Papers, Papers, Papers

An English Teacher’s Survival Guide

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Colleagues—

Our first Grading Party is this Saturday morning, February 21, in the Santa Monica High School Library! The schedule is below.

If you don’t plan to come for the earliest session, please time your arrival so you enter during the 9:15–9:30 AM break.

The PTSA is funding bagels, juice, and Starbucks coffee, all of which will be available at the library. If you need a rather steady coffee flow, bring your first cup with you and then refill from our supply.

SCHEDULE—All times are SHARP, so if you want to chat and eat a bit before Session 1, please arrive before 7:45.
7:30–8:00 Coffee, juice, bagels, socializing, staking out your spot
8:00–9:15 Session 1
9:15–9:30 Break
9:30–10:45 Session 2
10:45–11:00 Break
11:00–12:00 Session 3

Misery Loves Company
PAPERS, PAPERS, PAPERS

RULES:
— No noise or other distractions during grading sessions.
— Eating is OK, but quiet food only, please.
— Enter and depart at break times.
And always remember the Grading Party motto: Misery LOVES company.

Rob Thais and Cathy Marsh

The idea for organizing grading parties grew out of conversations between Rob Thais and Cathy Flores Marsh regarding the difficulty they were having disciplining themselves to grade papers. Cathy, a new teacher, was relieved to hear that a veteran like Rob suffered the same pangs of guilt as she about the pile of papers on their desks. She was also worried that not returning student papers in a timely manner distorted her curriculum. She felt she couldn’t move forward into a new unit until she had completed the last and resorted to classroom activities that filled up the days until she could catch up with the papers. It bothered her that these lessons weren’t as rigorous and focused as she would like. Rob confessed that he had been known to take a personal day and stay home just to catch up with his student papers.

Figuring that other members of the department likely shared the same problem and the same guilt, they approached our school librarian about opening the school library on Saturdays, and the PTSA president about providing refreshments for an English department gathering where teachers would come together with their stacks of unread papers to lend moral support to one another. Instead of feeling as if they were giving up their weekend to schoolwork, teachers could feel professional about their work and less alone in their struggle. Most teachers in the department meet between 140 and 180 students a day. Our department standards—determined by us—require that students write one process paper during every six-week grading period. The load was demoralizing us, taking its toll on our ability to teach.
Grading Parties

Surrounding ourselves with colleagues helps us teachers keep grading. We draw strength from our collective willpower. In this regard grading papers is much like exercising. It is so much easier to go out for exercise while walking and talking with a friend than it is to cover those miles alone. Coming together on a Saturday was a way to meet our professional commitment professionally. Cathy explains:

There were many things I enjoy about our grading parties. The first is that there was a sense of camaraderie. It was a “we’re all in this together” kind of feeling. It was comforting to see that I was not the only person who had a mound of potentially horrible essays to grade.
I also liked having access to the opinions of my colleagues. I was able to ask for advice and get immediate responses, causing a dialogue that was always beneficial to me. In addition, we were able to talk about each other and our personal lives, something we do not get to truly experience at a school our size. Not only do the kids get lost in the shuffle but, oftentimes, so do we. As a new teacher last year, it felt like I was establishing friends at the school on a different level. And lastly, we were able to gossip, frolic, be sarcastic, and simply vent to our colleagues what our spouses did not understand.

Santa Monica High School has an English department of twenty-nine teachers ranging from lifetime members like myself with over thirty years in the classroom to first-year teachers. Under normal circumstances we have minimal time to work together. Our school has negotiated “buy-back” time with our union, and every Wednesday morning students begin classes at 9:30 AM so that teachers can have approximately two hours of uninterrupted, high-quality professional development time. Each month, two Wednesdays are dedicated to house meetings (our school is divided into six smaller houses); one Wednesday is dedicated to departments, another to faculty meetings or personal professional work. Meeting monthly offers hardly enough time for a department as large as ours to discuss critical issues; it certainly does not allow us to run scoring sessions or discuss student work. Experienced teachers had little time to share what we knew with new teachers. We were hungry for more time together. We needed each other.

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future report *No Dream Denied, A Pledge to America’s Children* states, “Teaching is the only profession in which entry-level individuals are expected—from Day One—to do the same job and perform at the same level of competence as experienced practitioners. Our schools regularly put rookies in the starting lineup and are surprised when they strike out” (2003, 27). We are fortunate at Santa Monica High School to be able to attract highly qualified young teachers to our site, but we don’t always take care of them very well. In some instances having “stars” in the department intimidates new teachers.
They worry that they are not offering students the caliber of instruction parents expect and that they might have received from an experienced teacher the year before. I worry that that we will lose these bright young things. 

No Dream Denied identifies peer review and assistance as one of the features of a successful professional learning community.

Mentoring for new teachers is the first step on a path that leads to the career-long community of support needed to undergird accomplished teaching. Peer assistance and peer review support further career development. Peer assistance aims at helping new and veteran teachers improve their knowledge and skills by linking new teachers—or struggling veteran teachers—with consulting teachers, to provide continuing support by observing, modeling, sharing ideas and skills, and recommending materials for further study. (27)

The English department grading parties provided an informal setting for teachers to coalesce and become a professional learning community. New teachers were stunned to discover that well-informed, experienced teachers’ judgments on student papers can be inconsistent and that this isn’t a sign of incompetence but a reflection of the complexity of grading student papers. Given the circumstances under which we work—large class size and a writing-intensive curriculum—all of us struggle. There is something about laughing together over a student sentence in a paper on Romeo and Juliet, “. . . because if Claudio and don Pedro never found out that they had made a mistake, Hero would have lived to pretend to be dead for the rest of her life,” that helps all of us keep going, keep grading. Logic aside, the metaphysical implications are staggering.

Tisha Reichle, in her fifth year at Santa Monica High School, writes that she attended the grading parties because

The feeling of camaraderie in the air—a sort of shared torture—kept me alert and the silence (no television, telephone, or “I’m hungry” from the kids) enabled me to focus on the task of reading essays. Misery does, indeed, love company. The grading orgies offered the
option to tackle my grading right at the start of a weekend, rather than procrastinate until Sunday night. I left feeling a sense of accomplishment, and was then able to enjoy the rest of my weekend without the guilt embedded in a stack of ungraded papers. Additionally, the camaraderie was enticing; to be able to lament our common situations (in terms of grading and planning) was always something to look forward to!

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future insists “the nation cannot achieve quality teaching for every child unless teachers can be kept in the classroom. The missing ingredient is finding a way for school systems to organize the work of qualified teacher so they can collaborate with their colleagues in developing
strong learning communities that will sustain them as they become more accomplished teachers” (17). Grading parties demonstrated to new teachers that all of us in the English department—however “accomplished” we might be—struggle with the time- and brain-consuming calisthenics of grading student papers. The grading “gymnasium” improved the pain-gain ratio. The gatherings strengthened our professional community by providing an informal setting for reflecting on student writing and considering how to improve instruction. Ideally, teachers would be compensated for such Saturday sessions. Such an eventuality we regard, candidly, as unlikely.

Large-Scale Scoring Sessions Versus Remote Readings

In Chapter 3 I lamented the loss of large-scale scoring sessions to remote or computer-assisted scoring of student writing. Where once large groups of teachers gathered to score thousands of papers over several days, now student writing for many state and the new SAT and ACT exams is scanned into computers and sent out electronically to readers at different places all across the nation. Graders working alone at their home computers are “normed” on a scoring rubric and must read and score a set of anchor papers each time they log in. Supervisors electronically read over their shoulders, and readers who deviate from the accepted norm receive a telephone call for a conversation much like the ones a table leader would have with readers at a scoring session. Two readers score each essay independently and if the scores differ by more than a point, the paper is sent to a third reader. Research indicates that this process works as reliably as the large-scale readings at a fraction of the cost.

George Gadda, former chief reader for the Advanced Placement Language exam, director of Writing Programs at UCLA, and consultant to the College Board for the new SAT writing initiative, explained to a reporter for the New York Times, “A lot of us mourn the passage of the old face-to-face grading system. And in principle, I’m not a proponent of doing things online, but logistically the old kind of interchange just isn’t possible any more. You couldn’t get that many papers
graded quickly enough” (McGrath 2004, 27). I am persuaded that student essays will be scored accurately. What is likely to be lost in the process is consensus building by classroom teachers around the nature and features of good student writing.

The College Board is doing everything it can to make their process for scoring essays on the new SAT Writing portion of the exam transparent by providing sample essays with the merits and weaknesses described on their website, www.collegeboard.com. The ACT will include a similar writing component. Here is an example from their website, www.actstudent.org/:

**ACT Sample Prompt**

Prompts used for the ACT Writing Test will:

- describe an issue relevant to high school students
- ask examinees to write about their perspective on the issue

As a starting place, two different perspectives on the issue will be provided. Examinees may choose to support one of these perspectives or to develop a response based on their own perspective.

**The Assignment**

In some high schools, many teachers and parents have encouraged the school to adopt a dress code that sets guidelines for what students can wear in the school building. Some teachers and parents support a dress code because they think it will improve the learning environment in the school. Other teachers and parents do not support a dress code because they think it restricts the individual student’s freedom of expression. In your opinion, should high schools adopt dress codes for students?

In your essay, take a position on this question. You may write about either one of the two points of view given, or you may present a different point of view on this question. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

The standard directions in the second paragraph above will be a part of all prompts used on the ACT Writing Test.
I am an unapologetic and unreformed supporter of the addition of writing to the SAT and ACT tests. Rather than practicing arcane strategies for answering analogies correctly, college-bound students will work harder on their writing. Test preparation for these college entrance exams must include tutoring in writing, the very thing teachers are hard-pressed to offer. In addition, college admissions officers will be able to access the SAT or ACT essay written without assistance and compare it to the student’s personal statement. Affluent students often receive professional help with these essays, tightening and sharpening the piece until it sparkles. This practice has always bothered me. I help my seniors garner ideas for personal statements and will assist them with proofreading, but the essay is theirs, not mine. Now with a keystroke anyone making college admissions decisions will be able to get a sense of how the applicant writes without outside help.

Uncertainty, perhaps preeminently, impedes progress on a set of papers. Hemming and hawing over whether an essay deserves a C+ or B– takes time. Many new teachers put papers into tentative piles before assigning grades and only assign scores after they have read the entire stack. While this may be a good strategy for accuracy and fairness, it adds precious hours to the reading task. Common scoring sessions help teachers develop confidence as readers and internalize scoring rubrics. They also help teachers learn to read faster.

To re-create the common understandings about student writing that large-scale scoring sessions used to provide, schools and districts should organize local holistic scoring sessions. Teachers need to chew over the actual meaning of phrases in a scoring rubric and talk about the 4-ness versus the 2-ness of anchor papers. Coming to consensus on writing standards is a messy business. It is also essential. To bring such consensus about, schools must invest in professional development. The National Commission on Teaching Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges’ report *The Neglected “R”* recommends that “States should provide the financial resources necessary for the additional time and personnel required to make writing a centerpiece of the curriculum”
(2003, 8). One institution that continues to invest in large-scale scoring sessions is the University of California.

Every year toward the end of May, two hundred professors and classroom teachers gather at Berkeley for the Subject A reading. The ostensible task is to assess seventeen thousand essays written by students accepted to UC campuses. Results of this assessment determine students’ placement in freshman English classes. I always look forward to the long weekend because it provides me with a measuring stick against which to evaluate my own students’ writing. I also learn from listening to what writing teachers at the various UC campuses have to say about high school students’ weaknesses. While grading five hundred essays in three days might sound like a holiday in hell, these readings have always been a source of pleasure for me. Just as Santa Monica High School’s grading parties helped Cathy Marsh feel more connected to the English department, Subject A readings help me feel more connected to the universities for which I am preparing my students. A few years ago when my son James was still in high school, I came home depressed.

It wasn’t the quality of the student writing that depressed me but the warning these eighteen-year-olds’ essays issued to me as a parent. The text students had been asked to read and respond to was an essay by Ellen Goodman called “The Cordless Tie That Binds People to Work.” Goodman describes how cordless phones and other electronic devices have blurred the line between our work life and our home life. I read paper after paper bemoaning the way their mom or dad’s cell phone interrupted family meals, ruined family vacations, and, in short, obfuscated their relationship.

To be sure, most students acknowledged that their parents were working hard in order to offer them a better life. But between the lines was a plaintive cry for attention. I began feeling guilty. Ensuring my undivided attention for more than five minutes requires something just short of a thunderbolt. In the way that some women check their nails, I check my email. I always have student papers available to fill any spare second I can find. Like the parents of these soon-to-be college students, I was so busy working and staying in contact with the world that I feared I was in danger of losing touch with those I love most.
Determined to change my ways and eager to spend more valuable time with James, I returned home. The clock was ticking on his high school years, and I wanted to enjoy every minute we had left together. Full of good intentions, I pushed open his bedroom door. Of course, James was on the phone. So I turned on my computer, checked my email, and pulled out my red pen to grade papers.
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