

HANDLING THE PAPER LOAD

The kind of patient work that goes into devising appropriate writing assignments and responding to them intelligently does take more time than other kinds of teaching. But it need not pose impossible burdens. And some work that faculty undertake with the best intentions is actually counter-productive to the goals of improving student writing and thinking. Here are some common myths about teaching writing-intensive courses and explanations of what research shows to be effective.

myth: Conscientious teaching requires marking all grammar and language errors.

Research shows that **students can catch more than 60% of their own errors if they are taught to proof-read** and held to appropriate standards of correctness. By marking every error, we actually train our students to rely on us as copy-editors. Teachers may instead

- mark errors on the first page only.
- mark representative errors.
- place checks in the margins where errors occur.
- quickly scan papers and return error-laden essays for proofreading and correction.
- use software to scan student writing for error. (This requires awareness of the software's limitations.)
- create peer editing groups in their classes.



myth: Teachers need to read everything that students write.

Research shows that having students write for brief periods at the beginning or end of a class helps them focus or achieve closure. When discussion lags or reaches an impasse, students can be asked to write out a response to share. Students can bring to class written questions to stimulate discussion or definitions of key terms to debate. This kind of **informal writing need not even be collected. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion and encourage active engagement with the material.**



myth: More response is better.

Research shows that students are often overwhelmed and paralyzed when they receive essays on which the instructor's comments trail into every margin and leave a depressing map of error and negative response. Even when response is positive, saying too much is often confusing. It is better to **choose two or three elements of the essay to focus on, giving highly specific constructive advice or commentary**, than to attempt to cover all possible areas of concern.

myth: Teachers need to evaluate every piece of writing they collect.

Research shows that **non-evaluated assignments can work well and even be the most frequent type of writing used in a WI class.** For example, journals and informal writings, if collected, can be evaluated using a "minimal marking" scheme (i.e., points for completing the assignment plus extra points or a "+" for an insightful response). Or students can be awarded credit for the number of entries submitted, and they can single out a limited number of these for closer scrutiny, grading, and response.



myth: Requiring two drafts of an essay doubles the work.

Research shows that **students usually attend to comments only when they are given a chance to revise.** Otherwise, they are likely to give a one-minute glance to the remarks you spent twenty minutes writing—or worse still, look at the grade and toss the essay. It makes more sense to invest time and energy responding to the first draft and to make these comments truly facilitative. Respond to the final draft only briefly, and let your comments be more evaluative.



myth: "Writing intensive" means that students should do 3-5 separate, unrelated assignments.

Research shows that **students often benefit when the work of the semester can be conceived as one project, phased in logical sequences or in stages.** Moving through a logical sequence of assignments is one way to increase the level of conceptual difficulty gradually and to ensure that students build on material they have studied in earlier portions of the syllabus. It is more cost-effective for instructors as well, since in some cases they will have seen and responded to smaller components of a project before the cumulative work comes in.