Commenting on High-Stakes Writing

Options for Using a Writing Process in your Course
Matt Gilchrist & Carol Severino, Writing Center
Center for Teaching Workshop 2/23/11
What does it mean to use a writing process with your assignments?

Instead of first draft = final draft = commented on and returned for a grade....
try this:

1) Assign proposal/thesis paragraph draft/annotated bibliography for project.
2) Teacher comments on, returns proposal/paragraph/bib.
3) Draft 1 turned in.
4) Teacher and/or peers comment on draft 1.
5) Students revise & include a description of how they chose & used peer &/or teacher feedback.
Why use a writing process?

1) It’s better for learning.
2) It’s better for teaching.
Why have students draft and revise?

It’s better for students’ learning:

a) It gives them more chances to think through & make connections between ideas & to address parts of the assignment they may have missed.

b) It gets them started early & helps them avoid procrastination.

c) They will care about and focus on your feedback instead of on a grade.
And...

d) It gives them practice in processing & incorporating feedback, which will also improve their future writing.

e) It reflects more closely how our own scholarly writing & other professional writing happens.
Why have students draft and revise?

It’s better for teachers’ teaching:

a) We can frontload commenting. Final drafts will require fewer comments = less work.
b) Drafts inform us how students are (mis)understanding the course material or the assignment, so we can intervene.
c) We can point out major problems on a draft without the stigma of a low grade.
And...

d) Commenting on drafts has purpose & meaning—to improve the students’ thinking & writing, NOT to justify our grade.

e) We will receive more clearly thought-out final papers; our frustration & stress levels will be reduced.

f) We avoid rewarding the small percentage of students who do produce on-target single-draft writing & penalizing the larger percentage who don’t.
But speaking of stress, how do I prevent commenting on drafts from taking over my life?
Options for Managing the Paper Load:

- Provide guidance on how the can be approached (scaffolding).
- Comment on at most 3 major issues: e.g. assignment fulfillment, focus, ideas, argument, organization.
- Comment on error patterns or selected errors rather than identifying every error. If focus is off, the content of the final draft will be different anyway.
More options for managing the paper load:

- Give students models of what you consider to be good writing in your field.
- Use cover sheets that asks students what their concerns are to help direct your commenting.
- Use guided peer response; students read one another’s papers in small groups & identify major issues that need to be addressed.
- Use Writing Fellows whom you guide in commenting on the drafts.
In terms of time, energy, & emotion,

Commenting mainly on drafts rather than on final versions will either save time or take the same amount of time.

But your students gain:
- More knowledge of the subject matter.
- More control over the writing process.

And both students and instructors gain…
more satisfaction at jobs done better.
Why use peer workshopping?

- It utilizes student expertise in writing & in course content.
- Peer critique may be less threatening & easier to swallow than an instructor’s.
- Students can articulate & discuss their ideas that can lead to revision.
- It develops students’ social skills & fosters cooperation rather than competition.
And…

- Students see positive features in other students’ work & use them in their own.

- At first, students see negative features more easily in others’ work, but then notice them in their own.

- Expands the audience by providing a more realistic one—a community of peers & the teacher.

- Makes students write with readers in mind.
How to use peer workshop:ing:

- Generate with your students a list of criteria for a good response to the assignment.
- Compose a workshopping guide sheet with criteria or questions for students to fill out for each draft they read.
Model the workshopping process:

- Distribute & read a draft written in a previous semester.
- Discuss what advice you would give the writer & how you would phrase it.
- Stress support, assignment fulfillment, expansion, clarification.
- Break students into mixed ability groups. Have them read and comment on one another’s papers.
Here is an example of an assignment and response:

- A short letter identifies higher order (global) concerns and error patterns.
- Marginal comments provide examples of those global concerns & a few errors.
Now let’s try it ourselves. Keep in mind:

- That the paper is an unfinished work-in-progress.
- How to build on the students’ strengths.
- How the student can better fulfill the assignment.
- Bigger issues like focus and ideas (vs. smaller issues like grammar.)
- How to prioritize the issues & comments—don’t overwhelm the student with critique.