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A Resource for Grading Academic Writing

Third Edition

With Downloadable Access to the MCT
Comment Archive for Grading Research Papers

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Introduction to the Annotated Comment Archive

This text, with a research paper comment archive that is available for download, has two potential purposes. One is to supplement my three-volume *Advanced Academic Writing* series, also published by Royal Fireworks Press, and the other is to offer a stand-alone resource for grading student papers.

Even the most successful teacher knows how it feels to work hard and come up short. As teachers, we often succeed, but we also sometimes form ambitious plans for student learning, only to find that for some reason—which we often cannot identify—our wonderful plan fails. We can be in denial about this outcome: the students do not care, the parents do not supervise at home…there are ways to avoid the ugly truth. In the end, however, we sit staring at the fact that does not die: our strategy did not work. We know, grimly, that if we use the same strategy again next year, it will fail again.

Some forty years ago (hence the title of this book), I found myself in the gray clutch of such a gruesome fact. I was teaching high school and devoting serious classroom time to advanced academic writing—research papers, to be specific—and getting *nowhere*. We were going through all the standard motions, but we were the writing dead, stumbling and groaning from deadline to deadline, and all of us—me included—despised the entire process. When it finally ended, not with a bang but a whimper, all of us were glad. After mountains of work, the students still did not produce impressive academic papers; they still did not feel that they knew what to do, they still did not see the point, and they hoped they would not have to write another. This was not what I had hoped for at all.

I was more frustrated than the students were. I cared. I knew it was important. I had tried everything, and I did not know what was wrong. I had tried numerical point systems, busy rubrics, and trendy student-centered writing projects. I had gone to workshops; I had assigned journals; I had stood on my head. I had tried to let students pick their own topics without restriction. I had tried breaking the paper assignments down into a long series of simpler deadlines—a deadline for each component of the process (thesis, note cards, bibliography cards, outline, rough draft, second rough draft, final paper, revision of final paper, *ad nauseam*). I had lectured and threatened and stomped and steamed. No soap. Oddly, every other part of the course went well, and we all liked one another; chemistry was not the problem.

The problem was my process. I needed a different strategy. I needed a strategy strong enough to change my students, who were nowhere near ready to write academic research papers, into

academic writers. I needed a strategy that created writers, not one that had us going through the wasted motions of fleeting units and flurried activities.

The Students

My students were not the cause of the problem. The students I was teaching had much in common with millions of other students. They did not have the foundation that they needed for academic writing. As a group they had characteristics that many teachers will recognize. They had studied grammar in previous years, but the study had been partial and sporadic, not imparting the comprehensive four-level command (parts of speech, parts of sentence, phrases, and clauses) that enables students to avoid bad grammar or to punctuate grammar correctly. They had studied grammar but had not learned it. They had done stacks of writing, but the bulk of the writing they had done was in informal genres such as journals, opinion responses, and short stories, leaving them clueless about the expectations, standards, and style of academic writing. Repeatedly, their writing practices (gag me with a *prompt*) had been of the personal response type on hollow topics that anyone can write about, in first person, without knowledge. They had written often but had not written standard English—what we once thought of as *normal school writing*.

They also had studied vocabulary, but the words they had studied had been random and idiosyncratic, had been presented as self-contained vocabulary worksheets, and had not been reinforced by strong literature containing those words because their primary reading experience had been textbooks from which such words were methodically removed by sales-minded publishers. The age-graded vocabulary program had been dumbed-down—gutted—and hundreds of basic words necessary to the appreciation of even children's classics (*Peter Pan*, *The Wind in the Willows*) were deferred to higher grade levels. Students had studied word lists but had read wordless textbooks. Their literature had consisted of short excerpts in literature anthologies, supplemented by a few low-vocabulary classics such as *The Old Man and the Sea*. They had never read strong, long, non-textbook nonfiction, which was the genre I asked them to write in their research papers. They had visited the school library but had never mastered the library or learned how to read or take notes from academic sources. In short, the students were not ready to write academic papers, nor were they close; they had neither written nor even read the kind of language I wanted in my annual research paper assignment. They simply did not know what it was, did not know what it sounded like, did not know what I wanted, had no experience of it. Their entire reading lives had been only schooly, never scholarly. Not until I became realistic about the unacademic school lives of the students did I perceive the nature of a writing program that would transform them.

Without belaboring the trial-and-error saga that led to a solution, let me just say that after years of teaching academic writing in middle school and high school English and history courses (I taught both at different times), I finally arrived at a method that works. It is not effortless, but it is a winner. It makes an academic writer of every student in the class. If you as the teacher know academic grammar and punctuation rules, if you can type well, and if you have a computer that can open two word processing documents at one time, letting you copy from one document and paste into the other, then you, too, can do this.

I should have known, but I did not, that the solution would be simple—simpler than any of the failures. Simple enough to make the truth clear to the students. Simple enough to be right in front of my nose all along. Simple enough to shed the pedantic for the authentic, to be something any real writer would recognize. Simple enough to be hard work without being busywork, either for me or for the students.

To solve the problem of teaching my students to write good academic papers, I had to change four things. First, I had to implement a thorough four-level grammar review in the first weeks of school, followed by a review of the grammar-based punctuation rules required in academic English. Any grammar strategy that did not present clauses until the spring was useless to me; the students would need the grammar to write good papers during the year. Second, I had to upgrade the quality and quantity of the literature they were reading, both fiction and nonfiction. Third, I had to give up the expectation that I could transform the students with only one major research paper. And fourth, I had to change the way I was grading.

I will not here elaborate the grammar strategy because that is the subject of my grammar texts, nor will I go into detail about the writing assignments and the content of the instruction because that is already available in the *Advanced Academic Writing* series. My approach to literature has been described in *Classics in the Classroom*. What I will discuss here, briefly, is the multiple paper strategy and then, more elaborately, the grading method that is the purpose of this text.

The Strategy: One Paper Is Not Enough

When my first efforts to teach academic writing did not succeed, I did the logical thing: I allotted more time to the research paper, dividing it into more logical steps and expanding the complexity. The more I broke it down and increased the time I was spending on details, the worse things got. Trying to get the students to see the forest, I was adding trees. After years of frustration, I realized what should have been obvious all along. Academic writing is too complicated to learn in one pass; students cannot do it once and get good, and it does not matter how much class

time you throw at a one-paper plan. To master academic writing, students need to do the whole process, and then do the whole process again, and then do the whole process again, and again.

I had to change my model from a single massive paper with ten different deadlines to a college-style program of multiple short papers with single deadlines. The only deadline would be for the paper itself, just like in college. In high school I had learned to do note cards, bibliography cards, outlines, rough drafts, final drafts, and revisions; in college no professor had ever asked me for cards or outlines or rough drafts; they only wanted the paper, when it was due, and there were no rewrites. You had only one chance.

I also realized that students could learn from short papers. My experience showed that students made the same mistakes in a three-page paper that they made in a ten- or fifteen-page paper. I realized that just because I did not have deadlines for the thesis and notes and outlines and rough drafts, that did not mean that I could not teach (some of) those things or help students during those phases. I would be supportive and available, but I would not expect those to be turned in or graded. I realized that some of the impedimenta of the orthodox method were no longer necessary or appropriate in an era of computers in which word processors have outline processors built into the software.

I also thought about what the students would experience by having to do the entire process again and then again. For the second paper, it would no longer be their first time researching legitimate sources; it would no longer be the first time they had read long academic nonfiction; it would no longer be the first time they had tried to find quotations or wrestle their information into an essay structure. It would be their second time, and then their third time, and their fourth time, and each time the strangeness would diminish. Each time the extraordinary would become ordinary. Each time the students would find more of the process obvious and would turn their attention to new aspects of it.

As it turned out, four short papers, connected to the course content, in MLA format, did not absorb more class time than the one-paper method I had been using. I now had four deadlines instead of seven deadlines. Grading rough drafts then had taken longer than grading a second paper now. Grading revisions then took as long as grading a third paper now. Four weekends a year, I had to grade term papers. The effect on my course calendar was negligible, but the students were getting four full cycles instead of one.

What to Do

What I had been doing for years was reading each paper carefully, handwriting whatever marks and point deductions I was using at the time in the margins, and writing extensive comments in the margins and on the back of the paper. This method was messy, unimpressive, time-consuming, and disagreeable. When I handed the papers back, I felt apologetic and embarrassed about the appearance of the papers. The handwriting was a problem in many ways; it took up too much space and limited what I was able to say. I was turning the paper this way and that way to scribble in the margins. The result neither looked nor felt professional.

I needed a method that was more professional, and I wanted to say much more much faster. I wanted not only to mark the errors but to *explain* them. During a period of years, I solved the problem. First, I replaced the point systems with four-level assessment, making the grade logical and valid and understandable. Second, I replaced my extensive handwritten comments in the margins and on the back of the paper with a letter to the student that I typed (I can type much faster than I can handwrite) and stapled to the front of the student's paper. Third, I realized that I was explaining the exact same problems repeatedly—what a run-on sentence is, what a misplaced modifier is, how to do the MLA margins, how to punctuate the parenthetical documentation for a short quotation—and that by using a computer I not only could save time by typing instead of handwriting, I could save massive amounts of time by saving those comments I typed most often into an archive so that the next time I found, say, a run-on sentence error, I could just copy the explanation from the comment archive and paste it into my letter to the student. That was *really* fast.

A comment archive. For years, as I worked on stack after stack of student papers, I built up my archive of comments. Often I would revise a comment to include a new twist or to improve the wording or to include another example. Eventually, I amassed an archive of comments that allowed me to do a quick copy and paste for dozens and dozens of standard errors. This enabled me to grade the student papers much more rapidly, with much less frustration, and with a major increase in feedback to each student. With the power of the archive, I could give a student two or more pages of feedback, explaining most of the errors that appeared in the paper. When I gave the papers back to the students, they respected the work and attention that I had devoted to their papers, and their parents became intensely supportive of the process.

The computer archive changed everything. Suddenly, I could comment extensively but rapidly. Suddenly, we were all on the same page. Instead of getting messy, unprofessional papers with ambiguous and incomplete comments back, the students were getting personal, positive,

encouraging, typed letters filled with clear explanations of their errors. They were getting a simple grading calculus that made sense. They could see that every detail was directed to their future thinking about writing. They could see that the process was as much work for me as it was for them. No longer did I receive complaints from students or parents about a grade that they felt was unjust.

Part of the key is the personal and positive nature of the comments. Every letter is positive. In fact, the worse the problems of the paper, the more important it is to be positive and to tell the student that despite the problems of the paper, there are clear indications that the student will be writing excellent papers soon. I make it a rule never to scold, never to condemn, but always to explain that the errors in the paper do not indicate the student's potential. Even a bad paper can have impressive achievements, and I make a point to find those and comment on them.

Notice how the comments in the archive were created: as responses to student errors on student papers. The archive is a kind of reality check, a database that surveys the landscape of real student writing problems.

A typical letter to a student will have the following elements:
- The number grade at the top, calculated with four-level assessment
- The student's name
- A positive introduction admiring the good achievements
- Explanations of errors and achievements, most pasted from the archive
- A conclusion with appreciation and encouragement for the next paper

In a school year students will do four research papers, one per quarter; they will go through the complete process four times. The result is that by the fourth quarter my students are writing better research papers than I had ever seen using the old single-paper methods, and they have done enough of them that they no longer think it is a big deal. They use it to learn deeply about good topics, and they feel proud of their work.

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Maya,

Thank you for this outstanding paper on negative indignation as a theme in Jane Austen's novels. The fact that you developed that term yourself is impressive—an indication of your depth of reading. Your argument is clearly structured and tight; I did not see a wasted paragraph or even an unnecessary sentence. Your quotations are superb, particularly the long quote from *Pride and Prejudice*. I should also add that your English is very good; I only found one grammar error and two punctuation errors. You adhered well to the MLA format standards. This is an excellent paper—much better than the first one—and it makes me eager to see what you will do with your third paper after the holiday. Congratulations on your writing, and let us look at a few issues that do need improvement.

Space correctly in documentation.
Space correctly before parenthetical notes for long and short quotations. My # mark means that you have made a spacing error in a parenthetical documentary note. Remember that spaces are language objects, just as letters are. You have to get them right. When you use a short quotation, first give the quotation in quotation marks, and skip a single space before the documentary note "like this" (Thompson 78). Do not omit the space "like this"(Thompson 78) or put two spaces "like this" (Thompson 78). See the difference?

> For long quotations place a space after the period at the end of the quotation before you type the documentary note, like this. (Thompson 78)

Avoid using *this* as the subject of the verb. (ref)
Please avoid using the demonstrative pronoun *this* as the subject of a sentence. Use *this* as an adjective, referring to this idea, this policy, this poem. When you just write, for example, "This altered everything," there is almost always ambiguity, leaving readers to wonder precisely what *this* is referring to.

Do not forget the list comma.
Remember the list comma before the coordinating conjunction. When you are listing items of three or more, please use a comma between all items, including before the coordinating conjunction that precedes the final item. Write that life is "nasty, brutish, and short," not that it is "nasty, brutish and short."
Some style manuals allow you to drop that final comma, but I prefer that you retain it. If you do not retain the list comma, then you lose the ability to distinguish between writing that the woods are "lovely, dark and deep" and writing that the woods are "lovely, dark, and deep." The first version means that the dark depth is lovely, but the second version means that the woods are three things. Commas change meanings.
Notice that two items do not make a list; they make a compound, which does not require a comma.

The Comment Archive

In this section I present each comment that appears in the downloadable comment archive, and I comment on the comments. I have organized my comments into categories, grouping all of the MLA formatting comments together, all of the grammar comments together, all of the punctuation comments together, and so forth. I only created a comment when I encountered the same problem repeatedly. If the problem was unusual, I would simply type out the comment spontaneously, but when the problem was one that afflicted numerous students in every stack of papers, and I was having to recompose comments on the same problem repeatedly, that is when I would save a comment. The archive as a whole, therefore, represents a kind of map of the errors that students make. It is battle-tested.

My general grading process is to read each paper carefully and use standard proofreading marks to indicate the presence of problems and errors, as well as to write quick marginal comments, later expanded in the typed letter, to reinforce and acknowledge achievements. Then I type out a letter of comments and staple it to the student's paper.

Affectively, I want the students to feel proud of any achievement and to realize that I actually admire it. As for problems, I always feel that the worse the problem, the more important it is that I approach from the positive side, indicating that though there are issues, there is nothing that we (WE) cannot solve together.

I found that I must reset my mind before each paper. I will finish one paper, have a sip of cold water, put aside any feelings of weariness or frustration I might feel after grading for five hours, clear my thoughts, and consciously start myself looking forward to the next paper with high expectations and as good a mood as I can muster. This stoic/Zen approach makes a big difference. It is easy, when you are reading your twenty-seventh paper and you encounter yet another run-on sentence or subject/verb disagreement, to feel (unfairly) that you just got through telling this student not to do those things. The fact that it was not this student does not always matter, so there is a sort of serene maturity that you must activate when you grade important student papers. You want to approach each new student with the same high expectations, fresh mind, and fair attitude.

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Chloe,

I really enjoyed your paper on Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Caravaggio is one of those artists who can be neglected in a quick or introductory scan of major artists such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Picasso, and others, and yet Caravaggio appears to have had a shocking level of genius—one that he never fully controlled. Caravaggio's wild and often violent personal life seems in brutal juxtaposition with the power of his artistic vision, and I think that you have made that paradox especially clear. You proofread the basic grammar and punctuation errors out of your paper, and you adhered perfectly to the MLA standards; I only found one small mistake in your Works Cited page. What you have not yet mastered is essay structure and function, as well as the nuances of paragraph continuity, and I think this means that your next paper will be superb. Let us look at a few of these details.

The paragraphs in an essay should be real. Group your sentences into real paragraphs. The paragraph symbol ¶ indicates the location of paragraph problems in your paper. In organized, advanced thinking such as an essay, you cannot let your ideas wander back and forth randomly. The ideas have to be collected into a simple, comprehensible structure that someone, including you yourself, can understand. Sentences have to be separated into clear paragraphs. A paragraph is a group of sentences all about ONE THING. All of the sentences might describe an event in time order. They might explain a thought in logical order. They might present a conclusion by proceeding from concrete to abstract. But the sentences of a paragraph must be ordered, and they must belong together in the same place. If you are discussing the theme of man versus woman in Sophocles's *Antigone* in a paragraph, then you may not include the conflict between the brothers Eteocles and Polyneices in the same paragraph because that conflict is not about man versus woman. Separate your sentences into the paragraphs in which they belong.

Focus your essay on the thesis with microlanguage. The thesis of this paper is not focused enough or easy enough to follow. I had to look back over the paper after I finished reading it in order to remember and retrace the ideas. Remember that a thesis essay must be a self-focusing instrument; you must construct it so that it is clearly focused on the thesis. Readers must not be given the task of figuring out how things are related to one another; that is your responsibility. One of the best ways to focus is to use key thesis language—a microlanguage: two or three key thesis words that you continually repeat and emphasize throughout the paper. If your thesis is that Euripides was a philanthropic pacifist, then you should explicitly express the topics of the paragraphs in terms of how they demonstrate that Euripides was *philanthropic* or how he was a *pacifist*. Those two words should keep reappearing. They should appear in the title, in the introduction, in the sections of the body, and in the conclusion. Every paragraph should have such a thread tying it to the central thesis.

Comments about MLA Format

Your MLA details are excellent.

Your Works Cited page is excellent.

Use a different font for your paper, such as Times New Roman.

Double-space your entire paper.

Avoid widows and orphans.

Minimize your use of hyphens.

Indent properly.

Follow the MLA margin rules.

Use a ragged right margin, not a justified margin.

Follow the instructions for your header.

Follow the MLA rules for the title.

Format long quotations correctly.

Indicate mistakes in quotations. [sic]

Put an MLA parenthetical after each quotation.

You may document poems with line numbers.

Understand how documentation works.

Format the Works Cited page correctly.

Construct your Works Cited title correctly.

Use *et al.* for multiple authors.

Document editors correctly.

Abbreviate common elements in publishers' names.

My choice of the available research paper formats has always been the MLA method, created by the Modern Language Association and documented by the *MLA Handbook*. It is the simplest and easiest to learn and set up for beginners, and it is a form of knowledge itself because it is the most widely used research format in the world, used by more high schools and universities than any other. We should adhere exactly to the MLA method without introducing any personal variations—we should do it by the book.

MLA

Your MLA details are excellent.

I appreciate the excellent job you have done of following the MLA format. Your title page, your documentary technique, your margins and spacing, and your Works Cited listings all show advanced attention to detail. This gives me, as a reader, more time to spend thinking about your ideas.

When everything is right, I use this comment to summarize the student's accomplishment, leaving me more time to help the student with problems. It is no mean feat for a student to get all of the MLA details right; MLA might be the easiest of the major research formats to use, but that does not mean that it is easy for a student who is encountering it for the first time.

A core concept here is the nature of standards. Students today do not grow up in an environment of inflexible standards; they grow up in a culture of informal flexibility and personal preference. It can be a shock to them to realize that they are not entitled to any personal preference about research paper standards; everything must be by the book: the margins, the documentation, the line spacing, the title information—everything. So part of the experience is the cultural shockwave that hits students who have never had to internalize and apply a complex system of standards. In other words, it is outstanding training.

MLA