *Alternatives to grading student writing*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

The text is a collection of nineteen essays, the result of an investigation by the National Council of Teachers of English Committee on Alternatives to Grading Student Writing. The essays cover a range of ideas about how to foster and motivate student writing in innovative ways.

White, E. B. (1991). *Teaching and assessing writing: Recent advances in understanding, evaluating, and improving student performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This book attempts to bring the reader up-to-date on the fruits of research into student writing and to turn this research into fruitful assignments. The book discusses writing assignments as implemented in small and large classrooms but also writing tests intended for department-wide, university-wide, or even nation-wide implementation (as in standardized testing). The book discusses how to develop large- and small-scale assignments effectively, how to help one's students excel at them, and how to grade them. The text presents many ways of assessing students' writing but pays particular attention to "holistic" grading, in which essays are evaluated as wholes rather than analyzed into separately graded parts. The text is intended for instructors of all disciplines.

Woods, R. G. (1999). *Calculus mysteries and thrillers (classroom resource materials)*. The Mathematical Association of America.

The text contains a dozen mathematics projects, each of which is much more involved and complex than the traditional mathematics textbook problems. To be more engrossing and more transparently relevant to other fields for the students, the projects draw on problems and concepts from economics and physics, but no prior knowledge of these fields is required. The projects can be used either for individual or for group work.

Young, A. (1997, Spr). Mentoring, modeling, monitoring, motivating: Response to students' ungraded writing as academic conversation. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (69), 27-39.

The article describes three different methods for incorporating low-stakes, informal, ungraded writing into a class. Each method is aimed at providing the student a medium in which to explore and converse in the subject matter. The first method is a five-minute essay, in which the student includes questions for further discussion. The instructor might respond directly to the student or might use the essays to plan future lessons. The second method is the writing of poems. The author encourages this method for use in any field – examples are provided from a course in entymology. This method focuses on motivating students to engage with the material in a playful way. The last method is letter-writing between students. This method encourages academic conversation not just between teacher and student but primarily amongst students as peers. Examples of each of the three methods are provided.