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Better Papers by “Failing Forward”: The LAST strategy

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GIFT: Better Papers by Failing Forward

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Too often students wait until the last minute to write their papers; don't do drafts; don't seek feedback; don't incorporate what feedback they do get into a final product. This method seeks to help students manage the steps required to write a solid research paper. It's all about getting better papers and fostering good work habits through positive feedback and deadline management.

OUTLINE: Better Papers by "Failing Forward"— The LAST strategy

THE PROBLEM:

Too often students:

- wait until the last minute to write their papers.
- don't do drafts.
- don't seek feedback.
- don't incorporate what feedback they do get into a final product.

WHAT WE DO WHEN WE GRADE:

- basically copy-edit grammar and spelling.
- give structural feedback.
- make suggestions on how the paper could be improved.
- give them a grade on the final product.

THE DISCONNECT:

Once students receive their grades, they have no motivation to put our feedback into their papers.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Use a "fail forward" waterfall approach.

- ▶ Break the paper into steps.
- ▶ Apportion half the points for handing in pieces of their paper
 - ▶ ON TIME and
 - ▶ MEETING CRITERIA.
- ▶ Facilitate a peer review before the paper gets to you.
- ▶ Apportion the other half of the points to the final product.

Philosophy & Pedagogy

The basic philosophy underlying this method is consistent with many approaches to writing pedagogy and supports these principles:

- 1) Guide students to working on their final paper throughout the semester, not waiting to the last minute to draft it... and handing in a first draft as the final.
- 2) Use writing as thinking in the early stages.
- 3) Use peer review as a way to learn how to be a better writer/editor/reader and how to give and receive constructive feedback.
- 4) Use a grading system that rewards meeting criteria and deadlines, allows for "failing forward," and encourages the incorporation of feedback in the final submission.

The CRITERIA of the final paper are discussed early on in the semester and planned in the following stages:

1 - Topic selection: This might even change half-way through because the original idea was too broad/too narrow, insufficient literature supporting the premise, etc. Students learn that it's OK to follow the AHA! moment and adjust their topic. *(5 points assigned for handing in a 3x5 card outlining the topic and the thesis statement by the deadline.)*

2 - Review of literature: Five to seven well documented sources. Depending on the topic, no more than half the sources can come from "written for the web" material and all sources must be credible, i.e. have an editor/author and evidence of citations. Dictionary entries are not "sources." The Review of the Literature must include the following for each source: 1) a properly formatted bibliographic citation; 2) a description of how this specific work helps the student support their argument(s); and 3) an appropriate quote from the work the student might use in their final paper. *(5 points assigned for handing in the literature review by the deadline, 5 points for meeting all the criteria.)*

3 - Topic Presentation: A 5-minute presentation to the class on the student's chosen topic which includes their initial thesis statement, what they've found in the literature, three possible argument statements (or possible research questions). This step is not a presentation of the finished product but rather a collaborative feedback session. It's an opportunity for the student to get help filling in some holes or getting a different perspective. It also forces students to organize their ideas and think about how they would present them to the listener/reader. *(5 points assigned for presenting by the deadline, 5 points for meeting all the criteria.)*

4 - Analysis: Students basically write up what they presented, incorporating any ideas or suggestions they got from their peers. No citations are required here... this is a "writing to think" piece and should largely consist of ideas presented in the student's own words. *(5 points assigned for submitting by the deadline, 5 points for meeting all the criteria.)*

5 - Synthesis: This is the first "draft" of the final paper. It should include a thesis statement, arguments supporting the thesis statement and quotes from the literature. Not all quotes need to be in agreement with the arguments, but explanation of differing opinions or findings from the literature need to be contextualized to the student's arguments. This paper is submitted for peer review and must include appropriately formatted citations and bibliography/reference list. *(5 points assigned for submitting the draft by the deadline, 5 points for meeting all the criteria.)*

6 - Top and Tail: Students craft their introduction and conclusion based on what their paper has become after all the feedback and editing. The introduction and conclusion should demonstrate clarity and coherence and should begin with engaging sentences. Epigraphs are welcome if they epitomize the nature of the paper. *(5 points assigned for submitting the draft by the deadline, 5 points for meeting all the criteria.)*

7 - Peer Review: Students review a paper (this can be blind review if you want to undertake the extra work) by highlighting (not correcting) grammar and spelling errors and by indicating, with 'in the margin' questions, errors in logic or incomplete exposition. Students can note: "You lost me here..." "I'm not sure where this is going..." "This contradicts what you wrote in the paragraph above...", etc. I also ask them to highlight and mark with a star what they believe is the thesis statement. *(5 points assigned for reviewing and returning the peer paper by the deadline.)*

So far 60 points have been assigned for the process -- meeting the criteria and the deadline. The final 40 points are largely dedicated to the quality of the writing.

8 - Final Submission: Students edit their draft, incorporating all relevant feedback from the peer review. Final paper should have: 1) Title page with abstract, 2) Introduction including thesis statement, 3) Body, 4) Conclusion, and 5) References/Bibliography. All sources must be appropriately cited. *(40 points assigned for the quality of the content, meeting the criteria of the assignment, and meeting the deadline.)*

Regarding the split of points between meeting the criteria and the deadline—when I am dealing with Communication students, it's all or nothing... if you are a professional handing in a story (or press release) and you met the criteria but handed it in late, it doesn't go to press and you don't get paid. Likewise if you hand something in on time but it doesn't meet the criteria. Students may as well learn that now. While I personally believe this standard should apply to everyone, thereby teaching people to be responsible for the timeliness and quality of their work, it is up to the individual instructor.

HANDOUT: The LAST PAPER Waterfall (100 pts total)

Choose a topic and hand it in on a 3x5 card with your name on it by the deadline (5 pts)

Literature Review (20 pts)

.... Conduct a literature review and use required citation style (10 points). Deliver a Paper Topic presentation based on your review of the literature to elicit suggestions (10 points).

Analysis (10 pts)

.... This is basically a brain dump of what you presented augmented by the suggestions from your instructor and your peers.

Synthesis (10 pts)

.... Bring your Lit Review and your Analysis together and begin to polish the work.

Top & Tail (15 pts)

.... Add your intro and conclusion (10 points) and then submit to a Peer Review for copyedit and structural feedback (5 points). Incorporate all feedback and polish.

Final Paper (40 pts)

Submit your final paper for grading. These 40 points are based on the quality of your content. Points are deducted for spelling and grammar errors.