

The Center for Excellence in Teaching
 Boston University
 143 Bay State Road
 Boston, MA 02215

spring 2003 bulletin

Faculty Workshop: Grading Student Papers

On Tuesday, March 4th, nineteen faculty from across the university participated in a workshop taught by Professor Davida Pines, who teaches composition. Professor Pines presented *Grading Student Papers*, providing faculty with objective criteria for evaluating students' essays across the disciplines.

The first half of the session focused upon Gordon Harvey's "Elements of the Academic Essay," which Professor Pines distributes to students in her writing classes. These key elements include: a convincing and focused thesis statement (or motive), evidence and analysis (data, quotations, and explanatory commentary about the thesis), logical structure (progression and transitions), counterargument(s), appropriately chosen and cited sources, and elements of style (grammar, sentence-level details). To test for logical structure, Professor Pines encourages students to cut up an essay into paragraphs and paste them onto individual sheets of paper, mix them up, and then have a friend reassemble them in order. A well designed essay that follows a logical structure will withstand the rigors of this test.

Professor Pines then provided participants with grading criteria outlining "A" papers, "B" papers, etc. The six criteria for objective evaluation include: thesis, structure, evidence, analysis, sources, and style. She emphasized that she weights thesis, evidence, and analysis as having greatest importance for her in evaluating written work. She looks foremost "for an arguable point that is supported by analysis of specific evidence."

During the discussion of grading criteria, one participant asked: "How does a faculty member judge the relative merit of an essay across the distribution of an entire class—what is the governing approach to assigning grades—that is, absolute criteria versus relative distribution?" Professor Pines emphasizes the absolute criteria, particularly early in the term. By adhering strictly to the absolute criteria, she commonly gives lower grades on first assignments completed early in the term. This provides opportunities for students to grow and to improve over the course of the semester, holding them to a certain standard of performance. This approach is not rigid, for example, students might be given the opportunity to re-write and revise a paper written early in the term for which they received a C. Another professor suggested assigning a point system to the criteria, which can then later be scaled. Another professor from a more technical field, assigns points in essays for demonstrated understanding of difficult technical concepts, focusing his grading scheme toward content, rather than form and structure.

Professor Pines offered some helpful hints from her own experience. She assigns rough drafts of all papers in her composition class, but does not grade them. Instead her evaluation limits comments to global issues—
(continued on reverse, Grading Papers)



Professor Davida Pines
 CGS - Humanities & Rhetoric
 and CET Advisory Board
 Member

Faculty Development Workshops

for faculty, by faculty

Preventing Disruptive Student Behavior

Senior Associate Dean Susan Jackson, CAS - Modern Foreign Languages, Professor Natalie McKnight, CGS - Humanities & Rhetoric, and CET Academic Director and Professor of Physics, Kevin Smith

Thursday, March 20
12 noon - 1 pm CAS 202

Picture This

Professor Jim Lengel, COM - Mass Communication, Advertising, & PR

Tuesday, March 25
4 pm - 6 pm COM 206

Online Grading Tools

Professor Meenakshi Narain, CAS - Physics and Professor Tanya Zlateva, MET - Computer Sciences

Friday, March 28
12 noon - 1 pm SMG 315

The Web Quest

Professor Jim Lengel, COM - Mass Communication, Advertising, & PR

Tuesday, April 1
4 pm - 6 pm COM 206

Panel Discussion: Teaching Philosophies of Metcalf Award Winners

Professor Fred Kleiner, CAS - Art History, Professor L. Jay Samons, Associate Dean - CAS, Professor Diana Wylie, CAS - History, and CET Academic Director and Professor of Physics, Kevin Smith

Wednesday, April 16, 2003
12 noon - 1:30 pm SMG 424
Lunch will be provided

Web Top Publishing

Professor Jim Lengel, COM - Mass Communication, Advertising, & PR

Tuesday, April 22
4 pm - 6 pm COM 206

■ **Please see**
■ www.bu.edu/cet/events/workshops.html

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- to **register** for workshops,
- for full workshop **descriptions**,
- and for information on **upcoming CET events**

Grading Student Papers, continued

organization and structural concerns—rather than to sentence-level detail. On final papers she contains comments to just three points, since students tend to absorb no more than three suggestions for improvement for any one assignment. Her last helpful hint encouraged faculty to guard their time when grading essays. She has even experimented with setting a timer and limiting herself to a certain number of minutes per paper. It is a well-recognized challenge that grading essays can consume an inordinate amount of faculty time.

The workshop concluded with the entire class reading the same sample essay and grading it in ten minutes, based upon an assignment for Rhetoric 102. After reading and grading the essay, participants volunteered the grade they had assigned and gave reasons why they had assigned that particular grade. Faculty assigned grades ranging from an A to a C. Comments varied widely from “the thesis was unclear,” “the logic is poor,” “it lacked transitions and had grammar issues,” to “the detailed account was good, but the thesis was merely an illustration and re-cap of Berger’s thesis,” and “this piece is atmospheric and personal. Can we expect students at this age to be able to articulate intelligently about such a difficult subject? What can we expect of twenty-year-olds?”

This discussion raised important questions about grading and strategies for tracking student progress. The question, “How do faculty address the assignment of grades when students, in spite of noted improvement, still fall short of the absolute and objective criteria that we set as the measure of success in writing?” remains for a subsequent workshop. One final tip for faculty seeking to help students benefit from commentary on graded essays: “Don’t assign specific grades up front, since grades get in the way of students actually hearing and/or reading the comments.”

CONTACT

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The Center for Excellence in Teaching

143 Bay State Road
Boston, MA 02115
617-358-2488

www.bu.edu/cet
cet@bu.edu

