

focus

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Teaching Writing as a Teaching Assistant

by

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Editors' Note: Like many large Canadian Universities, Dalhousie relies heavily upon the important contribution of its many Teaching Assistants, both within the classroom and in the evaluation process. A central aspect of TA tutoring and grading responsibilities involves the teaching and assessment of student writing. This edition of Focus addresses the teaching of writing, with particular emphasis on the TA experience, through a discussion of issues, challenges, and potential solutions. We begin with a direct, concise guide provided by Dalhousie Professor Shirley Tillotson to her Teaching Assistants. A modified version of this guide can benefit TAs from a wide range of disciplines. This is followed by a collection of exercises specifically designed to assist in the teaching of writing. And while these ideas are intended primarily for TAs, there is much of value here for even the most seasoned teacher of student writing.

The Teaching Assistant's role in assisting students with essay writing involves two basic stages: Advising and Evaluation.

Essay Advising

Basic precept: *It's about listening.*

To begin with – assume nothing. Diagnosis should proceed by the asking of open-ended questions. Get to know what the student's past experience of essay writing has been, and what kind of help s/he wants from you. The following list presents some potential situations and common student needs:

- a very bright, capable student is seeking stimulation and wants to clarify his or her own thinking by participating in intelligent discussion;
- a bright, capable student has a good idea and a good plan, but is feeling insecure and confused;
- a student, struggling to digest a lot of new information in all of his or her courses, who needs yet more information from you, in a manageable form, on the basic steps in finding research materials or in planning and writing an essay;
- a profoundly stressed student needs help managing his or her workload, or possibly his or her life. (The latter is *not* your

jurisdiction; direct the student to someone whose job it is to deal with these issues.)

In any and all of these situations, the TA's job is to listen and respond appropriately. It's very important that you don't just unload a dumptruck of information and walk away. Don't feel obliged to be an expert on every topic. If the student clearly would like a conversation on a particular topic in which you are not qualified, feel free to suggest approaching the professor. Your most relevant expertise is your own set of sound habits as a researcher and writer. It is, however, a good idea to prepare yourself for essay advising by reflecting on and reading about the process of undergraduate essay research and writing.

Essay Marking

Basic precept: *Marking is teaching, not just correcting.*

Hunting errors in undergraduate essays is like shooting fish in a barrel, and can be equally unproductive. Correcting errors helps with only the first of the three goals of marking essays, which are as follows:

- to enable students to recognize the differences between good and bad essays;
- to motivate them to write better essays;
- to equip them with the tools that will help them make some increment of improvement in their essays.

Here are some guidelines for how to accomplish these teaching goals.

- Learn how to recognize in weaker essays any sign, however partial, of the good qualities that distinguish excellent essays. Be sure to praise signs of strength, however rare, in the most specific terms possible. Ask for more of what you feel is sound

and effective. Provide examples of this approach.

- Write your comments legibly in a civil, constructive tone. Interlinear comments are often more legible than ones confined to the margin. It is wise practice to use a sharp pencil, rather than a pen, until you feel confident you will never have to retract an intemperate remark. (You may well not reach this state of confidence until you've been marking for a few years.)
- You will likely find it difficult or impossible to mark every error of grammar, spelling, usage, or reasoning. There will usually be more than you can legibly mark in the 1/2 hour to 1 hour you are expected to give each paper. Moreover, even the strongest ego can only handle so much "negative" information at one time. Instead, select one paragraph with some characteristic errors of style and grammar and mark it thoroughly. Alternatively, you can choose a small number of particular weaknesses to mark throughout the essay, and provide specific direction for how to strengthen future essays in these areas.
- Use check marks in the margins to provide recognition for points that are to some degree clear and correct.
- In your summary comment, say something specific that shows interest in some idea or factor or argument in the paper. This is a way of indicating that you value the student's intellectual life. You are not just a writing teacher; you are also a teacher of a specific discipline.
- **A time saver:** scan the bibliography and notes before beginning to read the essay. The quality of these and the first paragraph will give you a basic idea of the calibre of the essay and the effort that went into it, and you can design your in-margin comments appropriately.
- Make sure your own knowledge of terms used in marking essays is sound. Consult sources such as *The Clear Path*, *The Modern*

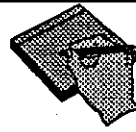
Researcher, The Craft of Research, Thinking Straight, or The Practical Stylist. Some useful manuals that focus particularly on quality of expression include *A Canadian Writer's Reference* and *The Least You Should Know About English*. These will equip you to avoid unproductive forms of criticism such as the marginal comments "vague" or "awkward."*

Conflicts with students

Basic precept: *Most conflicts with students can be avoided; get help from the professor for the ones that can't be.*

- You can avoid problems by knowing your **instructor's preferences and practices** regarding letter grade to number grade conversions, deadlines and deadline extensions, research standards, grades of F, etc.
- In order to avoid or, if necessary, better handle disputes about **missing or late papers**, keep careful records of the essays received, and make copies of essay marks.
- In the case of **re-marking requests**, ask the student to give you the essay (with your original comments), and a written statement of what the student feels is the basis in his or her work for a better mark than the one you assigned. Take time to re-evaluate the essay (but don't hold on to it so long that you miss the deadline for submitting a change of mark).
- Report suspected **plagiarism**, with evidence, to the professor. **Do not raise it with the student yourself.** The professor will handle all cases of plagiarism.

*For complete references for the writing resources listed in this article, please contact the OI DT at 494-1622 or OI DT@is.dal.ca, or consult this edition of *Focus* on our website at www.dal.ca/oidt.



"Write a Letter": A Cross-Discipline Assignment

Asking students to 'write a letter' has proven to be a versatile and effective exercise for instructors from a wide range of subjects and disciplines. Here are just three variations on this theme (from *Learning Through Writing: A Compendium of Assignments and Techniques*, eds. Eileen M. Herteis, W. Alan Wright).

William Lobb, Formerly of the Faculty of Dentistry, Dalhousie University

In this exercise, the student is asked to prepare an "information letter" which summarizes the findings of a clinical examination regarding an existing clinical condition and its planned treatment. Then, using the same clinical information, the student prepares a letter to a colleague concerning the nature of the clinical situation and the proposed treatment plan, and another letter to the patient and/or parent which also describes clearly the nature of the clinical condition and the proposed treatment plan. These letters are evaluated for their clarity and effect, as well as for correct spelling, grammar, and sentence structure.

John Fraser, Department of English, Dalhousie University

An assignment that's always worked well for me in English 1000, both in themes and in exams, is the fictional letter: "You are [Joseph] Conrad's publisher. He's recently sent you the manuscript of a long short story called 'Heart of Darkness.' Write him a letter in which you make suggestions for improving it. Bear in mind that he's got a terrible temper."

Kenneth Dunn and Richard Nowakowski, Department of Mathematics, Statistics & Computer Science, Dalhousie University

About half way through the first term, when students are well into Differential Calculus, we ask them to write to a friend who is a History major but who is contemplating switching to Science. The students are asked to explain to their friend what Calculus is all about and why s/he should (or should not) consider studying it. While the usual weekly questions force students to become immersed in specific topics, this assignment allows them to stand back and look at the subject as a whole.

The Writing Workshop, located on the the third floor of the Killam Library (494-3379) is a Student Service unit. It is a resource centre offering group instruction and individualized tutorial service for Dalhousie students to instruct them in writing papers in meaningful, clear, concise, conventional prose.

Besides being an ideal place to work at improving the quality of written work, the Writing Workshop is, as Louise Young, Senior Instructor, puts it, "one of the most consciously unintimidating places on campus." Students fearful about their ability to write clearly and persuasively can be sure that they will receive supportive guidance at the Writing Workshop.



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