

Improving Student Writing Skills

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Working with students to improve their writing skills can be frustrating and time consuming for both student and instructor. In a Forest Pathology course I use weekly, short (< 2 page) writing assignments to develop student learning skills and to reinforce major concepts. For example, students are asked to describe one diseased specimen for a student who missed the lab. As students become more comfortable with writing, the assignments focus on active writing and on structuring short writings. Two takehome exams and a review paper provide further opportunities for students to improve writing.

One of the major keys to getting students to work at writing is the somewhat subjective grading rubric. This rubric eliminates the need to grade each assignment with a "fine-toothed comb" and allows for more subjective feedback. Students can focus more on what they have to say, and less on how to say it. During labs, I meet with students for a few minutes to give them individual feedback, and provide specific examples of stronger writing. This is especially important for students whose native language is not English.

Working with students to improve their writing skills is a noble cause, but can be fraught with frustration for both student and instructor. In my forest pathology course, which is designated as a writing intensive course, many of the activities are aimed at improving student writing. I offer some ideas that have worked for me. And I'm still looking for to improve them.

Weekly writing assignments

Each week students complete a short writing assignment. The assignments allow students to delve deeper into the current topic and to write about their knowledge. See the examples provided.

Assigning a point value (0-10) consistently was difficult. To be honest, grading often became a "gestalt" process. This was not fair to the students, and required me to be overly meticulous. Eventually, I realized that the final grade was not terribly sensitive to the writing scores. Then why be so picky? I now use a system where a student gets one of 3 scores for each assignment: This rubric makes grading much easier, as there is no need to find and count errors – it facilitates an overall assessment. Students seem to react better to it, because they don't perceive that they are "penalized" for mistakes – they can focus on their writing. Writing scores are used to adjust final grades upward or downward, if necessary.

Weekly Writing Grading Rubric

- + good writing
- 0 good effort but writing needs improvement
- more effort is needed

Writing Assignment 1

This assignment should be no more than two (2) pages, double spaced, and typed or printed. What disease do you think of when we mention forest disease? How does your disease affect the tree? How do you recognize the disease? What causes this disease? You do not need to know the name of it, just describe it well and do your best. Think back to a time before you took this class. Try to write descriptively. Paint pictures. Make this exercise fun!

Writing Assignment 2

This assignment should be no more than two (2) pages, double spaced, and typed or printed. Based upon today's lecture, write one question which you still have about a root disease. Discuss how you would go about finding an answer to the question, then do it and answer your question. Use active writing - avoid the dreaded "be" verbs! [Examples of things to avoid](#)

Exams

In Forest Pathology, I assign take home exams to cover the lecture part of the course. These usually consist of 5-7 questions that require background presented in class, and an understanding of the subject gained from discussion or from research into the topic. Students may omit at least one question, sometimes two, but if they answer all, the lowest score is dropped. Each answer is limited to two pages. Grammar, spelling and writing are part of the grade.

Last year I noticed that some students submitted loosely organized collections of factoids. This year I am emphasizing organization. Not sure yet how effective that will be.

Regrade Policy

I use the following regrade policy to promote good writing.

"Aside from math errors, all requests for regrades on exams must be in writing. You should present a concise and effective argument for receiving more credit. Cite appropriate sources for the facts you present. Spell- and grammar-check your writing, as a poorly written document suggests that your request is not serious."

This policy causes students to think about their answer before "complaining." Students who have requested a regrade are almost always given more credit because they have researched the question and made a convincing argument. I'll bet they have learned more too!

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Take Home Exam 1

Please answer any 4 of 6 questions. Your answers should be typed, spell-checked, and grammar-checked. You may answer 5 and I will drop your lowest score.

Your answers are limited to two pages. That does not mean that you must fill two pages; it means that you have two pages in which to answer the question. Think about your answers. Research your key points. Most of the information will not be in your notes. You may find yourself reading and trying to understand a new disease system. You may use any resources, the class web site, text books, scientific literature— anything except your classmates – in answering these questions. Organize your key points, and then present them in a coherent, concise argument. Tell me the story.

If you have questions about a question, ask it in class or post it to the discussion area of the class web site, so that everyone may benefit from your question and my response.

Your answers will be worth 25 points each and graded as follows:

- _____ out of 5 Clarity in writing, spelling, grammar
- _____ out of 5 Organization of content
- _____ out of 15 Pathological content



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