Grading in First-Year Writing Online
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Online first-year writing instruction is an opportunity for us to rethink the way we assess student writing and provide feedback. Although it sounds contradictory, **flexibility and methodical scaffolding are the two most important takeaways from scholarship on teaching writing online and the ENWR instructor survey**. We have to be more flexible about assignments, deadlines, and the methods through which we provide feedback. We also have to ensure that the syllabus and assignment prompts are so detailed and explicit that they preemptively answer questions students may have.

Assignment prompts must include clear and precise directions. Asking students to "write briefly" about something, for example, will result in students questioning what "briefly" really means. Specify a word, paragraph, or page count. Explain the assignment step-by-step in writing. Additionally, consider recording a video to explain the steps in more detail and address potential questions. Be sure to inform students how the assignment should be turned in virtually. Be flexible about deadlines. Remember that students may be in different time zones and/or experiencing distress as a result of the pandemic.

Offer students clear and concise criteria for assessment in the form of rubrics that they can examine while working. Provide models of assignments and dedicate class time to discussing the model's best and worst features. The latter will help students develop their own ideas, particularly students who are unfamiliar with the type of assignment.

In terms of assignments, scholars recommend incorporating a number of formative assessments (assessments that ask students to reflect on their learning process), which will prompt learners to recognize what concepts they understand and what concepts they still struggle with. **In an online setting, formative assessments are particularly useful because they will give instructors a sense of student needs despite fewer opportunities for speaking with them.** Formative assessments could include short reflection paragraphs at the end of essays, reflection narratives, as well as anonymous surveys.

As for summative assessments (assessments that evaluate learning and comprehension), be aware that students will have limited access to research materials and possibly limited access to computers or Wi-Fi. Consider providing multiple options for fulfilling an assignment, including creative options, so that students can complete it in a way that works best for them. Alternatively, consider having students complete small assignments that build into a larger project. It is probably best to keep assignments short because the shift to online instruction may result in more writing.

Since synchronous meetings may be difficult to arrange, it is important to provide extensive written feedback. All of the things we would normally say to students during class or meetings have to be written now. **In addition to written feedback, consider recording video or audio feedback on student writing. Studies show audio feedback helps non-native English-speaking students in online courses.**

With all this in mind, I would recommend ENWR instructors **consider adopting contract or specifications grading in their online courses.** Contract or specifications grading can take

different forms, but the basic idea is that the assignments are graded on a satisfactory or unsatisfactory scale, with students earning or not earning the credit for the assignment depending on whether their work meets the requirements laid out in the prompt. Contract or specifications grading will not only address all the suggestions above, but it will help us rethink our learning outcomes. With contract or specifications grading, "the writing becomes," as Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow describe, "what's at stake, not so much the grade." It is also proven to motivate students, reduce student anxiety and stress, promote retention of written feedback, minimize teacher-student conflict, and reduce the time instructors spend grading. Especially considering the difficulties both students and instructors may face in the coming year, contract or specifications grading seems like an advantageous approach to assessing student writing and providing feedback.

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