



Seven Survival Tips for Writing Teachers

NO TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR WRITING would be complete without a discussion of how to handle the paper load. I often hear English teachers say that what with all the student papers, they don't have time to read a book from September to June. I despair when young, gifted teachers consider going into administration or counseling simply to get out from under their stacks of essays. It must be possible to teach students how to write without becoming a martyr to one's work.

A common mistake is to rewrite student papers. It is possible to take more time with the correcting than a student took with composition. Stop doing this. You are not a copy editor. And there is convincing evidence that the meticulous correction of errors has minimal impact on students. Our goal isn't perfectly corrected papers. It is improved student writing. So what should we do instead?

- 1. Focus on key areas for improvement.** Although there may be a dozen things wrong with a paper, choose one to comment on. Then hold the student responsible for this aspect of the paper in the next draft or next paper.
- 2. Respond like a reader. Ask questions.** "Why did you use this piece of evidence just here, Janie? It feels out of place." "Can you think of another way to write this, Jorge? It doesn't make sense to me phrased this way." "What do you mean?" "Where are you going with this idea? I'm intrigued but lost."
- 3. Mark but don't correct mechanical errors.** Circle misspellings and punctuation errors. Draw boxes around fragments and run-on sentences. Cross out mistakes in usage. Use a red pen so that students have a vivid sense that what they have turned in is rife with errors and not ready for public consumption. Do students become so discouraged by the "bleeding page" that they give up on writing? Not if you let them know that the red marks are not a judgment of them or their ideas but of the work at hand.
- 4. Do it now.** The shorter the interval between turning in a paper and receiving it back graded, the more students care about what you have to say. You are going to spend the same number of minutes whether you spread the task out over two weeks or get the set done in a day or two. Your assessment of the papers will be more consistent and you will finish up with a clearer sense of what kind of instruction this group of students needs next.
- 5. Use and teach students to use rubrics.** Along with providing transparency to the grading process, rubrics serve as reminders to students of the particular demands of the assignment. If you find yourself overwhelmed by the number of papers on your desk, give yourself permission to score a set or two holistically. It is a better solution than allowing them to gather dust for three weeks.



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Writing Recommendations

CONTENT: On my next essay, I need . . .	
TO DO	NOT TO DO
STYLE and MECHANICS: On my next essay, I need . . .	
TO DO	NOT TO DO

6. Make sure students read your comments. You invest a great deal of yourself into commenting on student papers. To ensure a return on that investment, on the day you return their papers structure a lesson that requires students to process your comments. I sometimes ask students to copy into quadrants every note I made on their essays, sorting them as TO DO or NOT TO DO on their next papers. Copying my suggestions in their own writing ensures that they have read them at least once. The form can be brought out for reference when students are next revising a draft.

7. Save student papers. Keep portfolios of student writing and periodically have students sort through their work, looking for patterns and progress, errors and omissions, triumphs and catastrophes. At the end of each semester have students write an essay reflecting upon their growth, or lack thereof, as writers.

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