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# Stop! Think! Grade!: Developing a Philosophy of Writing Evaluation

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## WRITING

# Stop! Think! Grade!: Developing a Philosophy of Writing Evaluation

TERRI A. FREDRICK

**O**n the first day of my graduate course in evaluating student writing, I ask the students to describe their evaluation philosophy. After a few moments of silence, the students, a mix of graduate assistants and full-time K–12 teachers, begin by telling me what they expect from students' writing. When prodded to focus on their own evaluation, they list writing issues they mark in student papers. Some describe evaluation practices: "I don't pick up my pen until I've read through the paper at least once," says one teacher. "Why?" I press. Eventually someone will venture a claim like this one: "I want to provide feedback that helps my students become better writers." "Ok," I counter, "but what does it mean to *you* that a student will be a 'better writer' and just as importantly, what is your plan for accomplishing that through evaluation?"

On that first day, very few of the teachers are able to articulate in any clear, specific way what it is they are trying to accomplish as they evaluate a student's paper.

### The Lack of Complex Dialogue Concerning Writing Evaluation

This inability to articulate a clear evaluation philosophy is not surprising, given how little educational training in evaluating student writing teachers receive (Smith, 1997). To begin, even the terminology itself is slippery: what do we mean when we say "assess," "grade," "evaluate," or "respond"? Do these terms describe different activities, or does each describe different attitudes toward the same activity? (In this article, I use the term "evaluation" to refer to the full range of activities that includes providing feedback on drafts and final papers, filling out rubrics, and assigning grades.)

Despite the significant role evaluation plays in teachers' daily work, surprisingly little attention is devoted to this topic in most education and English education courses. While students in English methods courses might develop units that include assessment plans, there is usually little actual

discussion of why and how teachers evaluate and likely no practice evaluating writing produced by real middle or high school students. As a result, new teachers must develop a set of evaluation practices on their own, often simply through trial and error or by "doing what's been done to us." Despite the importance of evaluating to our teaching, these evaluation strategies are usually developed with little guidance or access to the body of evaluation research.

Once in a teaching position, a teacher may have opportunities to participate in workshops that provide models for evaluating student writing (e.g., the Collins Writing Program's Focus Correction Areas, Schaffer writing rubrics, Six Traits Writing Assessment). These programs generally provide teachers with both a system for writing that can be taught to students and also a system for evaluating student writing. These programs offer an easily implemented approach distilled from research concerning student learning. The Collins Writing Program, for example, describes its use of Focus Correction Areas as allowing students to "concentrate on improving only a handful of skills at any one time [without feeling] overwhelmed by having to think about too many things when creating a piece of work" (Collins Education Associates). This approach aligns with evaluation research concerning the value of providing limited, yet specific feedback (e.g., Harris, 1979; Lunsford, 1997; Haswell, 2006).

In addition, these writing programs are developed by people who understand the practical realities associated with teaching large numbers of students with widely ranging writing abilities: the proposed writing approaches can be easily modeled for students and the evaluation strategies are designed to be efficient and consistent. As a result, however, these programs tend to present a one-size-fits-most model for writing and evaluating. These writing programs tend to focus primarily on generating short-term writing improvement in narrowly defined writing situations (Wiley, 2000). Under the Schaffer model, for example, students are taught to create paragraphs that adhere to a particular pattern of

topic sentence, concrete detail, and commentary, a model of paragraph structure that applies to only a small portion of actual writing situations (Braddock, 2011). Teachers, too, may feel constrained by such programs. What promises to be an efficient approach to evaluation can instead grind to a halt when a teacher discovers that a student's paper is just not working, for reasons other than those articulated by the program. A single writing program cannot fully prepare teachers for the diverse abilities, topics, and approaches they will encounter in a stack of student papers.

Even when a writing program can be generalized to many assignments and writing levels, telling teachers what comments to make is only the tip of the iceberg. We teach our students that the purpose of writing is to communicate, and that word choice, sentence structure, organization, and even format impact how we communicate with our audience. *Evaluating, too, is an act of writing.* Just as we want our students to consider their audiences, to focus on appropriate word choice, and to use clear thesis statements with supporting evidence, so should we when we write evaluations to our students. In fact, one of the primary differences between our students' writing tasks and ours is that while students' writing most often responds to hypothetical situations, our evaluations are always written for real audiences with the real purpose of helping students learn to become more effective writers. While a writing program might prepare teachers to look for and mark a particular writing element, such as supporting details, it rarely takes on the issue of how writing "Add a supporting detail here" differs from writing "I'm not yet persuaded. What support do you have for this claim?" Nor does it help teachers decide whether to note every instance where supporting details are lacking or to ask students to find the missing supporting details for themselves.

## Developing a Reflective Evaluation Philosophy

My purpose here is not to argue against the use of writing programs. Instead, I argue that, in the absence of a reflectively articulated evaluation philosophy, the effectiveness of such programs is limited. As a result, even well-trained teachers often have under-theorized evaluation practices, by which I mean that teachers place comments and grades on student papers and rubrics without first considering what it is they want their evaluation to accomplish and how their feedback might best lead to improved student writing and motivation.

Without a clear sense of what we're trying to achieve, we cannot determine whether our evaluation strategies help or hinder our students as they strive to become the "better

writers" we hope for. If we think of evaluating as *merely* a set of practices, then we're more likely to unintentionally engage in practices that undermine, rather than support, our goals as teachers. Teachers often have unexamined assumptions about evaluation: as one teacher-researcher writes, "some of my beliefs about what made a good response were deeply buried, and I was unable to articulate them, even to myself" (Kogel Gedeon, 2009, p. 52).

These unexamined assumptions may work against what we tell our students (and ourselves) about writing. Kristin Kogel Gedeon (2009), for example, shares these previously unrecognized assumptions she uncovered during her research into her own evaluating practices: the product matters more than the process; longer feedback is better; the sign of high-quality feedback is that the students use the teacher's ideas in their revisions. These unexamined assumptions may also work against what research can tell us about what makes evaluation effective. In fact, research on evaluation indicates many evaluation practices do not help students improve their writing. Haswell (2006) provides a detailed review of such studies.

Developing an evaluation philosophy and intentional evaluation practices means taking time to discern what it is we intend to accomplish when we evaluate students' writing and whether or not our current evaluation practices work toward those intentions. One step for doing this is to engage in focused reflection. In my graduate course on evaluating student writing, I ask the teachers to go through a guided reflection as they evaluate a set of papers, pausing every few papers to consider everything from their own mood to the types and lengths of their comments. Alternatively, teachers can analyze their own evaluations of a set of papers: looking at the comments with a little distance, what do they reveal about your attitude toward students, their writing, the assignment?

Another step in developing your evaluation philosophy is to use the best resource you have available to you: the students. As writers, we are fortunate to have almost daily access to our audience, and they may be in the best position to tell us what effects our evaluations have (Kogel Gedeon, 2009, p. 57). When I first began trying to be intentional about my evaluation approaches, I would ask students who came to my

**Developing an evaluation philosophy and intentional evaluation practices means taking time to discern what it is we intend to accomplish when we evaluate students' writing and whether or not our current evaluation practices work toward those intentions.**

office to walk me through the feedback I'd given them and tell me how they'd interpreted it. The results were sometimes surprising. For example, a cornerstone of my teaching philosophy is that supporting students' development involves giving frequent and specific positive feedback. Imagine my surprise when I learned that many of my students were misinterpreting my positive marginal comments as criticisms because their past experience had led them to expect positive comments to be brief, general, and placed at the end of the paper. Through reflection and/or directed classroom research, teachers can develop an evaluation philosophy by asking themselves questions like the following:

- Do my students really understand the comments I write on their papers? What are they learning from my comments and rubrics?
- What messages am I sending to students with my comments and grades?
- What does my evaluation say to students about what matters most in writing?
- How do my evaluation practices align with my philosophies of teaching and learning?
- What habits of evaluating have I developed (consciously or unconsciously)? Are those habits working for me? For my students? Might other habits be more productive, efficient, and/or instructive?

In the rest of this article, I want to suggest five principles that I believe lie at the core of any evaluation philosophy that seeks to maximize students' learning and writing improvement. These principles do not describe the goals we have for students' writing, for those goals change across time and writing level. Instead these principles represent some common foundations upon which I believe—based on research and my experience as a teacher and teacher of teachers—productive evaluation philosophies might be built. Along with each principle, I include examples of evaluation practices that might result.

My examples are not meant to be exhaustive. I'm wary of what Smagorinsky (2009) has called the "silver bullet," a "best practice" that works equally well for every teacher. So much of our teaching depends on our teaching personas, the students we teach, our subject matter, and contextual issues such as administration, parents, and state standards. In my graduate courses, for example, teachers passionately debate rubrics versus end comments, letter grades versus percentages, and positive versus critical feedback. Any of these practices, in the hands of the right teacher, can facilitate student

learning and motivation. Because students' writing abilities vary so widely, because middle and high school teachers have so many students at once, and because so many external demands are placed on teachers by administrators, parents, and legislators, one sign of a solid evaluation philosophy is its flexibility in terms of practice and implementation. The philosophy represents our ideal, which we make real through our evaluation practices.

### Effective Evaluation is a Dialogue Between Teacher and Student

For teachers with several classes of students, the evaluations we write on student papers may be the only time we have for individualized instruction with most of our students. Sitting in front of Tanisha's paper last night was probably the only time this week that I will have fifteen minutes to focus solely on Tanisha. Framed this way, it's important to me that I spend that time *talking to Tanisha*. Teachers frequently wish they had more time to work one-on-one with students, yet through our evaluation practices, we often squander the opportunities we do have for individualized instruction.

Evaluation is most effective when it is viewed as an opportunity for individualized dialogue between teacher and student. I find that when I ask teachers the question, "If you had fifteen minutes this week to talk specifically to Student X, what would you want to say to them?", their answer to that question goes a long way toward revealing the evaluation they want/need to write.

Thinking of evaluation as dialogue can lead us to a number of practices, the simplest of which is to change how we talk to our students about their writing. We might forgo some of those "rubber stamp" comments in order to say something specific to each student about his or her ideas, their writing development, and even their lives. We can pose authentic questions to our students that respect their ownership of the ideas and the paper. (I myself am the queen of the "inauthentic" question. When I write, "Is this detail necessary?", my students are quick to sniff out the veiled directive. I'm working on it!)

In studies, students, too, express the "desire for more dialogue" about their writing (Blake, 1994, p. 88). And if evaluation is going to be a dialogue instead of a monologue, then students need to have a voice in the conversation. There are a number of ways to bring students more fully into an evaluation dialogue:

- Ask students to include cover letters or marginal notes along with their papers that describe what they are trying to do in the paper, what they're most proud of, and what concerns and questions they have (Kogel Gedeon, 2009; Fredrick, 2009).
- Offer students control over what type of feedback you provide and when (Blake, 1994).
- Ask students to share with you—in writing or conversation—their responses to your evaluation.
- Before they begin to revise, ask students to write a letter to you that addresses the questions and comments you wrote on their earlier drafts.

### Effective Evaluation is Geared Toward Learning, not Grading.

Most teachers would agree that the feedback they provide is the most important part of the evaluation; after all, a grade can tell students what level their writing is at, but it does not teach them how to become a better writer. But while teachers might argue that the learning is more important than the grade, we often unconsciously behave otherwise. How often have you sat in front of a paper thinking “have I included enough negatives to justify this C– grade?” or “I needn’t write much on this A paper.” Teachers can easily fall into the trap of writing comments whose real purpose is to justify the grades that have been given.

In fact, in a large-scale study of teachers’ written comments, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford (1993) found that in 59% of papers, justifying grades was the primary purpose of teachers’ end comments. I refer to this approach as “evaluation shadowboxing”: writing comments in response to the imagined voice in our heads of the complaining student (or parent!) demanding to know why a particular grade was given. When we allow this voice to dominate in our minds, we lose the opportunity to teach, encourage, and challenge our student writers:

Determining a paper’s grade and writing comments to explain or to justify that grade;... in short, passing judgment, ranking: this is summative evaluation, which treats a text as a finished product and the student’s writing ability as at least momentarily fixed. Formative evaluation, on the other hand, is intent on helping students improve their writing abilities....

Formative evaluation treats a text as part of an ongoing process of skills acquisition and improvement, recognizing that what is being responded to is not a fixed but a developing entity. (Horvath, 1984, p. 137)

The solution to the problem of evaluation shadowboxing is simple and incredibly difficult: stop writing comments that justify the grade. It sounds terrifying, right? Can’t you just imagine those hordes of angry students and their parents, brandishing their pitchforks and demanding an accounting of points?

The reality, however, is so much less bleak. When I decided to stop justifying my grades, I explained to my students that my priority was to help them improve their writing—not just on this paper, but on future papers—and for that reason, I was going to focus my comments on strengths they could build upon and “next step” improvements to be made. I assured them that anyone who wanted a more complete accounting of a paper’s successes and errors along with the correlation to the grade was welcome to request additional feedback. Now, instead of shadowboxing an entire class full of imagined aggressors, I provide follow-up feedback to the two students per section who explicitly request it (and who know I won’t be upset with them for asking).

Choosing to focus on formative feedback does not address the problem of students’ hyper-focus on grades, however. A common complaint I hear from the teachers in my graduate composition classes is that students don’t read the comments written on their papers. As teachers, we spend a lot of time and emotional energy on our comments, and it can be demoralizing to have those comments skipped entirely and reduced to the symbol placed at the end of the page. But for students, it *is* most often the grade that matters most: “students seem to be caught in an institutional bind; grades (the school’s and society’s measure of learning) and the response that accompanies grades (and often justifies them) are confused with and become more important than the feedback that is more essential to helping them learn” (Loveless, 2006, p.13).

If paper writing and evaluation comprise a dialogue between teacher and student, the grade on a paper is the final period, signaling the end of the conversation. A teacher who wants the conversation to continue needs to find ways to forestall the grade or to disrupt its seeming finality. Again, teachers have a range of practices available to them:

- Tell students they will receive completion grades, not assessment grades, on drafts. Indicate that the completion grade has been received, but do not include the specific number or percentage on the draft itself. (Save the specifics regarding points for the assignment sheet and/or the online grade book.)
- Destabilize grades by making them tentative, contingent on revision or future work. I often label assignments with “current grade.” Students know that substantive revisions to the paper may make it possible to replace the current grade with a higher one.
- Withhold the grade on a paper until students

have completed a specified revision or editing task (e.g., correcting errors, writing a reflection, generating a list of tasks or goals for the next paper).

- Use portfolio grading in which students receive formative feedback on each paper, but only receive grades in a portfolio submitted at the end of the semester (Loveless, 2006).

**It would seem, then, that over-commenting on a paper neither helps the student nor honors our time as a teacher. What are some of the ways we can help students take their own next steps instead?**

A final note on rethinking our use of grades: increasingly over the past five years, middle and high school teachers in my classes report that they are required to post a minimum number of grades per week to an online grade book. For many of the teachers I work with, this requirement offers them yet another opportunity to find new ways to merge the ideal and the real through new or revised evaluation practices. Many of these teachers have found completion grades and tentative grades to be very useful for this purpose.

### Effective Evaluation Helps Students Focus on Next Steps

For more than 30 years, teacher-researchers have cautioned teachers to place limits on the amount of commentary they provide on student papers (e.g., Harris, 1979; Lunsford, 1997; Haswell, 2006), yet teachers continue to fall into the trap of providing too much commentary for students to use productively. This over-commenting can happen for several reasons. As I mentioned above, teachers may be unconsciously falling into habits of grade justification. In addition, in an

effort to move efficiently through a stack of papers, a teacher may quickly begin marking a paper without first establishing what is most important to say to the student. (To put it another way, we start writing without a clear thesis statement.) Finally, as English teachers, we are trained to seek out and eliminate writing error. I don't know about you, but an unmarked error on the page can be like an itch on my brain; the desire to scratch it is just so strong! But research tells us that we may very well want to resist scratching that itch. In a study of 35 teachers' commenting styles, Nancy Sommers (2006) found that teachers often provide conflicting feedback on students' papers, recommending for example, that a student eliminate or significantly rework a paragraph while at the same time indicating small editing changes to be made in the same paragraph.

What is a student to do in this case? The small editing changes are easier to make, certainly, but once those changes have been made, and the student believes she now has a correct and well-written paragraph, she may be hesitant to risk losing that correctness through more substantive revision. An effective evaluation models for students the processes experienced writers engage in when revising a document.

Global revisions, such as adding or deleting information and reorganizing paragraphs and sentences will have the most major impact on a text and should be addressed first. Editing and other sentence-level changes, while essential to the ultimate success of a paper, are best addressed in the final stages of revision. In addition, as teachers, we know that not all students will be at the same place in their submitted drafts. A focus on “next steps” allows us to deliver to each student the information that will best help him or her move to the next writing level. It would seem, then, that over-commenting on a paper neither helps the student nor honors our time as a teacher. Let me suggest ways to help students take their own next steps:

- Respond to students' drafts, focusing on different revision tasks with each draft.
- Point out specific problems in a text and then provide a suggestion how to address or avoid that problem in a future paper.
- Construct rubrics hierarchically and then tell students that you will work your way down the rubric until you have filled in two or three areas for improvement, at which point, you will stop.
- Rather than marking all grammatical errors in a paper, pick one or two frequently occurring error patterns.

- Build your evaluation from one assignment to the next by assigning each student one to three goals for the next paper. Keep a list of students' goals or ask students to write their assigned goals at the top of each paper.

Teachers often find it difficult at first to limit their comments; leaving a problem unmarked can make us feel that we're not doing our jobs. This thinking reveals another common trap we fall into as evaluators: the privileging of the immediate product over the ongoing process of learning. As teachers, we know that classroom assignments are created primarily for the purpose of learning. And yet, when we're in the throes of draft number two of a major research paper, it can be all too easy to become laser-focused on fixing this particular paper as though it were the end in and of itself.

It is true that students' written work can provide us with important assessment artifacts that allow us as teachers to measure student achievement and/or the effectiveness of our own teaching. But if we are able to internalize the idea that assignments are learning tasks rather than finished products, it becomes much easier to focus our evaluations on long-term improvement rather than product perfection. Limiting our feedback means that a student's paper may never be perfect (or even successful), but if that paper is only one step in a long-term process, then that's ok.

A final note on this idea of limiting our feedback: when we decide to refocus our evaluation from comprehensive coverage to the next steps for learning, it's important that we share this message with students. Haswell (2006) argues that despite the learning benefits of limited feedback, it is often students who most resist the move away from comprehensive feedback because they, too, have internalized the idea that "more is better" and that the goal of classroom-based writing and revision is to perfect a particular paper (product).

## Effective Evaluation Stimulates Active Learning

It is not uncommon for a teacher to describe spending hours tediously editing students' writing only to find that the students make the same mistakes on the next paper. Student learning is complex, of course, and issues of cognitive development, repetition, and context play a major role in when and how students internalize new knowledge. One major problem with the above approach to evaluation, though, is that while the teacher has engaged in thoughtful, lengthy grammar practice, the student has been asked only to note the marks that have been made. The work is one-sided,

and so is the learning. The same problems can occur when teachers reword confusing sentences or reorganize text for students. This labor imbalance creates "a gaping hole in the learning cycle: students do the [preliminary] work, the teacher assesses it, the students look to see how the assessments compare with what they hoped for, and go straight on to the next experience without even rereading their work, let alone reflecting on it" (Loveless, 2006, p. 13).

Elaine O. Lees (1979) divides evaluative feedback into seven modes:

- *Correcting* errors and perceived problems in the student's text
- *Emoting* over the student's text by sharing a personal positive or negative response
- *Describing* the features of the student's text as it is written
- *Suggesting* changes that might be made to the student's text
- *Asking* questions about the student's text to encourage the student to rethink what is written
- *Reminding* the student writer of relevant material that has been covered in class
- *Assigning* the student a new writing and/or revision task

While all seven modes of commenting have their uses, they have different effects on student learning. Lees points out that the first three modes put the labor on the teacher, while modes four through seven move more of the responsibility for revision and learning onto the student. The seventh mode, assigning, places the responsibility for learning most squarely on the student: "The importance of this method lies in its forcing students to reconsider what they have written and thus to treat a paper as if it represents a stage in the growth of ideas rather than the only crystallization of them" (352). Connecting this idea to the learning pyramid, comments that assign promote "practice by doing," which has a much higher average retention rate (75%) than simply reading teacher comments (10%).

What are some ways we might promote active learning by assigning students to complete evaluation and revision work themselves?

- Use minimal marking. Checkmark each line that contains an error. Ask students to find and correct the errors and then resubmit the text to you to determine which errors they have been able to correct successfully (Haswell, 1983).

- Identify and correct a particular type of error once. Assign students to find and correct additional errors of the same type.
- Close edit one paragraph of students' text. Assign students to try close editing the next two paragraphs on their own.
- Identify several sentences with awkward sentence structure and/or unclear meaning. Assign students to revise those sentences, individually or with peer help.
- Assign students with weak introductions to try quickly generating three alternative introductions by choosing from a list of common introductory tropes (e.g., posing a question, opening with a startling fact, telling a story or giving an example). Then have students consult their peers to determine which introduction is most effective. (This strategy works well for conclusions, too.)
- Pose authentic questions and assign students to write back to you responding to those questions.
- Assign students to write about their topic from a different perspective.

As I discussed earlier, most of these approaches will work best if the grade is withheld until the new writing "assignment" has been completed.

### Effective Evaluation is Transparent

Throughout this article, I have discussed sharing the evaluation philosophy and practices with students. Students come to our classrooms with prior experiences being evaluated, and they may expect "more of the same" from you. In addition, as my story of the failed praise demonstrates, what is clear to us is often much less clear to our students. Parents, too, have expectations of us as evaluators, born from their own and their children's schooling experiences.

When a student or her parent says to you, "What exactly does this paper need to get an 'A'?" or "You gave me a 'C,' but a lot of your comments were positive," they reveal their own, perhaps unconscious, assumptions about evaluation (that the product matters more than the long-term learning, that the purpose of comments is to justify the grade). Where a teacher's evaluation philosophy diverges from what students and their parents expect, it can be helpful to share that philosophy in writing and/or conversation.

What I've argued for here is the kind of reverse engineering that has long been associated with backwards design approaches to curriculum development championed by educators such as Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005). Just as course development works best when it proceeds from the core learning objectives, an evaluation practice proceeds most smoothly when it stems from clearly established goals for evaluating writing. Like Wiggins and McTighe, I do not advocate for a prescriptive approach or even a particular philosophy of education. Teachers do not need a "silver bullet" or single program to follow. What they need instead is the opportunity to step back and—based on reflection on their own practice and an understanding of research on evaluation—establish for themselves clearly articulated evaluation goals.

As teachers, we think a lot about our students' writing. What are they saying? What are they failing to say? How well organized is the text? How might the tone be improved? Is the writing correct? Is it clear to the intended readers? It's time that we as teachers begin thinking of our rubrics and comments as an act of writing as well: what are we saying or failing to say? What does the organization of our comments and rubric say about what is important? What relationship do we foster with our students and their writing through our comments? Are the rubric and comments clear to our students?

I recognize the difficulty teachers face in trying to find the time to innovate in the classroom, much less in finding the reflection time necessary to develop an evaluation philosophy. Yet given how much of our instructional time is devoted to evaluating students' writing and if we acknowledge that our written comments are the only instruction that our students will literally carry with them when they leave our classrooms, the benefits of rethinking how we evaluate outweigh the short-term costs.

And in the long run, when we are more intentional in our approaches, we can be more focused, and even—dare I say it—efficient, when we evaluate. Teachers have reported greater efficiency as one long-term benefit of developing a more reflective evaluation practice (see, for example, Kogel-Gedeon, 2009, p. 54). At the least, we will know that the 15 minutes we spend writing to each of our students is time we believe in.

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