

Evaluating Student Writing: Managing Your Time

Like just about any aspect of teaching, the work of evaluating student writing can take up just as much time as you allow it. Given the importance of balancing your many responsibilities as a GSI, the matter of time management deserves its own handout, even if it reiterates some ideas we've offered elsewhere. The good news is that many time-saving techniques (e.g., staging assignments, or limiting your marginal comments on student papers) also lead to better pedagogical results.

Assigning writing: practices to consider

- Spend class time discussing the learning goals and evaluation criteria for each writing assignment. You can answer student questions about the assignment when the class is assembled, rather than individually. Clear discussion of evaluation criteria can also save you time commenting on papers later.
- Devote time to discussing and responding to student writing early in a course to achieve stronger writing throughout the semester.
- Design assignments that teach particular skills so you can limit your comments to students' success with just those skills.
- If you can anticipate challenges students will have with the assignment, identify them in class and discuss strategies for overcoming them. A general rule to keep in mind: the stronger the papers, the quicker the grading process.
- Between major assignments, assign low-stakes writing that reinforces learning or allows students to practice new skills. These can be read and responded to quickly or not at all.
- Assign essays in stages so that students can receive feedback on specific areas (thesis, intro, topic sentences, lit review, etc.) that will produce more successful completed essays.
- Use peer groups to respond to drafts or develop essay ideas.

Commenting on writing: practices to consider

- Keep track of common problems and create a document (to be handed out or projected in class) addressing them, rather than repeating the same comments over and over on individual essays.
- Set a per paper time limit for yourself and stick to it.
- Read a stack of papers in several sittings so you can work on manageable chunks at your maximum efficiency.
- Skim each paper quickly in order to determine which issues are most important. This will allow you to construct focused lead or end comments that can guide your marginal notes.
- Focus your comments for each paper on two or three of the most important points you want to make, rather than trying to address every issue.
- Use marginal comments/notations only to point out examples of patterns or elements discussed in an end or header comment.
- If you are commenting on style, grammar, and mechanics, mark up a single representative paragraph to address broader patterns in the essay.
- When you have responded to drafts, limit your response on the final essay to a summative comment noting the success of the revision and the essay's overall strengths and weaknesses.
- Use technologies, such as the commenting function in Word, that allow you to give feedback more efficiently.

- If the feedback you want to convey is highly complex, make a general note of the issue and then ask the student to schedule an appointment to discuss the essay.
- Introduce students to the resources at the Sweetland Writing Center.

Assigning grades: practices to consider

- Develop a scoring guide or rubric based on the pedagogical goals of each specific assignment.
- Keep your rubric in front of you while you grade to remind you of your stated expectations and standards; this will help you remain both efficient and consistent in your grading.
- Encourage students to use rubrics as guides for both peer and self-assessment. E.g., ask students to turn in a page assigning their essay a grade and explaining that grade in terms of the evaluation criteria you have given them. Your comments can briefly address why you agree or disagree with their assessment.