Grading Essays in the Humanities and Social Sciences: Elective Seminar

Seminar Description

Your role as an instructor includes responding to and evaluating the work of students. In this elective seminar, grading essays in the humanities and social sciences will be discussed. Grading papers is not as simple as jotting your opinion of a student’s work in the margins and calculating a grade. How and where you respond induces students to more carefully craft papers. This seminar will also include discussions of syllabus creation, assignment scaffolding, prompt creation, and rubric use.

Seminar Objectives

- To discuss response and evaluation techniques in the context of humanities and the social sciences
- To understand how to produce developmental feedback on graded materials
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Syllabus Creation and the Scaffolding of Writing Assignments

Creating a syllabus is an art and an underappreciated art at that. Before the semester begins, instructors of college courses spend hours crafting their syllabi to include all of the course material they wish to cover and ways to evaluate and stimulate students on their knowledge and expertise within the field. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of drafting a syllabus is this latter component: building writing assignments and papers into the schedule. Naturally, a number of questions must be asked when attempting this task:

- What makes a good prompt for a paper?
- When are the best moments in the semester to assign papers?
- What are the benefits of assigning shorter papers versus longer papers?

While this manual cannot cover all of the intricacies related to writing assignments (the author of this has no knowledge of the theme of your course), this seminar along with the manual can provide some strategies for working paper assignments effectively into your syllabus as well as ways for responding to and evaluating essays appropriately and beneficially for your students.

The Syllabus Draft

First consider when you wish to assign papers. Is your syllabus broken into segments, which naturally suggest times for assignment essays? For example, your syllabus may include three distinct but associated units (World War I, the inter-war period, and World War II). It might be appropriate to assign three longer papers that require more detailed analysis and perhaps resources and research to compose at the culmination of each unit. One paper could ask the students to address a topic or theme they wish to explore about WWI; the second paper could ask the students to consider a problem from the inter-war period; the final paper could explore a number of possibilities: address something from WWII, something that connects the topics from each period together; or something that moves beyond WWII and into the post-war period. The choices are infinite; however, the possibilities need not overwhelm you when creating your syllabus. Again, look at natural divisions already built into your syllabus design.

Another option, especially if your syllabus does not include distinct units, is to think about major moments over the course of the semester. Perhaps your syllabus includes thematic milestones. For example, you may be teaching a course on American literature and while you include a number of non-canonical works, you also include three major novels. The essays you assign might be best placed around these works (even if the assignments include open exploration of other topics from earlier in the semester). You may also choose to work with Case Western Reserve University’s academic calendar and assign your essays to correspond to particular dates: a midterm essay and a final essay with a number of smaller, response papers in between to get your students to generate and process ideas outside of class.

One thing to always remember is that your students are taking other courses. While you cannot consider all potential time crunches, you may wish to assign papers before or after midterms rather than during
midterm week. Moving assignments around will make sure that students are less stressed because they will not have too many large assignments due simultaneously.

**Scaffolding**

After you have determined the due dates of the essays, it is important to consider building up to the final draft. Composition classes often reference this component as “scaffolding,” and this process includes a number inherent benefits: it breaks up the assignment into manageable pieces; it engenders the idea that writing is a process; and it allows you to see the development of your students’ essays from idea generation to draft. Scaffolding may appear to add more work to your calendar because it will require that you are an active participant in the writing process along with your students. However, this additional work helps to stave off the headaches often produced by inadequate essays that have not seen the light of day nor another reader’s eyes prior to submission. You may also help students avoid plagiarism by looking at rough drafts. While scaffolding seems like more work up front, it saves work in the end because you will be intimately familiar with your students’ writing and topics long before you sit down to grade that final stack of papers.

Some tips to consider:

- Divide your essay assignment into stages in order to reinforce the notion that writing is a process.
- Direct your students produce an outline of their essays—possibly a sentence outline.
- Challenge your students to craft a working thesis statement that they will support with credible research or strong evidence in their essays. Workshop these thesis statements in class with your other students (a very productive exercise as peers can offer critical feedback). Furthermore, explain to your students that thesis statements may change as writers continue to develop their ideas.
- Work with your students to produce a draft of their essay, which should include a working thesis, body paragraphs that support the thesis, and a conclusion.
- Have students craft an introductory paragraph that orients their audience to the topic the essay explores upon the conclusion of the draft.

You may also opt to facilitate extended discussions of body paragraphs and conclusions. It is your syllabus, and you will need to determine the balance between dedicated writing instruction and course material (although both can be done simultaneously).

**Creating a Writing Prompt**

Once a schedule has been established, it is time to think about creating the writing assignment. This is often done by writing a prompt that includes the topic, the expectations (including page
To create a good prompt, we recommend thinking through a series of questions. These questions will allow for easier evaluation and feedback generation and will assist in making sure that the prompt is clear for your students. What follows is a heuristic adapted from an adaptation of Erika Lindemann’s *Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (1982). The adaptation is taken from Edward M. White’s *Assigning, Responding, Evaluation: A Writing Teacher’s Guide* (1992).

- What do I want the students to do? Is it worth doing? Why? Is it interesting and appropriate? What will it teach the students? Specifically? How does it fit my objectives at this point in the course? What will the assignment tell me? What is being assessed? Does the task have meaning outside as well as inside the class setting? Have I given enough class time to discussion of these goals?
- How do I want the students to do the assignment? Are students working alone or together? In what ways will they practice prewriting, writing, revising? Have I given enough information about what I want so students can make effective choices about subject, purpose, form, mode, and tone? Have I given enough information about required length and about the use of sources? Have I prepared and distributed a written assignment with clear directions? Are good examples appropriate? Have I given enough class time to discussion of these procedures?
- For whom are the students writing? Who is the audience? If the audience is the teacher, do the students really know who the teacher is and what can be assumed? Are there ways and reasons to expand the audience beyond the teacher? Have I given enough class time to discussion of audience?
- When will students do the assignment? How does the assignment relate to what comes before and after it in the course? Is the assignment sequenced to give enough time for prewriting, writing, revision, and editing? How much time in and outside of class will students need? To what extend will I guide and grade the students’ work? What deadlines (and penalties) do I want to set for collecting papers, or various stages of the project? Have I given enough class time to discussion of the writing process?
- What will I do with the assignment? How will I evaluate the work? What constitutes a successful response to the assignment? Will other students or the writer have a say in evaluating the paper? Does the grading system encourage revision? Have I attempted to write the paper myself? What problems did I encounter? How can the assignment be clarified or otherwise improved? Have I discusses evaluation criteria with the students?

These series of questions might seem overly taxing; however, in order to create a valuable writing assignment for your students and your course, you will need to consider not just where the assignment fits into the semester’s schedule but also what you want the assignment to do. Is the assignment an analysis? Original research? A response? A Report? Creative? All of these questions require an answer before you begin to think about evaluation and response. Once you address these questions, evaluation and response are much easier to perform.
Evaluation

What Makes a Good Paper?

If you create a good assignment sheet with a thoughtful and well-planned prompt, then a good paper will exhibit those qualities you ask for in the prompt. Good prompts also make it more likely that your students will be engaged with the material which will make your job responding and evaluating their work more enjoyable. Remember, if you do not enjoy the question you are asking students to respond to or think about, then it is likely that your students will not enjoy answering or thinking about that question.

If you have created a good prompt, then it is equally as important to craft a rubric for evaluating how well your students have fulfilled the tasks of the writing assignment. Rubrics are invaluable guides for your students when they begin the writing process. They will know what you are looking for and how you will evaluate their work. Rubrics help to make the grading process of written assignments less subjective for the students. Below is a rubric for a writing assignment in English adapted from Sophie McClennen’s “General Evaluation Rubric for Papers” (2004), [http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/s/a/sam50/rubric.htm](http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/s/a/sam50/rubric.htm).

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Superior Paper (A)</th>
<th>Good Paper (B)</th>
<th>Average Paper (C)</th>
<th>Below Average Paper (D)</th>
<th>Failing Paper (F)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>Easily identifiable, plausible, novel, sophisticated, insightful, crystal clear. Connects well with paper title.</td>
<td>Promising, but may be slightly unclear, or lacking in insight or originality. Paper title does not connect as well with thesis or is not as interesting.</td>
<td>Difficult to identify at all, may be bland restatement of obvious point.</td>
<td>Problems more serious than Average paper.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Evident, understandable, appropriate for thesis. Excellent transitions from point to point. Paragraphs support solid topic sentences.</td>
<td>Generally clear and appropriate, though may wander occasionally. May have a few unclear transitions, or a few paragraphs without strong topic sentences.</td>
<td>Unclear, often because thesis is weak or non-existent. Transitions confusing and unclear. Few topic sentences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of Evidence</td>
<td>Primary source information used to buttress every point with at least one example. Examples support mini-thesis and fit within</td>
<td>Examples used to support most points. Some evidence does not support point, or may appear where inappropriate. Quote</td>
<td>Very few or very weak examples. General failure to support statements, or evidence seems to support no</td>
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<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Author clearly relates evidence to &quot;mini-thesis&quot; (topic sentence); analysis is fresh and exciting, posing new ways to think of the material. Work displays critical thinking and avoids simplistic description or summary of information.</td>
<td>Evidence often related to mini-thesis, though links perhaps not very clear. Some description, but more critical thinking.</td>
<td>Very little or very weak attempt to relate evidence to argument; may be no identifiable argument, or no evidence to relate it to. More description than critical thinking.</td>
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<td>Logic and Argumentation</td>
<td>All ideas in the paper flow logically; the argument is identifiable, reasonable, and sound. Author anticipates and successfully defuses counter-arguments; makes novel connections to outside material (from other parts of the class, or other classes), which illuminate thesis. Creates appropriate college level, academic tone.</td>
<td>Argument of paper is clear, usually flows logically and makes sense. Some evidence that counter-arguments acknowledged, though perhaps not addressed. Occasional insightful connections to outside material made. Mostly creates appropriate college level, academic tone.</td>
<td>Ideas do not flow at all, usually because there is no argument to support. Simplistic view of topic; no effort to grasp possible alternative views. Does not create appropriate college level, academic tone, and has informal language or inappropriate slang.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>Sentence structure, grammar, and diction excellent; correct use of</td>
<td>Sentence structure, grammar, and diction strong despite</td>
<td>Big problems in sentence structure, grammar, and diction</td>
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Rubrics are valuable templates to generate feedback and evaluation when looking at papers. Some rubrics, such as the one above, incorporate letter grades which are then assigned to the different components of a student's work. Therefore, a student can earn a sampling of A and B marks within the rubric before the instructor determines the final average. Other rubrics break down individual sections into points and then the points are added and divided by the points possible. In these types of rubrics, instructors determine deductions when a student's paper fails to meet the highest level of competency or expectation for a particular category.

**Written Evaluations and Response**

While rubrics are great for evaluating the overall scope of a paper, other forms of response and evaluation are often necessary to inform and further instruct your students about both positive and negative aspects of their work. Think back to the dreaded red pen of your youth (or the myth of the red pen). While we do not suggest haunting your students' papers in this manner, marginal comments can provide invaluable pieces of feedback. Your previous teachers and college instructors most likely used a similar method when responding to your work. They may have written comments in the margins; they may have jotted notes in text; they may have made suggestions and corrections; they may also have written a summary paragraph detailing your work and why you received a particular grade. However, no matter how you respond (one or all of the above methods), feedback should be given in order to improve the writing of your students. Simply providing a grade does little to give your students the tools necessary to produce better writing.

**Marginal Comments**

Writing comments in the margins is one way to respond to students' papers in-text. Marginal comments provide context. For example, if your student has an unclear thesis statement, a marginal comment next to the thesis draws attention to the problem. Furthermore, issues like clarity, word choice, grammar, or larger concerns related to argument can be illuminated and expanded upon in the margin. The following example shows effective use of marginal comments:
The marginal comments here do two things: they provide praise when necessary, and they request that the author of this paper clarify specific moments. The work of this student is good, and you need to make sure that the student is aware of this (beyond just providing an excellent final grade). However, all good papers have moments in them that can use further explanation or clarification. The commenter here makes note of those moments. Questions are used as a way of leading the student in the direction the commenter finds most appropriate for an audience. The use of questions allows the student to process and critically engage with the material in a more substantial manner. If the commenter were to simply direct the student to an answer, then the revision process would be far less beneficial. Think of marginal comments as having a
conversation with a student. You have conversations with students about their work in class and during office hours. Comments on a paper allow you to respond in a similar manner.

Just remember, how you comment on a paper sets a tone for the relationship between you and the student. Make sure that your marginal comments do not take away from the student’s work and their authorship of the piece. White (1992) requests that all instructors stop and ask whether “we [are] taking ownership of the paper away from the student by our marking and asking the student to say what we want instead of what he or she wants?” (p. 94).

**In-text Comments**

In-text comments are often used to highlight syntactic and sentence level concerns. Comma errors, spelling, and subject/verb agreement are all examples of errors commonly found in students’ papers. It can be important to note these moments in the text; however, a word of caution: make sure to not overwhelm a student with grammatical corrections. Just as it can be overwhelming to see a paper covered in comments in the margins, it is equally as problematic to see a paper marked with concerns over grammar. Here are a few tips to think about when working in-text:

- Consider the nature of the assignment: is the paper a draft? Is the paper a final version? Do you allow for revision? Is the assignment less substantial (a response, a blog post, a paragraph for homework)? The assignment should dictate your level of response.
- Decide the amount of engagement necessary: would you respond with the same level of interest for a blog post and a final research paper?

**Summary Comments**

Another way to comment on students’ writing is through a longer summary at the conclusion of the paper. Often, summary comments replace longer marginal comments or supplement a mixture of marginal and in text commentary. Summary comments should consider the paper as a whole and begin with what those who study composition pedagogy refer to as “the praise sandwich”:

- Begin with a sentence or two discussing what the student has done well in the paper: “Your paper, *Title*, explores the correlation between age and political affiliation. The paper is well-researched, well-organized, and the argument you make is quite good.”
- Note moments in the paper that could stand improvement and revision: “Although the paper as a whole is good, your thesis statement is underdeveloped. By the end of the paper, you seem to be arguing for something slightly different than when you introduced your topic.”
- Close your summary comment with more praise and then provide a grade for the student.
Conclusion

It is important that you determine what style of commentary works best for you and for your students. Some students will respond well to particular types of comments, while other students may find one form of commentary less productive. You need to evaluate the needs of your students and their writing and take note when providing feedback. No matter your style of commentary, it is important to be consistent, fair, and as thorough as an assignment demands.

Additional Resources

Consider the following resources for further insight into grading essays in the humanities and social sciences:

Print


Electronic

