

Evaluating Undergraduate Papers

Writing instruction has the potential to enter the life of any graduate instructor or teaching assistant, especially when teaching or assisting courses on classical culture—these have the greatest potential to be marketed as service courses to the university and given some sort of written component. Even if an instructor does not have to teach such a course right now, odds are good that at some point in a professional career every university instructor, adjunct, or faculty member will have to teach a course with a written component.

The objective of this workshop is to show how to properly evaluate undergraduate writing, a process which starts long before students begin their essays. First, we will cover how to communicate your expectations to your students about what exactly constitutes college-level writing – a topic that is surprisingly hard to define and about which your students will have heard many conflicting opinions.

Next to be discussed is how to structure the writing assignment(s) themselves in order to minimize ambiguity and maximize relevance and interest. Some important considerations: should we assign many small essays or one big paper? For multiple assignments, should each assignment be its own finished paper or a stage of a larger whole?

Finally, this workshop will cover the process of giving written feedback to undergraduates. It will describe in detail what sorts of comments to leave, how often to comment, and how to prioritize your feedback to make it most effective. This workshop will also address how to respond to student reactions to feedback.

After the initial presentation, attendees will break into groups and grade sample pieces of undergraduate-level writing according to a sample rubric. Special attention will be paid to diagnosing errors according to type (logical, structural, grammatical, stylistic) and severity, and giving appropriate levels of feedback—balancing instructor expectations with student capacity for improvement. After group work (approx. 5 minutes), the facilitator will reconvene and lead discussion of the comments made by the various groups. Time will also be reserved at the end for participants to share their own insights into or concerns about evaluating student writing.

By the end of this workshop, graduate instructors who have never taught a writing-intensive class should walk away with some idea of what to expect, and people who have taught writing-intensive courses should get some new ideas and perspectives on the importance of feedback in the writing process. This workshop is aimed primarily at graduate students, but anyone with an interest in writing instruction is welcome to attend.