

How Has Your Own Work as a Writer Helped You as an English Teacher?

Giving Meaningful Responses—Not Grades—to Student Writers

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When I am writing, whether for personal reflection, friendly communication, or professional publication, the primary questions on my mind are, *Does this text work? Will my readers get it? Does it have substance, style?* Significantly, I never think to myself, *Is this good enough for an A, or is it more of a C effort?* or *Is this writing 85% successful, or 92%?*

Thinking *as a writer* about meaningful feedback, I have concluded *as a teacher* that assigning letter grades to individual pieces of writing is not useful. What my student writers, like any other writers, need to know is, “Does this piece of writing work? Does it speak?” I let these questions guide my evaluations. Students receive feedback through analytic rubrics and my comments, and they earn a simple evaluation of “Credit” or “Revise for Credit.” If the writing works, it gets credit. If it doesn’t, it goes back for more attention. The writer who earns credit may still revise if he or she wishes to continue working with a piece; the writer who does not earn credit must revise to demonstrate proficiency in the skill or subject under consideration. Our conversations about revision can focus more on quality—What makes writing coherent, stylish, engaging?—and less on quantity—How many run-ons need to be corrected or paragraphs tightened to make this an A paper? As an added benefit, students seem more willing to revisit their work than under a traditional grading system.

My desire for meaningful responses to my writing has led me to offer more of them to my students. Students now are more likely to write with an audience in mind, to consider how effectively they are communicating their ideas, and to revise for clarity and style—that is, to do the real work of writing.

The Dark Side of Publishing: Reading and Writing Rejection Letters

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Being rejected is never easy. I know that from personal experience. During my 30-year teaching career, I submitted numerous manuscripts to professional journals. Sometimes they were accepted. Occasionally I got a conditional acceptance, requiring that I revise, and often I received rejections. I saved all of these letters and eventually found a valuable use for them in the classroom.

My eighth graders publish annual magazines based on topics that interest them. Students decide on titles and then write calls for manuscripts to circulate among middle school students. After receiving manuscripts, the editors write acceptance and rejection letters to the authors. By using my letters for models, editors recognize the importance of format, such as the need for a letterhead, date, personalized greeting (such as “Dear Julie” instead of “Dear Contributor”), and closing.

Most important, they get a sense of how to write their messages, especially to soften the blow of a rejection. Following what they read in my letters,

many editors word their letters broadly, such as “We are sorry that your article does not fit our needs at this time.” Others notice that rejection letters often describe why the manuscript was not accepted, and they include specific information in theirs. For example, one student wrote the following:

Dear Clare,

Thank you for submitting your manuscript, “Global Warming/Climate Change” to *Headlines*. Unfortunately, I already have an article about the same topic. Yours is an extremely interesting manuscript with several facts that I did not know before. I suggest that you submit it to one of the other magazines. They might be interested in publishing it.

Sincerely,
Daniel

The editors are eager to deliver acceptance letters but are reluctant to hand out rejection letters. However, they do so, knowing that they expressed a difficult message in a tactful way. Rereading my rejection letters was not something I enjoyed, but it was rewarding to see how they benefited my students.

Extending What Student Writing Is Allowed to Be and Do

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My status as a poet and book critic has certainly led to an assortment of classroom experiences: workshops, discussions of my poems, a behind-the-scenes

look at the evolution of one of my book reviews, a project where students submit to publications outside our community, anecdotes about writers I have been lucky enough to know, and applying writers’ statements on craft to what we’ve read.

But those are all little day-to-day issues; what has really mattered has to do with philosophy and attitude.

Most importantly, my writing life has given me the confidence to challenge and extend notions of what student writing is allowed to be and do. My students complete an independent writing project each semester: There is a sequence of parts to the project, but the form and content are up to the student, as is the pacing and schedule (except for the final draft). My challenge to them is: You have no other choice but to be a writer of *some* kind, but you may be a writer of *any* kind. What choice do you make?

In all kinds of other assignments, from argument to autobiography to research to literary response, I let—often insist—students use “I”; I allow purposeful one-sentence paragraphs and sentence fragments; I push them to include quotations from friends and family. And in terms of preparation for state tests, I do just a *bit* more than the required minimum because I know if I have students reading and writing regularly, widely, and authentically, then the only real challenge they’ll have with the state’s demands is the fact that those demands are at best counterproductive, at worst ignorant. The writing itself will be far beneath them. When they’re done with those silly hoops, they can get back to their real work. And so can I. 