**Avoid Writing Assignment and Grading Traps**

---**Grading based on improvement from one draft to another.** Each draft should be graded on its own terms. This “grading on improvement” can lead to inflated grades and, ultimately, lack of accountability by the student. They got enough of this in high school. Plus, it is very difficult to assess how the draft “improved” while responding to the paper as it stands. Puts you in a bad position of judging how accountable they actually were to your comments. Yuk. Allow rewrites. But grade rewrites as fresh products.

---**Allowing bad sentence structure, paragraph structure or spelling to keep you from seeing the potential of a student’s ideas or vice versa.** In other words, form and content count—and not one more than the other. One of my Writing Center tutor’s favorite comments on one of her FY essays came from Bob Archambeau. “Great idea. Terrible sentence.” In your comments, show how good form shows off good ideas, or how bad form confuses or distracts the reader from the writer’s good ideas.

---**Assigning too much writing so that your students can’t keep up or take your feedback seriously.** If you want them to make use of your comments, you need to give them time to ask you questions about them, digest them, etc. If you are asking them to revise one essay, start to work on another, begin a research paper, and prepare a response paper for every class, you will confuse and overwhelm. Make each writing assignment distinctive. Give yourself (and them) time to work the assignment through. Quantity can impede quality and growth.

---**Don’t confuse informal writing with formal writing**. Informal writing is usually unstructured, casual in tone, and evaluated for quality of insight or provocation and to show the reader that the writer has engaged in consideration of the topic. Formal writing is an argument and should follow the tenets of a good argument, including supported claims, evidence, counter-arguments, and a thesis statement. Form matters in formal writing as it helps the reader engage in the argument. While formal writing can be insightful and provocative, its main job is to be thorough and precise—clarity and organization are the main criteria for success. Students get confused by writing assignments that seem informal but are then graded formally or vice versa. Be sure you know what you are asking for and what the purpose of the assignment is and be sure that you aren’t “counting” one type or writing for another. Informal response papers cannot replace the formal essay and on-line chatting cannot be done instead of a formal paper. Both are necessary but function differently in the development of the writer.

---**Don’t create rubrics that are really checklists and have these replace substantive comments.** They got enough of these in high school. Your line-by-line responses and side notes and endnotes are very important. They show the student that you are engaged in the text as you read and that you care very much about what the student produced. Simply slapping on a rubric doesn’t have the same impact. Students need to believe that they have something worthwhile to say and that the professor is an engaged audience for their writing. End notes should not just justify the grade (good or bad) but should also point the writer in the direction of further growth. Always treat every draft as if it could be improved if revised. What should the writer consider? What was worth further development? Where were you the most engaged? What is the heart of the paper’s potential? How can these goals be achieved? Your side comments and textual notes should align with this concern for the writer’s ideas.

---**Avoid point systems in favor of letter grades and scales.** Point systems lead to inflated grades. Writing, in the end, needs to be judged holistically based on criteria—some of which are assumed in the contract between writers and readers. In other words, students will surprise you and make errors of judgment where you could never predict in a rubric or in a point system. The overall effect of the writing needs to hold up over an analysis of the elements. Points on completing stages of the writing process can also get in the way of making a good final assessment. While outlining and drafting may work for the majority of students, student writers come in Mozarts and Beethovens, meaning some write best over time having completed discrete steps and others write best in one sitting considering the “stages” as one writing event. Claiming that one is more useful or successful than the other will not hold up when dealing with the diversity of writers with whom you will work. You are better off supporting and commenting on process (and maybe giving participation points for this) but grading products.