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# Why Do Teachers Give the Grades They Do?

SARAH WARSHAUER FREEDMAN

WE ALL KNOW the student who says, "I turned in this very same paper last year and got an A on it. Now you're going to give me a D?" Luckily, this student is a relatively rare one. First, most students rightfully fear the consequences of handing in a paper twice or at least feel too guilty to confront the teacher with such discrepancies. But, as Don Hirsch noted in his keynote address at the 1978 CCCC's meeting in Denver, more times than not, two or more teachers would give the same paper a different grade. But the good teacher does not grade purely on the basis of whimsy or idiosyncratic values either. In this article, I shall discuss composition evaluation from the point of view of that "good teacher." I shall report the results of a study<sup>1</sup> in which I asked the questions: (1) why do teachers give the grades they do? (2) are there any specific, definable parts of student papers that influence teachers? (3) and if there are, which of the parts influence teachers most?

To find answers to these questions, I rewrote student papers to be weak or strong in four broad, but pedagogically interesting, areas: content, organization, sentence structure, and mechanics. Then teachers judged the overall quality of the rewritten papers. The teachers did not know I had tampered with the papers. I found that specific, definable parts of the student paper did influence these teachers. They valued content first and then organization. They also valued mechanics, but not as much as they did content and organization. Interestingly, they cared more about mechanics, proper

punctuation, and the like than about the quality of the structure of the sentences. They valued mechanics most, though, when the organization was strong, and they valued sentence structure only when the organization was strong, and they valued sentence structure only when the organization was strong. The effect of weak content was so powerful that it made nothing else matter.

Now, for all of these results to be meaningful, I must go back and explain a bit about how I got them. First, what specifically do I mean by these broad areas: content, organization, sentence structure, and mechanics? Rhetoric texts certainly conflict in their definitions, and we all know that mechanics play a big part in sentence structure. I will briefly summarize the definitions for the categories, the definitions which formed the basis for the rules for rewriting the student papers. Briefly, content was the development of, and logical consistency between, the ideas. It had nothing to do with the absolute quality of the ideas. To rewrite content to be strong, I took the core ideas the student had and tried to develop them into something that seemed logical. So when I say good teachers valued content most of all, I mean that they valued the development and the logical presentation of the ideas, not necessarily the ideas themselves.

Organization had three main parts: order, transitioning, and paragraphing. Sentence structure focused on matters of form particular to the sentence level; mechanics focused on the pickiest items of usage and punctuation. I tried to define each of the areas in a way that would make it discrete from, or independent of, every other area.

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on parts of my doctoral dissertation, *Influences on the Evaluators of Student Writing*, Stanford University, 1977.

I chose the papers that I would rewrite from a set of papers I collected for another, earlier study.<sup>2</sup> For that study I collected papers from a varied population of college students, papers the students wrote in class on eight different topics in the argumentative mode of discourse. Two Stanford students and I rewrote four of the papers on each topic, 32 papers in all. We selected for the rewriting the four essays that had already been judged in the earlier study to be in the middle of the quality range. We wanted papers that we could make better and worse, so we needed mid-range papers. When I had the teachers judge the rewritten papers, I stuck in four non-rewritten papers on each topic to test their reliability. The teachers proved to be the good judges I thought they would be.

After I trained the two student rewriters to follow my set of rewriting guides, I divided up the rewriting task between the three of us in as balanced a way as I could. We rewrote each of the 32 papers in three different versions each. In all, there were 12 possible ways a given paper could be rewritten, and each of the ways or versions was represented once on each topic. The 12 possible rewriting versions were these:

- |     |    |    |     |    |
|-----|----|----|-----|----|
| 1.  | +C | +O | +SS | +M |
| 2.  | +C | +O | +SS | -M |
| 3.  | +C | +O | -SS | +M |
| 4.  | +C | +O | -SS | -M |
| 5.  | +C | -O | +SS | +M |
| 6.  | +C | -O | +SS | -M |
| 7.  | +C | -O | -SS | +M |
| 8.  | +C | -O | -SS | -M |
| 9.  | -C | -O | +SS | +M |
| 10. | -C | -O | +SS | -M |
| 11. | -C | -O | -SS | +M |
| 12. | -C | -O | -SS | -M |

C = Content  
 O = Organization  
 SS = Sentence Structure  
 M = Mechanics

+ = Strong  
 - = Weak

In the end, we had 96 rewritten papers. We simultaneously rewrote all four areas—content, organization, sentence structure, and mechanics—on every paper. The rewriting task posed one major restriction: we never combined weak content and strong organization. It would have been an exercise in absurdity to try to order illogical ideas logically or to order and transition appropriately a group of inherently unrelated ideas.

When we rewrote, we were committed to creating a revised paper that retained, insofar as possible, the sense of the original student essay, the one that was the base from which we rewrote. We attempted to highlight the strengths and weaknesses in each of the four areas in each paper. Nevertheless, the act of highlighting often produced a new paper that was substantially unlike the original. Still the rewritten papers were like the papers real students actually produced. We rewrote papers to be very strong or very weak in each of the four areas, but these extremes were meant to reflect the extremes of the papers students produce.

After we finished all of the rewriting, I chose twelve teachers who were good evaluators. I used three main criteria to insure that they would indeed be good evaluators: strong professional recommendations, successful college-level teaching experience, and strong academic preparation. I divided the teachers into four reading groups of three teachers each. Each group rated essays on two of the eight topics. I trained the groups of teachers to judge essays on both topics the group would judge with training essays that I had used in the earlier study. I chose the training essays because they represented the quality of the essays students actually wrote for the earlier study.

The evaluations took place on four consecutive days. One group of three teachers rated essays on two of the eight

<sup>2</sup>The results of the earlier study are also contained in my dissertation.

topics on the first day; a second group of three teachers rated essays on another two of the eight topics on the second day, and so on. I informed each group of evaluators that college students had produced the essays, concealing from them the fact that some essays had been rewritten. All essays were typed. The teachers rated the essays using a four-point holistic scale.

I used an analysis of variance to measure whether the rewriting characteristics contributed significantly to the difference in the scores the raters gave to the different papers. As I revealed earlier, content proved to have the greatest influence on the scores the raters gave. If the content was strong, the score was high; if it was weak, the score was low. Content was significant at the .001 level of confidence. The quality of the organization likewise affected the scores; it too was significant at the .001 level. Mechanics proved significant only at the .01 level.

The difference between the average score given papers strong in content versus the average score given papers weak in content was 1.06 points. The maximum possible difference between a score was 3 points, since 4 was the highest score, and 1 was the lowest score a paper could receive on the 1-to-4 holistic scale. Thus, an average difference of over 1 point is quite large. Strong versus weak rewriting in organization also led to an average score difference of about 1 point. The effect of mechanics and sentence structure rewriting was about  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{1}{4}$  point, respectively.

Remember also that mechanics and sentence structure affected teachers mostly after the teachers assessed that the organization was strong. If the organization was strong, the mechanics rewriting caused almost an entire point difference between the average score of a paper with strong mechanics versus one with weak mechanics. In the same situation, sentence structure rewriting

caused about a  $\frac{1}{2}$  point difference. But if the organization was weak, the quality of the mechanics and of the sentence structure did not matter to the teacher. Remember from the rewriting combinations that when the content was weak, so was the organization. In such cases, mechanics and sentence structure had little effect. But when the content was strong, the organization too had to be strong in order for the strength or weakness of the mechanics and of the sentence structure to affect these teachers.

In summary, the rewriting showed that parts of the paper did influence the grade that the teachers gave. The most significant influence proved to be the strength of the content of the essay. The second most important influence proved to be the strength of the organization of that content. The third significant influence was the strength of the mechanics. Furthermore, the influence of the mechanics was most important when the organization was strong, and because the sentence structure alone was insignificant, the influence of the sentence structure was important only when the organization was strong.

What are the implications of these findings? Most important, if society values content and organization as much as the teachers in this project did, then according to the definitions of content and organization I used in this study, a pedagogy for teaching writing should aim first to help students develop their ideas logically, being sensitive to the appropriate amount of explanation necessary for the audience. Then it should focus on teaching students to organize the developed ideas so that they would be easily understood and favorably evaluated. The interaction between organization and mechanics and organization and sentence structure, showing that the quality of the mechanics and sentence structure matter most when the organization is strong, points even more strongly to a pedagogy aimed at teaching the

skills of organization before, or at least alongside, those of mechanics and sentence structure.

It seems today that many college-level curricula begin with a focus on helping students correct mechanical and syntactic problems rather than with the more fundamental aspects of the discourse. It is important to supplement these curricula for teaching content and organization. Certainly, because of the excellent research in the area of written sentence structure, on sentence-combining, and on the cumulative sentence and because of the objective nature of the mechanical rules for standard edited English, sentence structure and mechanics have become easier to teach than content and organization. The English profession knows more about teaching, evaluating, and doing research on sentence structure and mechanics than on the less objective areas of content and organization. Con-

ceivably, instruction in strengthening sentence structure or mechanics could result in strong content or organization. But such a hypothesis has not been tested.

Discoveries about why teachers evaluate papers as they do can contribute to a set of definitions of what influences teachers as they evaluate student writing. These definitions, then, can be examined critically, and those criteria of good writing that seem sound can be incorporated into pedagogy and into training evaluators of student writing. One of the first steps in improving the evaluation and teaching of student writing is understanding why teachers evaluate as they do.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>See my forthcoming article "How Characteristics of Student Essays Influence Evaluators," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71 (June, 1979).



## *New Editor of CCC*

Richard L. Larson, of the Herbert H. Lehman College, CUNY, has been selected as the new editor of *College Composition and Communication*. The first issue for which he will be responsible is the February 1980 number. But since the present editor has enough copy to fill his remaining issues in 1979, contributors should now address questions and manuscripts to Professor Larson at his home address (30 Greenridge Avenue, Apt. 5-M, White Plains, NY 10605). An announcement of any changes that the new editor decides to make in the editorial needs of the journal will appear in the masthead of the October 1979 issue. For now, however, contributors should be guided by the description of editorial needs in the present issue of *CCC*.