

## Conference Critique: Internalization of Writing Process

## Overview of the Course's Writing Instruction

Teaching writing has become teaching the writing process. Since the 1970s writing instruction has improved greatly due to this change in focus. Students are better able to master each step of the process that professional writers and researchers have pointed out as being essential for writing effectively. Even when students wait until the last minute to write an essay, they are able to perform the steps of the writing process. However, the writing process has also become a crutch for many students, who still wait to do each step *as it is assigned* by the teacher instead of personalizing the process to individual needs. Students graduate from high school able to follow the writing process, but not able to internalize it, not able to vary it for their own writing style and for the various kinds of writing they are asked to do.

The main feature of writing instruction I have developed to help students internalize the writing process is to hold a conference with the student about the final draft of the paper he or she wrote—a conference *at the end* of the entire process that examines the final draft in light of the decisions made during the writing process. In this conference, which is lead by the student, the focus is on two changes the student made about the content and two changes made in the expression of that content; the student has to own the choices he or she made in the entire process, from coming up with the paper topic to printing out and turning in the final copy. Selection of topic, amount and effort in drafting, seriousness of feedback sought from peer editors, attention to the needs of the reader (which is his or her peers), willingness to revise repeated drafts to improve the pleasure of reading the text and the strength of the content, all of these are to be considered by the student.

In essence, the meeting is a public display of learning during which the student gets to talk about the successes and challenges in writing the final draft of a paper. The conference reinforces the idea that one purpose for writing is to promote understanding through communication of one's ideas (both the student's understanding of the course's texts and the student's enlarged understanding of the tools of rhetoric). Instead of focusing mainly on the content of the writing, as we often do when discussing literature, the conference focuses on both form and content, namely how the form of the writing aids in conveying the student's meaning. In the conference the student gets to hear from an experienced reader (the teacher) what effects his or her language achieved. When the teacher takes on the role of an experienced reader, he or she can best explain the effects that diction, mechanics, usage, figurative language, and convention have on the communication of the student's ideas. When the student takes on the role of a writer explaining his or her writing, the student is required to know more about his or her writing and the effects his or her choices have on the reader's experience. The conference then is the formative and summative evaluation of the student's understanding of writing and the writing process.

In this conference approach to writing instruction, the student isn't finished with a paper until he or she has had a conference explaining to the teacher the significant changes made

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to improve the final draft. Moreover, the grade given to the paper happens during the conference, including a grade for the conference. The conference approach has proven to be very successful in ensuring that the student understands why the grade was given, and what to do to get a better grade, and more importantly, improve as a writer.

Several logistical changes happen to writing instruction when time is made each week in class to meet with students about their final drafts. **Staggered Due Dates:** The class needs to be divided into writing groups, each of which goes through the same process as the rest of the class, but on its own timetable. **Paper Topics:** Paper topics are not assigned: final drafts are not due at the end of a book or unit, so they may deal with parts of texts or larger topics across texts. Paper topics are developed each week by students themselves, sometimes in consultation with the teacher, and are constantly being generated by individual students based on interests discovered in homework assignments and class discussion. I often point out to students, during class discussion, what would make a good paper topic, and I encourage students to borrow other students' ideas they find interesting. Students learn that to write a good paper requires one to be interested in the topic, so each student gets to find his or her own way of getting interested in the texts we read. **Weekly Essay Drafts:** Students write a first draft and an outline of that draft each week, thinking through the week's material and practicing organizing those thoughts in the form of an essay. From these short (three-page) first drafts and outlines comes the paper that will be taken to a rough draft for peer feedback. After peer feedback, the student revises the paper again for a second peer response, and then revised again for a final draft. **Public Writing and Cooperation:** Each week, students who don't meet with the teacher (most of the class) are busy silently reading each other's rough drafts and writing responses to those papers. Each student needs to improve at giving feedback based upon personal reactions to specific moments in the peers' paper, using the course's guidelines. Each student needs to receive written feedback on drafts so he or she can, later on, read over the comments and make additions, subtractions, and rearrangements to the draft. **Central Role of Homework:** Nightly homework assignments become the field from which students grow their ideas for papers. It requires the student to actively tend to the material (do the homework) and make observations about data (reflect on ideas to explore). Students cannot succeed by passively listening in class, failing to read and write about texts, and expecting to be given a topic to write on. Learning to develop ones' own topic is essential in becoming a better reader, in developing into a skilled writer, and for succeeding in college. **Active Communication:** Students need to actively communicate with the teacher before or after class, or during the day, if and when there are problems in keeping up with his or her writing group's due dates.

Conferences: If a student is absent the day of a conference, that student will fail the conference, which may make the paper grade go down as well since students often point out important achievements the teacher might have passed over due to other concerns. If the teacher, for some reason—usually conferences running too long—, is unable to meet with a student on his or her scheduled day, the student needs to reschedule with that teacher at that moment, or later that day or the next day, to set up a new time and place

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outside of class for the conference. A failure to reschedule will be treated the same as missing a conference. Since the teacher has a constant schedule of meetings with students, any meeting not made up within a week will be treated as a missed conference.

Papers: Students work on their writing continuously, each week developing an idea for a paper that could be written based upon that week's or the previous weeks' readings and discussion. Students generate their own paper topics, with feedback from peers and through using class discussion to find and hone ideas. To do this well, students develop the ability to recognize a good paper topic of personal interest while participating in class discussion, and learn to be comfortable with writing about parts of texts and sub-points of ideas. To do this well requires the next item:

Daily Homework: Each student must keep up with the homework, do it conscientiously, and pay attention or participate in class discussion.

Public Writing and Cooperation: The feedback students give each other needs to be precise, clear, and in the spirit of helping a classmate improve his or her paper. (See the article "Strengths into Strategies.") Each student will need to work on his or her own skills at reading and responding, using clear, precise and non-judgmental language, and thoughtful and helpful comments about the effects the writing has on the communication of an idea. Students are to give feedback in terms such as "I really liked it when . . ." or "I was confused when . . ." or "I wanted you to add . . ." or "I found it distracting when . . ." The ability to give specific feedback on a peer's paper about the effectiveness of the writing IS THE SAME ABILITY as giving a reaction to a specific passage or element in the course material.

Active Communication: Each student is expected to communicate with the teacher his or her concerns, issues, or difficulties in keeping on track with the course. The course is demanding and requires a lot of self-monitoring. The teacher makes a distinction between *patterns* of missed due dates and *incidents* of missed due dates. The causes of the former (the patterns) needs to be communicated to the teacher; the causes of the latter (the incidents) are of no interest to the teacher and will have their due impact on the student's grade, usually negligible for conscientious students. Communicating the causes of patterns of missed assignments is extremely important for ensuring the student receives a quality education, not a quality grade. The teacher is greatly concerned about the quality of each student's education—not his or her grade.

*The Conference Critique:*

Students get graded on their conference based upon their preparation and performance in the conference. To prepare for the conference the student must do the following:

- Mark up personal copy of final draft: **Mark** where changes were made and why, and the **effect sought** using the Holistic Rubric. (done for homework)

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- **Focus on two specific important changes** in drafting the content to make it better and **two specific important changes** in writing to enhance your meaning or to make the paper fun to read: content issues such as apt use of text, topic sentences aligning better with the thesis claim, organization, paragraphing, explanation development, use of quotations, introductions and conclusions; writing issues such as, parallelism, diction, sentence openers, metaphors, similes, rhetorical questions, MLA formatting, title, punctuation, etc. (done for homework)

The student's performance is based upon the student's ability to be quick and focused on what he or she finds important to talk about. Also, the student's familiarity with **[Woodruff's Modified] New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric** will be assessed in the conference.

*Paper formatting:* For the rough draft and final draft, the format needs to follow MLA formatting guidelines. There is no excuse not to follow MLA formatting by the time a student is an upperclassman. Under no circumstances can a paper receive an overall grade of an A if it is not formatted correctly. Titling, paragraphing, capitalization, line spacing, type size, margins, and citation format all should have been mastered. Follow the MLA guidelines, easily accessible at Purdue's OWL site (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>). If you are not sure or do not know the correct way, look it up.

Always label each assignment with your name, the date, item and number submitted; class, period and teacher; and title.

The paper is graded for both the content (the argument) and the form (the style) of the writing.

*Basic errors in Mechanics:* Certain errors, such as in titling, capitalization, using "I" inappropriately, citing sources, etc., will result in an F on your style grade no matter how well you use words and construct sentences. (See Holistic Scoring Rubric)

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## Grading

Homework and class participation: written assignments and participating in class discussion over the week will make up the points of homework each week. Students need to participate a couple times a week to get full discussion points: participating in only one class a week will get around half the points, depending on how often the student participates that day. Participation is very easy: merely bring up in class a point you raised in your written work or respond to a comment by another student by making a comment on the text. Participation can be thought of as a time to get one-on-one feedback from the teacher about an idea the student may want to pursue in a paper. A student who does not add to class participation fails to create an atmosphere of group inquiry.

**Homework is always posted** on a public calendar that students are responsible for checking regularly.

**Homework cannot be made up.** Since we discuss the homework in class, it is unfair for a student who didn't do the homework to use class notes in making up the homework while the rest of the class helped produce those class notes. If a student is absent he or she is expected to bring the homework to class the first day back. Missed days are missed opportunities for participation. A few missing homeworks a quarter should not impair one's grades; a pattern of missed homeworks will impair one's grade. A student may, however, write more on the next several homework assignments to make up for missing a homework assignment.

**With each reading assignment will be a writing assignment**, the length of which depends upon the level the student has contracted for. The reading assignments are not meant to be easy, but are mostly challenging: one does not get to be a better reader by reading easy material. So there will have to be some effort in understanding the reading assignments, or parts of the reading assignments. That is why the written reactions to the homework are graded on length, not quality: students are to get the most or what they can from the reading, writing out their ideas (explaining to themselves what they think); then, through class discussion, they can further explore ideas or seek answers to questions. If all you can do is find one bit of a reading to understand, find that one bit, and react to it. Homework is not right or wrong; it is done or not done.

**Final Drafts:** final drafts get a content grade and a form (writing style) grade.

**Writing process:** an element due each week: outline, first draft, rough draft, conference. Substitute work: if teacher is absent, the subwork due by the end of the class will be worth at least a homework assignment and cannot be made up.

**Presentations:** occasionally there will be presentations to do, worth an essay grade. Presentations are a timely part of the course material and cannot be made up later: the teacher will have to do the presentation if the student is absent, and the student will receive a 0 for the presentation.

For seniors, regular attendance and the consistent completion of daily homework are indicators of success in college. A student who falls behind or

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only does homework sporadically will surely be wasting thousands of dollars next year at college. .

Extra credit: there are occasional extra credit opportunities announced in the course. Also, there is always possible the extra credit of writing longer homework assignments.

However, longer extra credit assignments are capped at 50% of the points available for the assignment.

**Letters of Recommendation:** I handle all recommendation requests in my office, where I will let the student know if I could write a good one or not. I will not write any recommendations for students prior to January 1 deadlines, unless I have known and worked with that student before. I will not write a recommendation without the following materials and without having a 5 – 10 minute meeting with the student:

Copy of best or most interesting paper written in my class

Copy of college essays, in process or finished

Copy of resume

Cover page with paragraphs on the following: what you plan on studying and why, moment in class that reveals how you think, what you like about your best paper

I need at least two weeks notice for the first deadline date.

Please confirm that you are using Naviance or not.