

MONITORING STUDENT WRITING: HOW NOT TO AVOID THE DRAFT

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Monitoring student writing is a challenge because it involves a number of teaching skills, all aimed at effectively guiding students from a first to a final draft. Monitoring is different from evaluating because it does not involve assigning the student a grade or making a final assessment; rather, it helps students direct their attention to aspects of their drafts that they might change to improve their writing. This article is designed to help teachers monitor student writing. In section one, I discuss the rationale for monitoring; in section two, I demonstrate the monitoring procedure on three papers from an English 101 class at the University of Colorado-Denver; in section three, I summarize the major considerations to remember when monitoring writing.

RATIONALE

When we monitor students' writing with the primary purposes of helping them improve their writing skills and helping them maintain or attain a positive attitude about writing, we must consider a number of important points. The way we phrase our responses to students is just as important as what we actually tell them. And, of course, neither of these can be done in a vacuum. First, we must consider the point in the semester at which a paper is written: what we expect on the first paper should be much less than what we expect on the fifth paper. Second, we must consider the stage of drafting the student is in: what we respond to in a

first draft will be different from what we respond to on a third draft. As a general rule, teachers should hold students responsible for implementing skills only after those skills are introduced and discussed in class.

FOCUS, DEVELOPMENT, ORGANIZATION

Recognizing what to monitor on a student's paper can be simplified when we keep a few major concerns in mind. Instead of approaching a paper looking for problems, we should approach a paper considering how and why communication either failed or succeeded (Lindemann). The question is how to determine what leads to a failure in writing. Certainly sentence structure and mechanics can hinder writing. However, if a student's focus, development and/or organization are not apparent, correcting sentence structure or mechanics will not clarify an idea. Thus, it makes sense to direct our own attention to the paper's focus, development and organization, especially on initial drafts (McDonald; Sommers). Reigstad and McAndrew suggest that teachers divide their own thinking into High Order Concerns (HOCs) and Low Order Concerns (LOCs). HOCs include focus, organization, development and voice. Analyzing these areas only on all initial drafts will first tell us how well the students communicated their ideas, and second, direct the students' attention to these, as *their own* areas of concern on all early drafts.

STYLE

Determining the point at which we should monitor sentence structure, mechanics, spelling and usage is not difficult when we remember to focus on these only after students have a handle on their HOCs. To simplify monitoring, I make a separate category for sentence structure (variety, subordination, phrasing) calling them "Middle Order Concerns" (MOCs). Once students have focused, organized and developed their content, concentrating on MOCs serves to direct the students' attention to *how* to express ideas (McDonald). When a teacher points out *why* a sentence is awkward and suggests one or two ways to clarify it, students can then work on their own to revise particular sentences. What's more, after students spend class time discussing sentence variety, subordination and coordination and practice using these during class sessions,

most students simply need to have their lack of variety or subordination pointed out to them in order to improve their sentences.

MECHANICS, SPELLING, USAGE

As a rule, I rarely spend time responding to individual LOCs such as spelling and mechanics on specific papers when I monitor except when a student asks me to check for a particular pattern of errors (see below). This is not to suggest that LOCs are not important; however, it does say that my emphasis is first on content, then on style, and then on mechanics and spelling (Bridges). Mechanics and spelling are areas for which students can take more responsibility (Hirsch, cited in Lees) once they understand their own pattern of errors (Bridges; Kroll & Schafer; Lindemann; Shaughnessy). That is, instead of students seeing themselves as never knowing how to use a comma, they can begin to see that they omit commas after introductory clauses or use a comma before every coordinating conjunction. Most LOCs, such as mechanics, spelling and usage, can and should be worked on in editing groups in class sessions before the final paper is due but after the student has revised for content and style. Working in mini-groups on a common problem or “error pattern” is effective because group members can work together to isolate and correct a particular error.

ROLES

Finally, when we read a student’s paper and begin to formulate in our own minds what we want to discuss with the student, it is most important to determine how we will phrase our responses to the student so that we facilitate positive attitudes about writing (Johnston). From the first class session we need to strive to get to know our students and learn to be sensitive to their feelings about who they are as writers.

As we get to know students and develop our own sensitivities to them, we should also be able to assume various roles as teacher (Britton; Calabrese). When I monitor students’ writing I assume one of four roles—the partner or trusted adult, the coach, the diagnostician, or the critic:

—As a partner or trusted adult, I give my honest reactions regarding a paper. For example, I might express my own confusion about a certain passage that I do not understand because

of a lack of detail or sentence structure; or, I might express my feeling of sadness after reading a certain passage.

—As a coach, I work to direct a student's energies in a certain direction to help him or her accomplish a goal. For me, coaching means asking the writer specific questions. For instance, I might ask a series of questions throughout the paper, all for the purpose of helping the writer answer those questions to find a focus.

—As a diagnostician my role is to analyze or identify what is being said or how something is being said in the paper. For example, I might simply point out that in a particular paragraph, each sentence begins with the subject/verb pattern. I do not praise or criticize this—I simply diagnose or identify it.

—Finally, as a critic, I direct my comments to those areas of the paper that are either “not working” or simply wrong, and *tell* the writer such very openly and directly—much more directly than as a diagnostician. As a critic, a teacher should be sure to explain why something is wrong and refrain from making negative value judgments about the person.

The teacher needs to assume different roles for different students on different papers, during various drafts at various times throughout the semester. In other words, one student may need a partner on a first draft but a critic on a third draft. And another may need a coach on a first draft and a diagnostician on a second. The point is that we need to be *flexible* in our role when monitoring student writing, and this flexibility in our role should coincide with the actual comments that we make. Overall, the role we assume must be determined by (A) the personality of the student and (B) the academic needs of the student because our role as monitor is not only to help students improve their writing but also help them maintain or attain a positive attitude toward writing.

APPLICATION

KAY

The following is a copy of Kay's first draft. The assignment, given during the third week of the semester, was to write a one to two page character sketch in which she was to describe a person in terms of a specific quality, trait or characteristic. We spent the class period in which the assignment was given on pre-writing

activities specifically relating to the assignment: brainstorming, mapping and free writing about a person. We then discussed how to limit oneself to a single aspect of a person's personality. At this point in the semester, I knew little about Kay or her background in writing. (All student papers in this article are reproduced exactly as written.)

Up in the morning here we go again, into the shower or maybe not into the shower, washing one face awake. Drawers full of blue shorts, white socks and blue T-shirts. Jocks everywhere thrown all over the place, colors and styles of who only knows what kind. Grabbing one of any kind into the shorts and on goes the T-shirt, socks and tennis shoes.

Just a repeat going through the motions, on with the hat and out of the house. Vitamins breakfast some nutrition of that kind. Arriving day to day all jokes aside, Back and forth up and down the floor we go, white lines, red lines up and down I go. Wet like a pig the sweat just pours down his forehead, neck and slowly down the spin.

All the yelling screamin spearing, on this may go however we only know to what extent it really goes, on our mission is to score. As it all ends I must keep in mind in another days time the motion will return

My first response to Kay's paper was in the form of a simple question in our workshop group in class. I asked her what she wanted to get across to us, her audience. Her reply was that she wanted to describe her messy husband in the morning. I then commented that what confused me was the use of different pronouns such as I, one, we, his. I suggested that she focus just on him—what *he* did or thought or where *he* went. Then, I added one additional comment—that it would be nice for me as a reader to have more information that “showed” he was messy.

Obviously, there are many stylistic and mechanical problems in Kay's paper. However, it was important for her to understand that her content was of primary importance in communication. So, she needed to know why her *content* failed to communicate her idea. Because I was merely a member of her workshop group, I responded to her primarily as a partner and a trusted adult, giving my honest responses to her essay.

Kay's second draft contained approximately nine to eleven

additional sentences that showed his messiness; she used one "I" pronoun and "he" or "his" in all other places. After reading her second draft, I told her that I was beginning see how messy he was and that she *had* focused the paper on him. My only suggestion for change was that she might arrange all the information in the order that it happened.

During the remainder of our conference, I talked to Kay about herself. My goal was to understand Kay as a person and learn why she was in school. I wanted to find out why she wrote as she did and the amount of motivation she had to improve her writing. I hoped that in knowing her motivation I would also find out her reaction to criticisms or suggestions so that I could *phrase* my responses accordingly.

Kay was just starting college, 13 years after finishing high school. She always did "awful" in high school but was now training to be an airline stewardess and felt the need to better her education. Kay hated to read. Even at the age of 30, she disliked reading newspapers or magazines. Her only contact with written English was in the form of instructions or mail.

Kay's writing suffered from a lack of exposure to written communication. However, although her skills were very weak, her motivation was very high. Also, she liked the idea of revising her papers and was eager to do so. Kay was not overly sensitive about her writing so I could easily assume the role of a diagnostician and/or critic.

We discussed this third draft several days later.

Throwing the covers back off the bed, he begins slowly to stroll. Up in the morning, made it once again into the shower or . . . maybe not into the shower he goes. Rubbing his eyes to see clear the view headed straight for the bathroom door. Feeling the running water looking into the fogged mirrors just can't seem to focus a view. Stepped into the shower splashing water all over his body and fact beginning to surface a view. Out of the shower onto the bare floor his feet are stuck to the towel that was left on the floor.

On with the robe and down the stairs he goes, leaving tracks of water dripping from his body onto the floor. Opens the door picking up the newspaper sits at the dining room table, off comes the rubberband and onto the floor. Papers

sorted thrown here and thrown there, goes to the kitchen and fixes a bowl of cheeios, dripping milk from the bowl to his mouth realizing the time and away their he goes.

Into the drawers begins the search for daily wear, underwear that are throun hear and there grabbing a pair and on they go. Pulling another drawer open to find a T-shirt, wrinkled and studded no one else would dare, put it on to wear. Sorting through the socks mixed and some matched some long and some short who will ever know. Ties and belts accessories who know where they are, in a pocket or on some slack Lord only knows. Grab a shirt half way hanging on a hook and a pair of slack that are from before. Oh what about his hair a couple of stroked of the comb and out of the door he goes.

Within three drafts, Kay had basically attained a focus (her husband in the morning), given details to support her focus and succeeded at a sense of organization (the order in which he did things in the morning). Kay had made progress with HOCs within three drafts. It became apparent that the next major failure in her communications was due to her lack of proper sentence structure (MOCs). However, marking R.O., Frag. or Awk beside every sentence would not help Kay in any way. She simply did not understand the function of subjects and verbs in sentences, so the editorial markings would make no sense. First, Kay needed to hear how a correctly written sentence *sounded* when read aloud. She then needed to understand the function of the subject and verb in a sentence so that she could be sure to include them in every sentence she wrote.

I first took a paragraph or two and simply put in subjects and verbs, retaining as much of her own wording as possible. For example:

He put on the robe and went down the stairs leaving tracks of water dripping from his body onto the floor. He opened the door, picked up the newspaper, and sat at the dining room table. He took off the rubberband and threw it onto the floor. Papers were thrown here and there. He went to the kitchen and fixed a bowl of cheerios. As he read one section of the news and ate his cheerios, milk dripped from his mouth to the bowl. Realizing the time, he went upstairs.

I asked Kay to read this aloud a number of times. We worked on another of her paragraphs, concentrating solely on identifying subjects and verbs in each sentence. I then assigned her exercises in a simple grammar book on sentence fragments and run-ons. We also did some group work in class on how to identify a subject and verb in a sentence and correct run-ons and fragments.

These are the only areas we worked on in this paper. Over a period of two weeks Kay made noticeable progress on the paper and the fact that she still wished to continue writing, knowing that she had numerous hurdles to overcome, encouraged both of us.

STEVE

The following is a copy of Steve's third draft. It was the seventh week of the semester, and class discussions had included essay structure, paragraph structure, use of details, methods of organization, and identification and correction of run-ons and fragments. In this assignment he was to write an essay in which he described a person's influence upon him.

One day while walking through the green and flowered gardens of Kensington park I encountered a man that forever changed my dull view towards music. The man was Bill Wyman the bassest for the Rolling Stones, a legend in the rock music world.

Having met such a renowned person without having heard his work, I decided to listen to some of his bands particular type of music. I went to the largest record store in the city where I found an enormous selection of Rolling Stones albums. I listened to several of their albums and ended up buying my first real rock and roll album. This new album began opening up many new relationships and ideas.

One of the relationships that sprang from my new awakening to rock music was, that I met more musicaly inclined people. They were always interested in playing and listening to different music. An other relationship was that I began participating in a band where I could learn more about musiciams and their instruments. Through these people and the band, I learned how to play the bass guitar as well as recognize different styles and tastes in music. My new friends tastes in music were varied which gave me thoughts of the

type of music that excited me. These thoughts led me to choose jazz as the music that I enjoyed listening to. My interest in jazz began with the blues and blossomed into a more progressive instrument style.

Occasionally I hear different types of jazz that brings back memories of how I had become acquainted with this type of music. Only by having met Bill Wyman would I have eventually had the influences I did and discovered the music I really liked.

Because it was the seventh week of the semester, I had had some time to get to know Steve. He was 27 years old, had spent four years in the Navy, had worked full time and had just decided to return to school. He had spent much of the semester developing the essay structure and developing details. Steve was a humorous person but extremely sensitive about his writing ability. When given abrupt or negative comments such as "This sentence doesn't make sense" or "I don't understand this at all," his reaction was severe: his facial muscles tightened and he became very discouraged. Consequently, I learned that *how* I phrase my comments to Steve was extremely important. Generally, in order to avoid his interpreting my written responses negatively, I tried to talk so that my tone of voice might convey encouragement or humor. I found that assuming the role of partner or coach relaxed Steve the most while at the same time elicited positive responses.

I began by comment on the flow of the first sentence and the obvious improvement he had made on paragraphing, noting the different idea each paragraph conveyed. Even though this was his third draft, focus, organization and details in the third paragraph still needed revising so it was on this paragraph that I focused my attention.

I summarized his third paragraph by saying, "This is what I hear you saying in this paragraph. Tell me if I'm correct. Because of Bill, you started listening to music, meeting people interested in music, and really got into jazz." He was excited that I had understood his idea, and the positive feedback encouraged him. My next comment would be an important one for Steve because he would need to understand that the way in which he conveyed these ideas was not clear and detailed. However, knowing Steve, I also knew that I would not need to be blunt because when I

simply questioned a statement or suggested another way of saying something, Steve would immediately assume that he didn't get his point across. I started by asking him if "that I met . . . people" and "participating in a band" were "relationships." As he quickly understood that he needed to rephrase his ideas, I voiced my interest in knowing what he meant by such phrases as "musically inclined people" and "different music" and "tastes in music" and a more "progressive instrument style." He began to understand that this paper could use a lot of revision. However, most important for Steve was the fact that he was not devastated or overwhelmed by comments which would discourage him from writing, and he actually became excited at the prospect of revising his content, which he went on to do.

MATT

Approximately eleven weeks into the semester, Matt submitted this paper as his "almost final" draft. In this essay he was to describe and give his own reactions to a situation that he saw but was not involved in. When the paper was submitted, the class had just completed two class sessions on sentence variety (in length and opening) and subordination and coordination of ideas.

They faced each other. Joe was really mad. He kept yelling and pushing Rob around. Rob repeated, "If you push me again, I'm gonna kill you." Joe did not heed this warning. Another shove and Rob's head hit the locker. I guess that's when he lost it.

In raged, Rob jumped at Joe, fist flying. I was wondering what provoked this incident. A right hook landed on Joe's brow. It looked quite painful. Rob paused and waited for Joe's return blow. I don't know why he waited except that they were best friends. Joe, being stunned did not return a punch. I thought it was over, but Rob seemed to desire a punch in the head just to make it even. Again Rob swung and another blow struck and split Joe's lip. Why won't Joe fight back I wondered. By now Joe was being held up by the lockers. I was really mad at both guys. They are best friends. Why are they fighting I thought.

I know Rob often jokes around too much. Maybe Joe got fed up with his pranks; however, Rob gave Joe fair warning. Why did Joe want to fight so bad and why isn't he fighting

now that he has the chance. Rob continued to pummel Joe's face.

Bleeding from about the eyes and lip, Joe slid to the floor. Some guys pulled Rob off the beaten pile of flesh. Rob quickly ran off somewhere. I asked around and found my hypothesis to be correct. Rob and Joe were having punch wars and Rob hit Joe too hard when Joe didn't expect it. Joe blew up and forced this whole thing. A bunch of questions came to mind. Will they still be friends? Will they see the dean and get suspended? Why didn't some one stop the fight? Why didn't I?

As it turned out the dean did not suspend them because they were best friends and both said they were very sorry. I don't think that really mattered. Sorrow did not help the situation. I wondered how their parents felt. Parents can't win in this situation. The victors parents must be angry at their sons violent aggression. And the losers parents must be disappointed in their sons performance. It just proves that fighting serves no purpose for anyone involved.

Matt was 19 years old and interested in writing but overconfident about his writing abilities. In class he quickly responded to discussions on mechanics, grammar and content and could verbalize rules for mechanics and grammar and identify possible problems in essays. However, he did not apply the rules and his insight to his own work. In many ways, it seemed that his overconfidence was his greatest hindrance because he never felt that he was the type of person who needed to revise. Also, Matt often chose not to work on his papers unless someone was very firm with him, pointing out errors directly. "Suggestions" to Matt were merely another way of saying something that he perceived as already well said. Often, encouragement resulted in his working less on his papers because hearing the encouragement, he seemed to consider the weaknesses unimportant.

There are many types of errors on his paper, even though this is his "almost final" draft. His focus and development obviously need to be revised. So, I started by *telling* him that there were three major weaknesses in his content that he needed to work on. One, there were numerous "telling" statements such as "It looked quite painful" rather than "showing" statements; two, there

was a paragraphing problem in the fourth paragraph; and three, there was a shift in focus in the last paragraph. Matt understood why these areas were weak and said that he just hadn't taken the time to change them and went on to explain how he would revise them. If when I pointed out to him the weaknesses in his focus and development he could not have told me how and why he would change these, it would have been premature to discuss his style.

However, for Matt, a discussion of style motivated him to place more demands on himself, demands which he knew how to make but too often chose not to. I first asked him to analyze the pattern and length of each sentence in the first two paragraphs, commenting that they did not show application of the skills we had worked on in class. I then had him count the number of coordinating and subordinating ideas. Within a couple of minutes, Matt saw that his first two paragraphs contained many short, choppy sentences and did not give his reader insight into what ideas should be stressed. When I asked him how he might change the situation, he readily rattled off three or four different techniques for sentence opening and sentence combining and illustrated how he would combine his first three sentences. He then took the paper home and revised it. Matt had the skills for being a good writer, but he needed a critic to "encourage" him to use his skills.

Students use and learn from our comments when we monitor their writing rather than simply evaluate their final papers. When students have the opportunity immediately to incorporate ideas and changes into a paper, they understand the value of a particular comment. One student noted this idea quite succinctly in a journal entry: "The more important fact to notice here is that the conference is held *before* the paper is graded. This allows the teacher and student to thoroughly discuss and revise the paper. I believe that everyone should have the right to perfect something to make it the best it can be."

So, as we work to apply the theory behind monitoring writing and help students "make it the best it can be," we must remember four key points: (1) When we respond to student writing, our first concerns must relate to focus, development, organization and voice. (2) Only after students have a handle on these in any given paper should we direct their attention to style. (3) When further revision in these areas is no longer necessary, and students are con-

templating their final drafts, we can work with them to help them identify their pattern of errors regarding mechanics and spelling. (4) At each point in our monitoring we must strive to be sensitive to our students as writers so that our comments foster positive attitudes about writing.

Successful monitoring, then, is really a matter of organizing our own expectations for papers and developing our own skills as communicators. As we develop in these areas, our students' writing will develop as well.

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