

STUDENT WRITING MUST BE GRADED BY THE TEACHER

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It's a common assumption that when students write something for a class, the teacher should evaluate that writing and return it with a grade. Chances are, those you work with take a different approach to the writing you do professionally. When was the last time *your* writing was graded? Odds are, not since you left school. Since then, anything you've written had a specific purpose, and you worked on it until it met your goal. Maybe a colleague or manager decided when it was good enough, and maybe they even gave you feedback about what worked well or not, but you didn't get a score, a letter grade, or have your writing ranked against your colleagues' work. But for some reason, this scoring/ranking system has become the norm as a method of labeling the relative quality of student writing. The whole arrangement teaches students to write for an arbitrary measurement from an authority figure rather than for a real audience.

As Mitchell R. James explains elsewhere in this text, grades are a fairly recent invention, in terms of the history of education. It would seem that grades have been imposed upon a system that had been getting along without them for hundreds of years. This imposition is a reductive one, replacing feedback, commentary, suggestions for improvement, and opportunity for discussion with merely a single letter or number. The idea of an *A paper* and giving numeric or alphabetic grades needs to end. Instead, we need to help students think of writing as adults do—in terms of inciting action and achieving goals. We need to help students become skilled reviewers of other people's writing, a skill that is much more useful than learning to write to please the teacher.

That last point poses not only a problem prominent in the history of writing assessment but also a perspective that may help

lead to improvement. Assigning a grade to a piece of writing is fraught with inconsistencies (which James discusses at length), as different graders notice different things within the same text. But when students have only one teacher in their classroom, and that one teacher's assessment carries all the weight and authority, students learn to write for the teacher instead of expecting the writing to do anything on its own. (See also Elizabeth Wardle's chapter in this book on "writing in general.") Grading becomes a mysterious label, reducing meaningful commentary to a single letter or number. It puts the teacher in charge and abolishes the opportunity for students to learn how to evaluate quality. Writing in graded situations becomes writing *for* a grade, whereas writing in other circumstances seeks effectiveness as a standard. When students write for a grade, they come to see writing as *transactional* (given to someone in exchange for credit) rather than *actionable* (created with purpose and designed to achieve a goal). That's somewhat like a journalist writing news reports to please the layout designer rather than to meet the needs of the publication's readers. Writing for the teacher creates an artificial environment that's harmful to a writer's development.

Writing for a teacher rather than an intrinsic goal may produce work that the teacher deems excellent, but wouldn't it be better to help writers develop the ability to independently assess the quality of writing, either theirs or other people's? By expecting students to write so that teachers can rate, rank, and label them, we implicitly tell students that our satisfaction is more significant than their intrinsic aspirations. Writers should develop the purpose of their writing, rather than having it determined elsewhere. Students must learn that process through experience; grading will not teach them.

Students don't learn how to write from a grade. They learn how to write well by getting feedback from readers and from reading and analyzing examples of similar writing from other authors (such as their peers or professional authors writing the same type of material the students are writing). Sure, teachers can add marginal comments on drafts to provide some of this feedback, but as Muriel Harris argues in her chapter of this text, such commentary frequently becomes overwhelming and meaningless to students. Regardless of how many comments appear on a paper, students know the grade is the only thing that counts in the long run. But how exactly does a letter count? How does it fit in with an overall view of a student's ability? And more importantly, given the complexities of writing, how can one letter reflect the myriad

aspects by which writing quality might be judged? If a letter grade represents completion, how can teachers determine when writing is finished? If the letter reflects accuracy/correctness, how can teachers account for style? And whose opinion of the quality of the writing matters most?

Indeed, grading does very little. Music theory teacher Kris Shaffer says that “letter grades do an absolutely horrible job” of three things that would help students improve their writing: (1) determining whether students understand a concept well enough to implement it, (2) identifying elements of student writing that need improvement, and (3) helping students learn to better self-assess. Shaffer makes his argument specifically about writing music, but I’ve recast it here for writing words. Each of these three goals presents a helpful perspective on developing authors’ needs. An author’s ability to compose requires skill, understanding, and situational familiarity. None of those goals are met through a letter grade. Grades help label, sort, and rank students; they don’t inform students, target instruction, or encourage self-awareness. Those who have left school and begun their careers have long stopped expecting grades to help determine what they do and don’t do well because grades aren’t appropriate measures of learning. Schools need to stop relying on grades, too.

Instead, we should teach people how to improve their writing through peer review. Variations of peer review help us write in many of our day-to-day situations. We learn what sorts of text messages work best by observing how our friends text and respond to us. We learn what makes an effective email by reading the ones we get and responding or deleting as we see fit. We learn how best to craft Facebook posts by seeing what kinds of content can garner the most likes—at its heart a form of quick (and addictive) peer review. Consider, too, all of the review features available on websites such as Yelp, Amazon, LinkedIn, Angie’s List, and so on. Reviews offer feedback and critique by users/peers.

With all these systems of peer feedback already available to us, students need to learn to make use of them. Teachers could benefit from saved time and energy if they incorporated peer review systems of various flavors in their classes, reducing their workload and providing a variety of feedback for their students. Students, then, would learn to trust—and derive practical value from—the feedback of a real audience beyond their teacher. Writers who can peer review effectively become purposeful readers, thinking of texts, from classmates’ work to their textbooks, as devices used

to achieve goals, rather than as static documents designed only to inform. The mantra that “you can’t believe everything you read on the Internet” makes rational sense but seems to fail us at crucial moments. Thinking critically about the things we read takes longer than clicking Like, retweeting, reblogging, or sharing; the efficiency of social tools discourages complex questioning that challenges and validates claims. In-class peer review helps writers think carefully about the implications of writing and the ways writing can help solve problems.

The interactive, social nature of writing (not just tweets) makes peer review not only an effective source of feedback but also an essential skill. True participation in peer review systems requires that we act as reviewers ourselves. These peer-review skills should be assessed by teachers, as they help us learn the real work of writing. Because writing allows us to coordinate and collaborate, it serves as an essential element in the effort to get things done. In other words, *situations*, not teachers, define the importance of writing. Learning about situations and the effects of writing comes from reading and writing, not from being graded. Students should learn to assess writing situations and learn how to improve that writing—both theirs and their peers’—in situations that have more at stake than just a grade.

If grades tell nothing meaningful about writing ability, and if learning to work as/with peer reviewers provides insights into and feedback about writing performance, then the traditional structure of writing education is backward. If writing helps groups of people get things done, then students need to learn how to form, negotiate, and benefit from those groups. Grades get in the way, and teachers cannot guide students through their own writing, assessing, and reviewing processes if they are too distracted by issuing grades. The teacher’s view of student writing is but one voice among a chorus of peers. Writing benefits from collaboration, not top-down dictatorship. Learning to write means learning to write with the support of peers, in an authentic situation, and with a genuine purpose. Writing should not be done for a grade. Teachers should not grade writing; instead, they should empower their students to meaningfully assess the effectiveness of writing.

If students learn to improve their understanding of writing by collaborating in groups that use writing to achieve a specific goal, then those groups should determine whether they met their own goal. A teacher should help students learn to assess quality fairly, to collaborate professionally, and to identify differences between

their own work and model writing they wish to emulate. Writing classrooms can be laboratories in which students develop meaningful, relevant writing skills. If teachers stop grading student writing and instead focus on review and collaboration skills, each classroom would have a team of people qualified to assess the quality of writing. Teachers, then, could grade whether students provide beneficial peer review feedback and collaborate effectively—the meaningful work of writing.

Further Reading

For an overview of assessment practices in the teaching of writing, see Brian Huot and Peggy O’Neill’s *Assessing Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*, by Bedford/St. Martin’s. For scholarly research on why engagement as part of assessment is important, see Jeff Grabill’s *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action* (Hampton Press), Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser’s *Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement* (Utah State University Press), and the “father of assessment,” Ed White’s “Holisticism,” published in the print journal, *College Composition and Communication*. For examples of how and why teachers assess holistically instead of for micro-grades, see Cathy Davidson’s 2009 crowdsourcing grading discussion on the HASTAC blog, Kris Shaffer’s blog post, “Why grade?”, and Shaffer’s discussion on “Assessment and Generosity” with writing teachers Chris Friend, Asao Inoue, and Lee Skallerup Bessette at the *HybridPod* podcast from *Hybrid Pedagogy*.

Keywords

open peer review, peer review, rhetoric and civic engagement, student writing self-assessment, writing community engagement

Author Bio

Chris Friend has been teaching writing classes since 2000, originally as a ninth-grade English teacher with Seminole County Public Schools and most recently as assistant professor of English at Saint Leo University. He believes that testing disempowers students and makes them resent writing, and he jumps at any opportunity to give students more control over their learning and writing. As managing editor of *Hybrid Pedagogy*, Chris works with authors and editors in an open peer-review process that he believes brings out the best in writers and those who work with them. He tweets about these and other topics from @chris_friend.