

# Write More, Grade Less: Five Practices for Effectively Grading Writing

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## **Grading Writing**

One of the dilemmas that teachers frequently face is grading student papers. The grading of writing assignments can be especially problematic. Enter any faculty room and you are sure to hear at least one exhausted educator lamenting over the stack of papers that need to be graded. Teachers can be identified by the multiple bags of papers they haul out to their cars daily. Thankfully, early in my career, I took a writing course developed by Dr. John Collins that made grading writing papers a clearer and more efficient process.

John Collins, EdD, founder of Collins Education Associates, LLC (CEA), is an acknowledged expert in converting research on writing and thinking into practical and time-saving teaching techniques. Dr. Collins is the author of *The Collins Writing Program*, which is the culmination of over 20 years of work with students, teachers, and school districts. Dr. Collins's proven techniques have benefited more than two million students and have been singled out for recognition by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Dr. Collins has taught from elementary through graduate school and is the author of numerous publications. *The Collins Writing Program* presents a model for writing across the curriculum. At its very core is the belief that writing enhances the learning process of any subject at any level.

The process I learned helped me manage the "paper load," and provided a concrete way to assess and grade both writing quality and student effort. An added bonus of the process was that it helped me immensely with my classroom management.

I used this process successfully in various grade levels and content areas in K–12 classrooms and am now using it in the college classroom. The Collins writing method results in students thinking, writing, and participating more. Experts agree that writing helps students understand and remember content and improves student learning.

## **Research to Practice**

As a teacher, I regularly read research regarding instructional practices, grading, and assessment, but struggled to translate theory into practice in my own classroom. The intent of this article is to share one method of instructing and grading writing that has a sound research base. This method is easy to implement and makes sense; it provides students with meaningful assignments and teachers with clear guidelines on how to efficiently grade writing.

Grading writing will always be somewhat subjective. Using this method can make the expectations more explicit to students and parents. The solution is to slice writing instruction into five specific types of writing, each with a purpose and clear expectation. Each type of writing states explicitly what students must produce and how it will be assessed. This eliminates guesswork from grading, both for students and teachers. The method allows for differentiated instruction and expectations that enables assignments to be modified easily to meet varied student ability levels. The simplicity of Collins's Five Types of Writing is what makes implementation of the Collins method easy.

## TABLE 1. Five Types of Writing at a Glance

**Type One** writing gets ideas on paper—brainstorming. Type One is timed and requires a minimum number of items or lines. Questions and/or guesses are permitted. Evaluated with a check or minus. One draft.

**Type Two** writing shows that the writer knows something about a topic or has thought about the topic. It is a correct answer to a specific question, graded as a quiz. One draft.

**Type Three** has substantive content and meets up to three specific standards called focus correction areas (FCAs). It is read out loud and reviewed to see if the draft meets the following criteria: completes the assignment, is easy to read, and meets standards set by the FCAs. Revision and editing are done on the original. One draft, time varies.

**Type Four** writing is Type Three writing that is read out loud and critiqued by another. Two drafts, time varies.

**Type Five** writing is of publishable quality. Multiple drafts, extensive time taken to revise and edit.

Teachers and students need clear expectations. The Five Types of Writing provide a framework that has structure and clear direction. It won't stifle teachers' creative juices, but it will lead them in the right direction.

Following is a brief overview of the five different writing types that make up *The Collins Writing Program*. What's ideal about this approach is that it isn't just for language arts or English teachers; it's for all content areas (see Table 1).

### Quick Writes

#### *Type One*

Type One writing is an informal, timed "quick write" with a quota of lines or words that helps develop writing fluency and increases academic engagement. Writing frequently is undisputedly the best way to help students gain fluency. These brief, informal writing opportunities have the advantage of engaging all students not just the usual handful that can be counted on to volunteer.

Gary Chadwell (2009), author of *Twelve Assignments Every Middle School Student Should Write*, described the classroom norm this way: "Three fourths of your students are stealth students, whose goal is to fly below the radar in hopes of never being called on—they wouldn't raise their hand if their hair was on fire. The other quarter of your class has trigger arms, they're your high verbal kids the other stealth students just thanks god the trigger arms are here."

Having students respond in writing is a way to focus attention, and encourages them to express what they might be hesitant to raise their hand and say in front of the class. It promotes what Doug Lemoz (2010) in *Teach Like a Champion* describes as a "no opt out" classroom culture.

Type One is manageable for the teacher to grade—a quick check or minus for effort and written participation. This provides teachers with a tangible record to justify a participation grade and the opportunity to clear up any misconceptions that students may have about grading policy. Used anytime during class, Type One writing focuses students on the learning content at hand. It is a low-risk strategy

that allows students to think, reflect, and make meaningful content connections and become more confident in their ability to generate ideas quickly and get ideas down in writing. It requires minimal class time (one draft) and is straightforward to grade: a check for completion and a check-minus for no or minimal attempt; an ideal system to evaluate effort.

#### *Examples of Type One Writing*

Before introducing a new unit: *Imagine it's the end of our unit on . Predict what you think the five most important questions will be on the end of the unit test.*

Mid-point in the unit: *Based on today's activity, do a 3-2-1 reflection. Write down three things you found interesting, two things that were a bit confusing, and one thing you would like to know more about.*

At the end of the unit. *Describe something in this subject that you understand more about. Give four examples of what I (your teacher) could do to make this unit better for the students next year. In eight lines or more, write the things you know, things you think you know, or questions you have about.*

Teachers have known for years that the best targeted instruction takes place when teachers assess before teaching. Administering Type One writing before beginning a new unit is an excellent way to implement this practice in the classroom.

#### *Type Two*

Type Two writing is also a quick write. Used at any time during the class period, Type Two is an excellent way to confirm understanding, ensure recall, or monitor whether last night's reading homework was completed. However, unlike Type One, it is a correct answer to a prompt that shows that the writer knows the answer to specific question. It is formative assessment at its best. The format mimics the open response questions that are on many state outcome tests where the intention is to assess knowledge or understanding, not of conventional writing skills. It is graded as a quiz that can guide teaching to improve learning. Type Two writing prompts can span the full range of Bloom's taxonomy. My favorite way to use a Type Two prompt in a classroom is to stop midway through a presentation and instruct students to "jot down the two most important points I made."

Another effective use of Type Two writing is to begin class by asking students to write three of the most important points from yesterday's class discussion. This is a great way to check for understanding of the content before moving on. In my college classroom I often begin by asking my students to summarize in their own words the main idea from last night's reading assignment. Interestingly, assigned reading book sales skyrocketed. It's amazing what a bit of accountability will do!

Type Two writing also makes an easy exit ticket with real world application. Daily, I ask a student to summarize the day's discussion for a friend who was absent, including two ideas that they think are important enough to appear on our end-of-unit test. For the unengaged student, Type Two writing at the end of class can be a real wake-up call.

Questions or prompts that have quantity specification are good candidates for Type Two writing. Evaluation systems for Type Two writing should be kept as simple as possible, allowing the teacher to skim a student's paper looking for the correct response. I found that the best evaluation systems are point systems because they are quick and easy to use. The teacher determines the points based on the importance of the assignment.

Following are examples of Type Two prompts with the corresponding level of Blooms taxonomy that can be used as quiz grades in various content areas.

**Mathematics:** What are three distinguishing attributes of a three-dimensional figure? (Remembering)

**Language arts:** Describe two textual features of a nonfiction introduction. (Understanding)

**Any discipline:** Give two reasons why this cannot be a correct answer for this problem (or question). (Analyzing)

**Science:** Explain two differences between volume and mass. (Analyzing)

**Social studies:** Describe two geographic facts about our town/city that have influenced its development. (Evaluating)

**Music:** Create a rubric or a checklist of at least four characteristics that you might use to evaluate a musical performance. (Creating)

The grading of these quick writes can be completed utilizing what I call “over-the-shoulder grading,” which takes approximately five minutes to complete for a class of about 25 students. I simply cruise from student to student, look over their shoulder, and can quickly and efficiently glean who is “with me” and who needs additional clarification, recording the grades as I go.

### **Moving from Writing to Learn to Learning to Write**

Type One and Type Two writing are both quick writes that help students’ develop comfort and confidence as they become more fluent writers. A fluent writer is easier to coach when it’s time to teach specific writing skills (the focus of Type Three and Type Four writing). Both

Type Three and Type Four assignments are designed to help students develop specific thinking and writing skills.

#### *Type Three*

Type Three writing moves students from merely producing and recording ideas to refining the way they present ideas. It is versatile and can take almost any form (essay, story, report, poem) and can be used in any content area. Selecting a few criteria to grade rather than grading for everything is the hallmark of *The Collins Writing Program*. Focus correction areas (FCAs) make grading papers less time consuming, which, ironically, can produce anxiety in teachers, especially English teachers who have a compulsive need to edit every aspect of the paper.

FCAs allow for frequent focused feedback. Wiggins (1998) stated that to serve learning, feedback must meet four criteria: It must be timely, specific, understandable to the receiver, and formed to allow for self-adjustment on the student’s part. Specificity is essential in order to help students understand both their strengths and the areas in which they can improve. Type Three writing is designed to provide timely, specific, understandable feedback that allows students to refine.

#### *Type Four*

Type Four writing is Type Three writing that is read aloud by the author and self-edited, read aloud by a peer and peer edited, and rewritten before it is submitted to the teacher. The teacher’s evaluation is limited to the focus correction areas. Students work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions.

During Type Four writing, two students sit together after each has completed a first draft. Both students read and edit their own papers, following the steps for Type Three writing. The students then exchange papers and listen to each other’s papers being read out loud by the partner, hearing not what they thought they wrote but what another reader actually reads. *In Writing Next*, Recommendation 3 is collaborative writing—using instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions.

In both Type Three and Type Four writing, FCAs are used to clarify the critical criteria for the assignment and send clear messages to students about what will be graded. An extensive body of research supports the usefulness of focus correcting. In Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde’s *Best Practice Third Edition: New Standards for Teaching and Learning* (2011) they summarized the best educational practice in each of

the five key school curriculum areas. In writing, they recommend “focusing on one or two kinds of errors at a time.” FCAs are simply specific areas of focus for the students and parents.

Mike Schmoker has visited hundreds of classrooms with other administrators, and frequently finds that most daily teaching lacks clarity and focus and doesn’t contain the basic elements of good instruction. He advocates for aligning learning expectations—this means changing the American tradition of curricular chaos—where teachers present a “self-selected jumble” of topics and standards with wild variations from classroom to classroom, even in the same school. If teachers taught to an agreed-on set of curriculum standards that conform even reasonably well with the best essential state standards, achievement would skyrocket. These standards could be the FCAs.

As a former language arts supervisor, one of my most rewarding tasks was the design of the K–12 FCA Writing Matrix that specifically delineated the critical writing skills that should be taught, assessed, and communicated to students, teachers, and parents. These skills matched those assessed on the standards based report card in the elementary schools. We used the guidelines specified by Marzano (2006), which advocated focusing on ideally 15 measurement topics per subject per grade level.

The process we used to determine the FCAs enabled teachers to see, firsthand, the redundancy and inconsistent approach to teaching and assessing writing that had been happening district-wide. The FCA Matrix provided the structure and clarity that was needed to enable educators to focus their teaching, give students focused practice and feedback, and make explicit the agreed-on focus areas in writing. For both more and less capable writers, the FCAs can be modified to meet individual student needs.

Selecting FCAs is part of the art of teaching. When teachers felt their students needed alternative FCAs to those chosen for their grade level, it was a matter of thoughtfully choosing the FCA that best matched the individual student-differentiated instruction at its best.

### **Write More, Grade Less**

Prior to using *The Collins Writing Program*, a frustrating common occurrence in my classroom resulted when I returned papers. After spending hours correcting, editing, and constructing feedback in order to help them refine their work, the students would glance at their papers, scan for their grade, and then jam the paper into their binder. Even my best students barely glanced at my comments. All of my time crafting feedback was wasted, and my students continued to repeat the same errors.

Schmoker (2006) writes fervently in *Results Now* about the time wasted by teachers grading papers. He advocates that it is neither practical nor beneficial for teachers to spend hours writing extensive comments on students’ papers. He believes this wastes teacher time and is counterproductive, resulting in teachers assigning less writing because each assignment yields hours of burdensome paper grading.

My experience has been that teachers need to teach fewer skills and do a better job of teaching, assessing, and providing formative feedback. We need to balance effectiveness with efficiency.

Schmoker calls for a drastic shift and a new awareness. He concurs with Anne-Marie Hall (1994) when she advises, “write more, grade less.” The research is strong that students are far better off when we score their work for only a few criteria that we have just finished teaching carefully and explicitly, and with the help of exemplars that add immensely to our best attempts to describe or define “voice” or “effective transitions” or “thoughtfully places details” in a paragraph. Students need specific feedback, and they need it quickly with the opportunity to correct or revise.

Marzano and others have shown that we can be vastly more effective while spending only a fraction of the time we now spend on grading (2006, 168–69). *The Collins Writing Program* provides a model for writing across the curriculum that explains exactly how to “write more, grade less.”

## Modeling Public Grading

San Diego State University professors Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher (2007) assert: "Without processes to provide students with solid feedback that yields deeper understanding, checking for understanding devolves into a game of 'guess what's in the teacher's brain.'" One way to make expectations transparent is to model some "public grading." Teachers can ask for one or two students to volunteer their papers for public correction, with the promise that the grade will not count and that they will receive a new, presumably higher grade, when they make the changes required by the corrections. The papers are then graded using a document camera so that the entire class can see the process. The teacher verbally explains the written feedback, comments, and grade with the class. This practice gives everyone in the class a chance to see the thought process involved in determining a grade. Afterward, all students have an opportunity to revise their own papers based on the public grading feedback. It's an opportunity for everyone to refine, revise, and retry.

### *Type Five*

Type Five writing is composition that is as perfect as possible considering the age and ability of the writer. It is meant to be posted, published, displayed, and shared with an audience, usually outside of the classroom. Writing of this caliber requires multiple drafts and is evaluated by all of the standards of the writing process. Collins (2007) writes:

The high expectations for Type Five writing are both its greatest strength and its greatest flaw. The strengths of Type Five assignments are that they convey high expectations and reflect what most teachers truly want: good ideas expressed well, without error in the standard conventions of written English. And there are times when Type Five assignments are the only choice, especially when the writing will reach concerned, active readers outside the classroom. These grand expectations lead to the weaknesses of Type Five assignments. Given the working conditions of most teachers (limited time with too many students, limited student experience with any type of writing, etc.) the expectation for perfection is probably unrealistic. Students are students, not professionals. If they could produce perfect work they would not need to be in school. But because so many students have had Type Five expectations drilled into them for almost everything they write, they respond with writing that is the easiest to "perfect"—short and limited, with easy words and basic sentences: no risk, no voice, and no opportunity to mess up. (35–36)

I found that the time needed to commit to making students revise until the writing was "publishable" was a bigger investment of my time than theirs, and often only measured their ability to recopy my edits. Investing my time and theirs in developing their thinking and writing skills was a conscious choice to develop a classroom that allowed students more opportunities to write, and to practice the skills they would need to develop into mature independent writers. My role is that of a teacher, not a copy editor.

The Collins approach to grading writing demystifies the grading process. Teachers that have to grade inordinate amounts of essays, attempting to make them all "publishable," will assign less writing. Writing is thinking on paper, and I believe we would all agree that students need to think more.

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