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TE 848: Writing Assessment and Instruction

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Inquiry into Assessment

The research paper in the second trimester of the freshman English course I teach serves as the final formal piece of writing that students complete in the course and, as such, it is the most lengthy and, often, the most challenging for some. The entire project takes nearly three weeks to complete, and includes time to research, read article, take notes, construct an outline and, finally, to draft and revise. The final product is the culmination of the student's research into a current controversial issue, in which there are clearly two opposing sides. The students are explicitly instructed to remain impartial on the issue, and instead split their body of their paper in half, offering an equal argument and counter-argument throughout.

I selected three students whose work I feel most comfortable with. One of the drawback of the trimester system at my school is that a course only lasts two trimesters and each trimester is twelve weeks, so I have a good deal of students in my class currently who had a different teacher for the first trimester and, unfortunately, I am only partially familiar with their writing. With this in mind, I picked three students who have been in my class since the beginning of the school year, which gives me a better perspective on their writing ability. The first student I selected is Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a highly motivated student who excels on almost every assignment she is given. She will be highly recommended for the advanced sophomore English class next year, and she consistently

writes at a very high level. My second selection, Stephanie, is an often apathetic student who gets easily frustrated by assignments. She consistently tries to push herself to do better, and I have gradually built a strong rapport with her to encourage her to be successful and apply herself consistently to all aspects of school. The final student, Dante, often has difficulty transferring his ideas into writing. He will often have excellent concepts in mind for his paper, but his final products are often poorly constructed and plagued by countless grammatical and sentence construction errors that often overshadow the content of his writing. Dante's clearly thinks at a very high level and is certainly capable, but his writing skills often serve as an impediment to his success on formal assignments.

Assessment Type 1: Six Plus One Traits Rubric

The six plus one traits rubric is standard for the entire English department at our school, and has been integrated as the primary scoring rubric for almost every major writing assignment in each class. Lucy K. Spence, in her article "Discerning Writing Assessment: Insights into an Analytical Rubric", explains that the origins of this particular rubric are unclear, but it has been widely applied across multiple geographic areas and has been used to assess many different types of writing. In addition, she also questions its effectiveness as an accurate method of assessment, nevertheless concluding that multiple states have adopted it regardless of its flaws (Spence, 338). Each rubric essentially follows the same format, but the grading criteria shifts depending on the writing assignment. For this assignment, students are graded on the following criteria: ideas and content, sentence fluency, organization, conventions, and presentation, and each category is weighted (see Appendix A).

In my four years as a teacher at this school, I have graded well over one thousand (maybe even approaching two thousand at this point) writing assignments using this rubric, and filling out the rubric has almost become an automatic response of sorts. By this, I mean that even before I critically examine the rubric to assign the student their scores for each category, I already have a predetermined idea of what their final grade for the assignment will be, simply because I have used this scoring model so many times.

As such, this is one of the inherent flaws with this particular assessment method. Spence states that teachers often place more emphasis on the rubric than their own knowledge and experience with the writing of English learners (Spence, 342). For me, circling the numbers and assigning the grade is largely an afterthought, as I often already know what grade I'd like to give the student after reading their writing, which then turns into a matter of simply making the rubric score match with my preconceived ideas.

However, the rubric's various subcategories do provide students with a general picture of which areas of their writing are strong, and which areas need improvement. The visual layout of a rubric such as this allows students to see "the big picture" of their writing, while at the same time attending to many of the more nuanced aspects of their writing as well.

In addition to simply circling the numbers on the rubric and calculating their final score, I also write comments on the rubric itself and throughout the paper (Appendix A includes an example of Stephanie's finalized rubric), in order to further give students an idea of their writing. Stephanie's rubric contains only a few general comments, while other students' rubrics (such as Dante's) contain more specific comments throughout.

Ultimately, this standardized rubric provides a sense of familiarity for both the teacher and the student. It is both easily readable and, at the same time, defensible to both an administrator and a parent.

Assessment Type 2: “Deconstructed” Six Plus One Traits Rubric

In an attempt to remove some of the more vague elements of the standard six plus one traits rubric, I created a more detailed rubric that contained various subsections for each grading criteria (see Appendix B). My thinking here was that it would give students a better idea exactly where they fell in the grading categories and would allow me to more clearly explain to each student the specific areas of their writing that need improvement. I spent time carefully constructing each different scoring criteria, being sure to accurately reflect the difference between each number category on the rubric.

As such, the grading process when using this redesigned rubric was both much smoother and, at the same time, more thought-provoking as well. Unlike the original six plus one rubric, I found myself pausing more often when circling one of the grading criteria, and I felt the need to constantly be referring back to the student’s writing in order to justify each of my choices. This was in stark contrast to the original rubric, when circling numbers often felt like it was based on a “hunch” or some preconceived idea that I had formulated in my head while reading the essay.

The scores for each student’s writing remained largely the same, yet the opportunity for the student to see exactly what led my thinking in assigning their score was greatly improved. Appendix B contains a completed rubric for Dante’s essay, and the circled areas

on each page contain indicators that ultimately correlate to a scale score in the six point range.

Although this layout is more visually appealing and more easily accessible than the original rubric, I found that the subcategories for assessment, although well-written, could often be contested. For example, some of the language in the grading criteria such as the difference between “some of the paper maintains objectivity” and “**most** of the paper maintains objectivity” is still speculative at best and is based largely on the teacher’s interpretation. Thus, although the rubric allows for more transparency in grading, it still contains some flaws in its content and layout.

Assessment Type 3: Written Response

To be honest, shifting from a highly structured rubric to a more holistic open-ended written response was an uncomfortable experience for me at first. When thinking about what students were writing and then giving them accurate feedback with a few short paragraphs of text seemed to be almost a radical notion to me. Nevertheless, Maja Wilson, in her article “Why I won’t Be Using Rubrics to Respond to Student Writing” states that students desire to write “for all those who hunger for the human experience melded with language” (Wilson, 64). With this idea in mind, I attempted to create meaningful responses for each of my three selected students that were mindful of the needs of their papers as well as offering constructive criticism. Below is an example of a response that I formulated for Stephanie’s paper (the original response was handwritten on the final page of her paper; what follows has been transcribed from its original format):

Stephanie,

You use a great deal of research very effectively to illustrate the many issues facing prisons and jail systems around the world today. However, some of your evidence needs to be further explained. For example, when setting up a quote, be sure to explain who, exactly, said this quote or which article it comes from. Also, make sure to explain how each piece of evidence fully proves your point you are trying to make. Connect each example to your thesis.

Your paragraphs are, in general, very well structured and you do a nice job following the eight-sentence format. Be sure to follow this format in your first body paragraph, which is missing a few elements.

Grammatically speaking, your paper had quite a few errors in terms of sentence structure and punctuation, which I've noted throughout. It always helps to have multiple people proofread your writing in class, even beyond what we do on peer review days. Also, take a look at the edits I made to your Works Cited page and MLA header. By just fixing a few small errors you have a properly formatted Works Cited page.

You should be proud of the effort you put into this paper and, with revisions, you will be able to earn points back on your paper. Final score: 84%

The example above illustrates my attempt to include a more “humanized approach” to my grading. Rather than circling numbers or sections on a rubric, the comments I provided here are more specific to each student. However, it is important to note that I had difficulty separating myself from the grading criteria of the six plus one rubric, and the grade I affixed to this paper was still largely similar to a grade I would have given using the six traits rubric. Thus, although the grading outcome remained largely the same, the method of delivering that outcome shifted greatly.

Spence explains that teachers should address the writing context during assessment, focusing on the writer rather than on the assessment tool (Spence, 345). Examining Stephanie’s comments more closely, I walk her through each major element of her writing that I examined (which was largely the same as the focus areas on the rubrics), providing her with an in-depth analysis of her strengths and weaknesses in terms of that area of writing. I found it most difficult to provide feedback that was at the same time

helpful, critical, and tactful as well. Wilson discusses that one of the inherent problems with this type of feedback is that it opens the door for some teachers to respond badly or insensitively (Wilson, 66). I was mindful to both begin my written response positively and end it positively, giving each student praised interspersed with criticism so as to avoid the problem that Wilson illustrates.

Ultimately, although I found the written response to be one of the most understandable and transparent forms of assessment based on how logically it maps out the grading process for each student, it is unfortunately impractical given my current teaching context. In a teaching climate that is increasingly influenced by standardized testing and teacher accountability, justifying a grade to a school administrator based on a paragraph of comments can be difficult, especially considering that most administrators desire (and are often pressured by the state) to obtain statistics or quantifiable data to demonstrate growth as an indicator of teacher performance. Even Hillocks, in his “The Focus on Form vs. Content in the Teaching of Writing” discusses “The pressure on teachers engendered in an age of testing and accountability; and the methods of teaching writing promulgated by state writing exams” (243). Thus, although the inherent flaws of the aforementioned rubrics have been highlighted, they nevertheless provide a solid set of statistics that can be easily reported to an administrator and can also be more easily explained to a parent.

Analysis and Conclusions

Each of the above assessment methods contain a host of benefits and drawbacks, and it would certainly be myopic to say that there is one “correct” way to grade writing.

The rubrics in themselves are easily accessible and create a visually succinct impression of the student's writing; however, they often do not pay enough attention to the subtleties of each individual assignment. Sarah Beck, in her study of two secondary teachers and their use of rubrics, explains, "On the other hand, rubrics have been found to limit teachers' conceptions of writing to what is defined by the rubric, and to prevent teachers from recognizing strengths in aspects of writing not explicitly defined by the rubric" (Beck). This is essentially the strength of written responses over rubrics, in that they allow for teachers to break free from the constraints and parameters that rubrics contain.

Lastly, it is important to discuss what students perceive as a result of using these different types of rubrics. The six plus one traits rubric is highly formulaic and, as such, gives students the perception that writing is formulaic. In other words, writing is more like an equation: the student simply must plug her words into a system to achieve a desired result. This is essentially problematic, and, as Hillocks describes, "Too often, the quick fix for writing is some formula or other" (Hillocks, 244). The problem is that, like each student, writing is an individualized, deeply personal endeavor and, by confining it to a rubric, it gives students the impression that it is confined as well. Education professor Arthur Applebee explains that "performance on most of the components of writing achievement varies with topic and type of writing: vocabulary, syntactical patterns, fluency, patterns of errors, organizing structures, and even writing processes will all vary from one topic or type of writing to another" and "[b]ecause there are many such conversations that are important in our social and cultural world, writing development may in turn become a matter of developing a voice in a wider array of conversations, and learning to make one's contribution in increasingly powerful and effective ways" (Applebee). Both of these points

are absolutely crucial to understanding the implications for these different assessment methods on how students perceive writing. By using a “one size fits all rubric,” we too often eliminate the human element of writing and send students a clear message that there is a right way and a wrong way to write.

Moving forward, establishing exactly what I want students to perceive their writing as will be most important to keep in mind. For example, some more technical writing requires a more rigid structure and form, while other types of writing (such as narrative, poetry, and other creative pieces) require a greater attention to content. Being clear about my expectations from the outset of a writing unit will give my students a better understanding of exactly what I hope them achieve and what constitutes writing for them. Considering this, the method of assessment I choose will need to be specifically tailored to meet the needs of the given writing assignment. Creating one standard rubric to assess every piece of writing does both a disservice to our students and ourselves as education professionals.

Appendix A: Graded Six Plus One Traits Rubric (Elizabeth)

Research Paper Rubric (150 points)

IDEAS/CONTENT (50%)

check some wordiness! sounds like your opinion

good examples and discussions, some quotes could be further explained/analyzed, and connected to topic

- Intro: General opening/truism, Background information, preview of body paragraphs, Thesis clearly stated
- Body: Body paragraphs developed, Clear topic sentences, Evidence to support, Logical development of facts, Thoroughness of research, Accuracy of research, Discussion of information, Three direct quotations, Four sources documented and cited, Objectivity sustained
- Concl: Logical conclusion to paper, Summarizes paper, Implications for the future

1 2 3 4 5 6

X 5 = 25

SENTENCE FLUENCY/STYLE (10%)

- Use of transitions
- Few awkward phrases
- Formal language
- Varied sentence structure

check some wordiness, lead-ins to quotes

1 2 3 4 5 6

X 1 = 4

ORGANIZATION (10%)

- Thesis at end of introduction
- Body paragraphs have topic sentences
- Body paragraphs have concluding sentences that match topic sentences
- Logical development of information
- Discussion follows examples

check some discussion

1 2 3 4 5 6

X 1 = 5

CONVENTIONS/GRAMMAR (20%)

- Contractions
- Pronoun agreement
- Subject-verb agreement
- Run-on sentences
- Sentence fragment
- Commas
- Abbreviations
- Possessives
- Capitalization
- Numbers
- Dates
- Semi-colons/colon
- Spelling

1 2 3 4 5 6

X 2 = 10

PRESENTATION/FORMAT (10%)

- MLA Heading
- Pagination
- Margins
- Works Cited Page**
- MLA Documentation
- Rough drafts/outline
- Pagination
- Titles
- Spacing

check errors

1 2 3 4 5 6

X 1 = 5

Overall Score: 49

X 1.5 =

POINTS:

94% A

*Paper must be submitted to Turnitin.com before student will receive the grade
 **Paper must have a Works Cited page to be accepted. (No Works Cited=Plagiarism)

- Excellent examples/analysis of quotes

- Check objectivity: some parts sound like opinions

Appendix B: Graded "Deconstructed" Six Plus One Traits Rubric (Dante)

Name: _____

ACL B Informational Research Paper

Ideas/Content 50%	2	3	4	5	6
Introduction is missing background information, preview of paragraphs and has no thesis .	Introduction is missing background information, preview of paragraphs, and has unclear thesis .	Introduction is missing both background information, preview of paragraphs and has clear thesis .	Introduction missing one background information, preview of paragraphs, and clear thesis .	Introduction contains relevant background information, preview of paragraphs, and clear thesis .	Introduction contains relevant background information, preview of paragraphs, and clear, strong thesis .
No body paragraphs are connected.	Few body paragraphs are connected.	Some body paragraphs are connected .	Most body paragraphs are well connected .	Most body paragraphs are very well connected .	All body paragraphs are very well connected .
Lead-in rarely sets the context for the quote.	Lead-in sometimes sets the context for the quote.	Lead-in often sets the context for the quote.	Lead-in mostly sets the context for the quote.	Lead-in always sets the context for the quote.	Lead-in always sets the context for the quote.
Very few quotes are used to reinforce the topic sentence. Many are missing .	Very few quotes are used to reinforce the topic sentence. Some are missing .	Some quotes are used effectively to reinforce the topic sentence.	Many quotes are used effectively to reinforce the topic sentence.	Most quotes are used effectively to reinforce the topic sentence.	All quotes are used effectively to reinforce the topic sentence.
Discussion often summarizes quote. Many missing lead-in/discussion.	Discussion sometimes summarizes quote. Many missing lead-in/discussion.	Discussion sometimes summarizes quote. Some missing lead-in/discussion.	Discussion interprets the quote or reinforces the topic sentence.	Discussion interprets the quote and reinforces the topic sentence.	Discussion interprets the quote and reinforces the topic sentence.
Research is inadequate and from 1 source .	Research is clear from 1 source .	Research is clear , thorough from 2 sources .	Research is clear , thorough and from 3 sources .	Research is clear , thorough, and from 4 or more sources .	Research is applied logically, thoroughly, and from 4 or more sources .
Conclusion missing .	Conclusion is off topic .	Conclusion successfully reviews paper content and lacks thesis or indication of continuing debate.	Conclusion unsuccessfully reviews paper content or lacks thesis or indication of continuing debate.	Conclusion successfully reviews thesis, paper content and ends by indicating a continuing debate.	Conclusion successfully reviews thesis, paper content and ends by indicating a continuing debate.
None of the paper maintains objectivity.	Very little of the paper maintains objectivity.	Some of the paper maintains objectivity.	Most of the paper maintains objectivity.	Most of the paper maintains objectivity.	Entire paper maintains objectivity.

Sentence Fluency/Style 10%

1	2	3	4	5	6
Transitions are not used effectively.	Transitions are used effectively at the beginning of some paragraphs.	Transitions are used effectively at the beginning of most paragraphs.	Transitions are used effectively at the beginning of all paragraphs.	Transitions are used effectively at the beginning of all paragraphs as well as within paragraphs.	Transitions are used highly effectively at the beginning of all paragraphs as well as within paragraphs.
Language is often choppy and informal.	Language is often choppy or informal.	Language is sometimes choppy or informal.	Language is mostly smooth and formal.	Language is mostly smooth and formal.	Language is always smooth and formal.
Sentence structure is awkward and repetitive.	Sentence structure is sometimes awkward and often repetitive.	Sentence structure is sometimes awkward and sometimes repetitive.	Sentence structure is mostly varied.	Sentence structure is mostly varied.	Sentence structure is varied.
Verb tense is often inconsistent.	Verb tense is often inconsistent.	Verb tense is sometimes inconsistent.	Verb tense is mostly consistent.	Verb tense is mostly consistent.	Verb tense is always consistent.

Organization 10%

1	2	3	4	5	6
Body paragraphs rarely follow the 8-sentence format.	Body paragraphs sometimes follow the 8-sentence format.	Body paragraphs mostly follow the 8-sentence format.	Body paragraphs are somewhat developed and follow the 8-sentence format.	Body paragraphs are well developed and follow the 8-sentence format.	Body paragraphs are very well developed and follow/ exceed the 8-sentence format.
Body paragraphs lack organization.	Some body paragraphs contain more than one pro/con or not clearly about a pro/con.	Some body paragraphs contain more than one pro/con or not clearly about a pro/con.	Each body paragraph contains only one pro/con.	Each body paragraph contains only one pro/con.	Each body paragraph contains only one pro/con.
All paragraphs have missing/ineffective concluding sentences and/or topic sentences.	Many paragraphs have missing/ ineffective concluding sentences and/or topic sentences.	Some paragraphs have missing/ ineffective concluding sentences and/or topic sentences.	All topic sentences are somewhat effective and have a matching concluding sentence.	Most topic sentences are highly effective and have a matching concluding sentence.	Every topic sentence is highly effective and has a matching concluding sentence.

Conventions 20%

1	2	3	4	5	6
Paper has surface errors in all paragraphs.	Paper has surface errors in 7 paragraphs.	Paper has surface errors in 5-6 paragraphs.	Paper has surface errors in 3-4 paragraphs.	Paper is mostly free of surface errors.	Paper is entirely free of surface errors.

Presentation/Format 10%

1	2	3	4	5	6
				Subtract one level for each item that is not 100% complete. **Works Cited Required	1 inch margins LastName 2 Correct header Double spaced Title Correct Documentation Works Cited title Works Cited entries

Works Cited

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