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Marking & Grading

A few thoughts about a sticky, tricky subject

By Andrew Pudewa

As soon as people get serious about the business of teaching writing, certain beasts inevitably raise their ugly heads: namely, how to “correct” papers in a way that will be truly helpful, and how to decide on a grade for the paper. We must consider then, how we, as parents and teachers, can create a culture of cooperation which will nurture and encourage students while ensuring that they acquire basic abilities and an attention to detail that will serve them throughout life. So let us discuss meeting these goals, beginning with establishing effective composition habits, then addressing how to develop editing skills, moving on to how we can establish a standard of excellence, and finally undertaking the problem of grading.

No Erasing Allowed

Of all ideas for teaching writing, one of the most instantly effective for young children—and sometimes for older students as well—is to establish the discipline of “no erasing” while composing. Although this is seemingly a small thing, one significant result of this approach is to eliminate perfectionistic tendencies, while creating freedom to change, add, move, or strike words or whole chunks of prose. If your writing culture includes: “There is no such thing as a first and only version...” then the tedium of making changes by erasing and trying to get everything perfect the first time is eliminated. Furthermore, when using a checklist of style techniques (or a rubric of any sort), revising to meet that checklist becomes a way of working, and the habit of reading, thinking, and changing things becomes natural.

Additionally, this freedom from neatness shifts the emphasis from writing something that “looks nice” to creating a piece that “sounds good.” When children grasp this at a young age, it can make a huge difference in motivation as well as in the quality of the finished product. An additional result of requiring this “sloppy copy” is that when a teacher, parent, or editor does mark on a paper, there isn’t the sense of being “wrong” so much as there is a feeling of “continued refinement.” Hundreds of parents and teachers have tried this, some skeptically at first, but they later reported that the culture of “no erasing” made a huge difference in motivation as well as in the quality of the final product.

Learning Editing Skills

In truth, successfully proofreading your own writing is perhaps the hardest editing task. Why? Because when we think something and write it down, it makes perfect sense to us. When we then read what we wrote, it still makes perfect sense, because that's the way we thought it initially. Since it seemed to be correct, made sense, and felt right to begin with, it still does when we look at it again later. In truth, the best way for most of us to effectively edit ourselves is to read out loud what we've written—or better yet, have someone else read it out loud to us, so we can run it through the native-speaker auditory language filter in our brain. Then there is a better chance that we will detect that awkward phrase, that error in number or tense, or that confusing syntax we wouldn't have noticed without the increased objectivity that listening provides. One thing is true for everyone, children and adults alike: it is much easier to find and fix someone else's mistakes than one's own.

Therefore, if our goal is to teach editing skills, we will have much greater success if we begin by having students learn and refine their proofreading and editing skills on something other than their own compositions. Understanding this, many teachers will create their own stories—often silly ones—that contain embedded errors similar to the ones that the students themselves are likely to make in their writing. The effect is almost magical. Now no longer the chore of “revising” one's own paper, editing becomes a game of tracking down all the mistakes. If the story is entertaining or humorous, all the better. One program using this teaching approach (*Grammar with a Giggle*) suggests that the story be presented in small chunks—a few sentences a day—so that the student will look forward to the editing practice, wanting to know what happens next. To be effective, however, this method requires solid grammar knowledge and additional prep time, things that many of us lack. Other workbook-based programs offer whole paragraphs or pages at a time, but can sometimes seem like busywork or meaningless copying. Fortunately, Pamela White has produced *Fix It!* an almost perfectly balanced program that fits right in between these two differing approaches.

Although some teachers do claim success with peer editing, this usually works most effectively in a mixed-grade classroom, where children don't suffer from the enforced presumption of equality making it “uncool” for someone to be “better” at something than someone else in their own “grade.” If it's okay to have an older, more advanced student “edit” the work of a younger or less experienced student, then both will benefit, and no hard feelings will ensue. Usually, however, it requires a very skilled teacher to pull off successful peer editing without someone feeling criticized, hurt, or misunderstood by a classmate who didn't have the experience to offer truly helpful corrections and suggestions. Even then, there's no control of error for the “editors” themselves; therefore many “mistakes” may be missed and true editing skills not efficiently developed.

In short, editing skills will be most effectively taught by using materials containing embedded errors similar to those the student might make, with content that has some charm or natural appeal to the child, presented in a way that makes it a game rather than a chore or a test.

Striving for Excellence

The whole idea of “correcting” can itself be problematic. The word “correct” implies wrongness, whereas in writing there can be sentences which are awkward but perfectly legal, as well as usages that are technically “illegal” but very effective. Therefore, we should all carefully consider the purpose of marking on students’ papers before we inadvertently discourage and demotivate them. Thinking back, how many of us looked at all those red marks on the paper we turned in and thought, “I’m so grateful for the time that teacher took to mark this paper...I’m going to study and reflect on every one of these comments so that next time I can do better and improve my grade!” No. Most of us saw all those marks and likely thought, “I’m dumb...I’m stupid...I’m not good at this...I wish I didn’t have to do it.” It is so easy for us as teachers to get trapped into “ex post facto” teaching, where we take what the student turns in and then, verbally or in writing, tell them everything they should and could have done better. So often the student isn’t really hearing what we’re saying; to them we sound like the adults in the old Charlie Brown TV shows....

Instead, consider Anna Ingham’s motto: “Teach at the point of need.” This means that we must design our lessons based on what the students need to know, when they need to know it, and not give a lesson just because it is on the next page of the workbook, or because it conforms to someone else’s schedule. Textbooks and institutions are the enemies of individualized education. Although we are all forced at one time or another to follow some external curriculum or calendar, virtually every teacher—public, private, and homeschool—will agree that personalized instruction and coaching is almost always more effective than group instruction. “Teach at the point of need” means discovering what the students’ challenges, weaknesses, or misunderstandings are, and then finding or designing activities that will address those problems. Therefore, the first step towards motivating students to do their very best is to keep them motivated to try, and to learn, and to try again. “Ex post facto” teaching very seldom does this.

So what should we mark on a student’s paper? Well, edits and suggestions are useful only if the student will have a chance to use those corrections and ideas to produce a more perfected version of their paper. If we simply mark up a paper, put on a grade, and throw it in a file, we have just wasted our time and lowered the confidence level of the student. If there’s no chance for a rewrite, there’s no need to mark the paper with anything but positive, encouraging comments. But if we do intend for the student to rewrite, then comments, corrections, and edits are helpful ... as long as there’s no lecture attached. You see, the difference between a Mom and an Editor, is that the editor will fix up the article for you and hand it

back with a smile—no lecture attached. A mom tends to sit you down and explain all the changes, falling back into “ex post facto” mode. But is this necessary? No. When the student recopies or types the changes into his draft, he or she will internalize the corrections as grammar “facts,” and probably won’t learn any more by suffering an explanation of the “reasons” that make it so. The other difference between a Mom and an Editor is that Moms are free; Editors get paid.

One of the Seven Keys of Great Teaching from *A Thomas Jefferson Education* is “Quality, not Conformity.” How can we nurture a striving for quality in students? Although there is no simple answer, the strategies discussed so far will very often help effect such a change. If we can maintain the cooperative attitude of an “editor” rather than the authoritarian position of “instructor”, the child will be much more likely to take ownership of the correction process. Kids should know that every good writer has a good editor (or two or three), and that in the real world, good writers are not always good editors, nor are good proofreaders always good writers. As a writer striving to produce an excellent story, the student should be encouraged to get editing help; it is, in fact their responsibility to do so. In the real world we work with others, and although independence and individualized mastery is important, the final product is almost always the result of a synergy between people and their talents; in writing, it is a product of cooperation between a writer and his editor. It’s okay for students to know this; it is right and proper for them to find themselves an editor and get the help they need to produce the most excellent compositions they can. That’s what writers do.

Grading

Again, we must ask, what is the purpose of grading? Presumably, it is to communicate to the student how well they did in fulfilling the given task, or how well they have learned and can apply the information presented. However, in the institutional world it is more likely used as a way to compare students, and in many cases ends up creating either an unhealthy competition or an unwarranted sense of failure. In addition, this traditional grading structure allows for “laziness,” and mediocrity and it’s no wonder that a “C” also means “average.” That a “C” is a “passing” grade simply reinforces the idea that it is acceptable to *not* learn thirty percent of what you are trying to learn. If we return to the basic principle of what a grade should be—a way to communicate to the student how well they accomplished what they set out to do—then we will realize that our first job is to convey to the student as precisely as possible exactly what is expected.

Thus, rubrics and checklists are critically important, especially in the subjective world of writing, which many consider to be not only a basic skill, but an “art” as well. To be fair, if we are going to grade writing, we should really only give a grade based on one criterion: “Did the student do what he or she was asked to do, and meet all my requirements?” Therefore, in an ideal environment, the only two possible grades one could get on a writing assignment would be “A” (for Accepted) or “N” (for Not Finished Yet). Now, some might object, noting that two

students, having written papers of very different quality, might get the same grade of “A.” Yes, they could, but who’s to say that the student whose paper wasn’t as sophisticated or refined didn’t work as hard or harder than the student who has a natural aptitude for writing? If you want to use grades to compare one child with another, then give B’s, C’s and D’s. But if you want to motivate children to do their best, make it possible—not necessarily easy, but possible—for them to always get an A. You will discover that this is far more encouraging, and brings out far more effort than the artificial and ineffective motivation of “competition.” This is especially true when teaching writing.

With the structure and style program, we can present excellent composition skills using structural models and stylistic technique checklists. With the right kind of editing help, coaching, and grading, we can teach excellent composition habits. The two are inseparable and indispensable, and as teachers we must strive to provide optimal guidance for both.

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