

CHAPTER ONE

Giving Strong Feedback in Less Time The Efficiencies

The very first article of the first issue of the *English Journal* from 1912 begins with a question: *Can good composition teaching be done under present conditions?* (see Figure 1.1). The current conditions the author was referring to? Having upward of 125 students under a teacher's care.

The author's answer? No, which he backs up by writing the following:

Every year teachers resign, break down, perhaps become permanently invalidated, having sacrificed ambition, health, and in not a few instances even life, in the struggle to do all the work expected of them. . . . Much money is spent, valuable teachers are worn out at an inhumanly rapid rate, and results are inadequate or wholly lacking. From any point of view—that of taxpayer, teacher, or pupil—such a situation is intolerable. (Hopkins, 1912)

One hundred and eight years later and the situation is equally intolerable. Results remain inadequate; teachers continue to be worn out at a rate that is not only inhuman but also increasing rapidly (Hackman & Morath, 2018); and the unacceptable level of 125 secondary students identified by the 1912 author would be a dream for many writing teachers, including this one, who currently has 159 students amongst his five classes.

THE ENGLISH JOURNAL

VOLUME I

JANUARY 1912

NUMBER I

CAN GOOD COMPOSITION TEACHING BE DONE UNDER PRESENT CONDITIONS?*

EDWIN M. HOPKINS
University of Kansas

No.

This is a small and apparently unprotected word, occupying a somewhat exposed position; but it is upborne by indisputable truth.

FIGURE 1.1 • Not Much Has Changed in Over 100 Years

Consequently, when I first dug into the literature about ways to become more efficient, I discovered my struggle with the paper load was far from unique. Even the most renowned writing teachers bemoan the oppressive load that papers put on their shoulders. Carol Jago admits in her book *Papers, Papers, Papers* (2005) to having elaborate fantasies of driving to the ocean and consigning whole stacks of papers to the waves; Dr. Richard Haswell (2006), who has studied responses to papers for decades, calls them “the profession’s mark of Cain” (p. 8); and Eric J. Mendelson (2018) recalls the iconic inscription on the gates of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*—*Abandon all hope, ye who enter here*—when he gazes on a stack of papers.

I also learned that I was not the first to embark on some desperate and quixotic quest to improve my feedback while drastically cutting down the time it took. There is a colorful history of theories, systems, machines, and suggestions, all seeking or promising ways to be more effective and efficient. Sadly, many of them have been debunked, sit on a dubious research base, or are outright snake-oil. Yet among the noise, there are a number of practices created and curated by brilliant teachers that are widely supported by research and can actually help us grow more efficient and, at the same time, more effective, largely because they simplify our messages or eliminate the clutter. I’ve organized the most significant of these into seven time-saving tenets that can help us give strong feedback in less time:

1. Don't Read and Respond to Every Paper
2. Use More Targeted Feedback
3. Wait Until October to "Give" Grades/Assessments
4. Be a Teacher, Not an Editor
5. Go Digital
6. Automate *Some* Parts
7. Get in the Feedback Mindset

Time-Saving Tenet #1: Don't Read and Respond to Every Paper

As a new teacher I made sure to read every syllable my students wrote for my classes. While part of this was because I wanted to read what they wrote, I also did this because *not* reading something made me anxious. Deep down I worried that if my eyes didn't pass over a piece, somehow the students wouldn't learn from it, as if my gaze was the necessary catalyst to begin the learning process. I also feared that students wouldn't take an ungraded assignment seriously or follow my directions. After all, by the time they reach my secondary classroom, a great many students have learned that the reason to write is primarily to get a grade.

Even now, to not read or respond to student work still often feels like cutting a corner, but limiting what we read and respond to is actually one of the most responsible things a writing teacher can do. There are two key reasons for this:

- (1) To maximize their learning, students need to write for sustained amounts of time every day—30 minutes to 60 minutes according to many experts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; Cruz, 2015).
- (2) Students need spaces where they can play with writing, try new things, and take the necessary risks needed to maximize their growth.

When we try to read and assess all writing, we stand in the way of these best practices. There is no way for a teacher to read 30 minutes to 60 minutes of writing from 159 students every day. Trying to do so courts burnout or makes it more likely that the teacher will eventually limit the amount of writing she

assigns in an effort to keep up. Additionally, many students won't take risks or try new things when they know the teacher's watchful gaze will be on them. In these situations, a teacher's eyes will potentially slow and obstruct learning rather than being a catalyst.

Instead, it is important that our students engage in lots of exploratory writing where they write even though the writing will go unread and uncommented on by the teacher. This type of writing can be powerful in many situations, but it works especially well when students are writing to

- Learn content
- Collect their thoughts
- Consolidate knowledge
- Learn about themselves
- Generate thinking
- Practice a new skill

These types of exploratory writing are about learning, creating, and changing. Those things happen best when we set aside our need to be competent and correct, because our first attempts to wield new ideas, skills, and approaches are generally clumsy and littered with missteps. Doing that is difficult for a lot of students when they know that their teacher will be watching. Many students have had at least one negative experience with teachers looking at their work, as a student shared with me last year:

Common Exploratory Writing

- Journals
- Free or quick writes
- Blogs
- Reflections
- Note taking
- Summaries
- Writing on graphic organizers
- Outlines

In third grade we were writing journals and I misspelled Michigan. I remember the teacher saying to the class, with me standing right there, how ridiculous it is not to know how to spell my state. "Class, how do you spell *Michigan*," she continued, and everybody recited M-I-C-H-I-G-A-N. . . . I was really embarrassed and have remembered since.

This student remembered this experience from 8 years earlier so clearly that he switched to present tense for part of it as he told it to me. If we add up even a few moments like this, it helps explain why many students look at a teacher reading their paper like surfers look at a dorsal fin approaching as they sit in open water.

Also, it should be mentioned that students who've been embarrassed by teachers aren't the only ones who react with trepidation when the teacher will be looking at their writing. I've found the students who are often the most nervous about teachers are often those with the highest grades or those who really like a class or teacher. For them, even the smallest assignment is often a serious potential threat because it could do damage to their GPAs or the *perfect* images they have carefully cultivated within the class.

Consequently, we need to allow as many moments as possible where our students can, in the words of Kelly Gallagher (2006), "get out from under the shadow of the red pen" (p. 143). We need to give them plenty of safe harbors where they can stumble, play, practice, and learn far away from teachers' pens of any color. Doing this doesn't mean that we abdicate our responsibility to respond to student work, either; we will be looking at it soon enough. Instead, it just means that before we look at it we will give students time to develop and refine their new skills, ideas, and creations before we move on to the business of giving them feedback.

If you are still unsure of stepping back from reading and responding to all writing in your classroom, think about it a different way: In no other pursuit—ranging from painting to playing piano to shooting baskets—do we feel that every minute of practice should be observed and commented on by a teacher or coach. In those, we rightly identify that students need space and lots of practice. This is why the best music schools ring with far more notes than any instructor could ever process and the best diving practices have more flips and twists than any coach could ever see. It is also why writing classrooms should produce far more words than even the most efficient and diligent writing teacher could ever hope to read.

Will Students Take Writing Seriously if I Don't Grade It?

Although there is much more talk about purpose, mindsets, credibility, and relationships in the upcoming chapters—and all these can act as motivators when grades and teacher glares go away—I face far less trouble with students doing ungraded writing pieces in class than graded ones, especially once I explain to them why I won't be reading the piece. Once students realize what it means to be given space to follow their interests and ideas away from the teacher's eyes, most students, including a surprisingly high number of self-classified nonwriters, engage more with a piece and work longer on it than they would have if I had attached points.

An Important Detail About Not Reading Student Work

In many states, teachers are required by law to report information they have concerning student abuse, self-harm, and violence. And even in states where mandatory reporting laws aren't strong, teachers—and writing teachers in particular—are, in the words of Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2018), the “eyes and ears of the mental health system.” For these reasons, it is incredibly important that we are very clear with our students from the beginning about what we will and won't be reading. Being coy about the pieces we will read can open up legal trouble for a teacher who doesn't read something that should be reported. Even more importantly, it can also lead to missing student admissions of danger—admissions that if students put in writing, they wanted you to see. For more information on mandatory reporting, www.childwelfare.gov has a host of wonderful resources and links.

Time-Saving Tenet #2: Use More Targeted Feedback

Two things we know very clearly about feedback is that it has the biggest impact when it is

- Given regularly (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 36)
- Received as soon as possible by the students (McGee, 2017, p. 20)

It makes a lot of sense that regular feedback given shortly after a task is completed would have a larger impact than intermittent feedback received weeks later, yet in most classes the latter is far more common than the former. This is because when feedback comes exclusively in time-intensive scribbling through the margins of papers—the standard and only feedback mechanism for a great many classes—it will inevitably be significantly delayed and intermittent.

If we want to get feedback to students regularly and quickly, we need to begin utilizing other, faster forms of feedback in the place of some of those extensive margin notes. Useful feedback can be given in a multitude of ways to a multitude of different writing assignments and moments in the writing process, after all.

This book looks at these different ways and times to give feedback (including margin notes), but I want to start with the one that I use the most often—targeted feedback—which is feedback focused specifically on helping students build or refine a certain skill. Targeted feedback works so well because when

we focus solely on one skill, our feedback can be both meaningful and fast, often given by the next day or even within the class period itself. This speed also allows us to give feedback much more regularly, which a University of Chicago literature review argued as “[an essential practice] for creating a school or classroom culture where success is perceived as possible” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 38).

To see targeted feedback in action, consider this assignment from a unit I teach on commas, colons, semicolons, and dashes (see Figure 1.2 for an example; you can download this and much more from the companion website at resources.corwin.com/flashfeedback).

Punctuation Write

Please write a one-page, double-spaced paper in the genre of your choice and on the topic of your choice. Somewhere in the paper you should correctly and thoughtfully use the following punctuation:

- At least two dashes
- At least two colons
- At least two semicolons
- At least four different types of commas

The grade will be earned purely on the usage of this punctuation. Here is the rubric:

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Points Possible</i>	<i>Points Earned</i>
Thoughtful and correct use of at least two dashes. No dashes are misused.	2	—
Thoughtful and correct use of at least two colons. No colons are misused.	2	—
Thoughtful and correct use of at least two semicolons. No semicolons are misused.	2	—
Thoughtful and correct use of all commas; four different types of commas are used; no commas are misused	4	—

FIGURE 1.2 • Targeted Writing Assignment—Punctuation

This assignment generally comes after the students have gotten pretty comfortable with these punctuation marks, meaning my goals when I assign this are to

- Assess each student’s understanding of these punctuation marks
- Redirect any students who have misconceptions about any particular mark

When it comes to responding to this assignment, I keep my eyes fixed on these goals, and my responses focus solely on assessing punctuation usage and clearing up misconceptions. By keeping my feedback targeted, I can read and respond to an entire class-set in well under half an hour by following this process:

1. If I want to return this type of targeted assignment in the same class period, I schedule it before an established block of drafting and/or reading time. This is important because while my responses will be fast, they won’t be instantaneous, and I don’t want students sitting around waiting for me. My rule for students in these situations is simple: Once students finish the assignment, they roll right into the reading or writing.

2. When students finish, they share their paper with me via a Google Doc, and I quickly scan each paper using the find function (Command-F) to highlight the elements (colon, semicolon, dash, commas) that I’m looking for. If students are writing by hand, an alternative to the find function is to have them highlight or underline each time they use a comma, colon, semicolon, and dash. The whole idea is that as the one assessing them, I can use these visual markers to help me instantly find the targeted areas, allowing me to move at maximum speed.

3. I then fill out the rubric with the points earned. In doing that, I simply take away one point for each misused comma, colon, semicolon, or dash. If a student has no errors, I give them full points and quickly move on. Because my secondary goal is to help redirect any misconceptions about the punctuation marks, if a student does have an error or issue, I will highlight the error, too. I do not fix the errors because doing this takes more time and is not ideal for learning because I would be the one doing the work, not the student.

4. Finally, I require students who made errors to fix them. I generally strive to give students class time to revise and the opportunity to regain all lost points, because I have found that this added incentive, time, and access to me are key if I want students to move forward in earnest. As I mentioned

above, I also don't make the changes for them, as I want them to go through the internal grappling that is necessary to learning something at a deep level. Of course, I do provide resources for them to find the right answers. They can access the resources from class (visit the companion website at resources.corwin.com/flashfeedback to see the punctuation tutorials available to them), conference with partners, and come to me if they have exhausted other resources and are still stumped.

A Class Without Grades?

In most corners of our education system, writing, feedback, and grades are inextricably linked. This can be problematic at times because it is well-documented that grades can have some pretty negative effects on writing, identity, and feedback. They can damage the attention paid to feedback (more on that in Chapter 2), make students more risk averse, and have a negative impact on intrinsic motivation.

Still, grades are largely nonnegotiable in the educational climate of today. For example, my contract states very clearly that new grades need to be put into the online gradebook weekly. I've also found how and how often teachers grade to be a very personal matter, and it is worth mentioning that reasonable arguments exist both for a variety of approaches to grading or going gradeless. Considering these things, this book doesn't take a stand for or against using grades, and many examples and resources do have points associated with them for use by teachers who assign grades. That being said, it might be worth some time to look into the interesting experiments being undertaken across this country by innovative educators who are *going gradeless*. Often, even if we keep grades, we can incorporate useful bits and pieces from these gradeless laboratories. Some of the most interesting places to go to learn about going gradeless include

- The Paper Graders: www.thepapergraders.org
- Teachers Going Gradeless: www.teachersgoinggradeless.com
- *Hacking Assessment: 10 Ways to Go Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School* by Starr Sackstein (2015)
- *Shift This!: How to Implement Gradual Changes for MASSIVE Impact in Your Classroom* by Joy Kirr (2017)

Targeted feedback comes with many advantages. It allows for more consistent and timely feedback while also adding little or ideally nothing to the paper load that I take home with me. With this assignment, even in my biggest classes, the students can do it, get timely personal and meaningful feedback, and revise if

needed within the confines of class time. Also, even though I write nothing, the feedback is focused and clear. Students know exactly what I expect them to do, what they got right, and what they missed, and the results are often stunning. One or two targeted assignments such as this can move the needle on something like comma or colon usage more than I used to see in an entire year of putting corrections and comments in the margins of larger and more globally assessed polished writing pieces.
