How to Practically Guarantee Poor Student Writing — Without Even Trying

by

Diane Boehm

Had enough of good student writing? Like worst-case scenarios? Want to prove that lots of students should never have been admitted to college?

Listen up! It is possible to practically guarantee the worst student papers anybody has ever seen, in just ten easy steps:

1. Accept first drafts. How can you be sure you are getting bona fide first drafts? Easy. Assign writing but do not instruct or monitor writers as they work on the assignment. When the paper is due, collect final products only — no early drafts, no revisions, no in-class preparation exercises, no proposals, no working bibliographies, no source materials, no preliminary outlines. Who wants to carry all that stuff?

2. Require sworn statements that no one else has read any draft of a student’s paper. We all know how helpful feedback on drafts, or conversations about our ideas, can be. Why take a risk? Nip those strategies in the bud!

3. Assume that the writing process of all students is the same as yours. You always write a detailed three-page outline before drafting any document — why shouldn’t they?

4. Take advantage of students’ writing anxiety. Do not waste class time responding to student questions about the writing assignment. Do not present any models of effective papers to allow students to visualize the completed assignment. How are students ever going to learn to be tough if you don’t get tough with them?

5. Circle every error in red, but offer no comments. This will remind them of every teacher they’ve ever had who told them they were poor writers — and it will clearly demonstrate both your own superior command of language and their hopeless inadequacy.

6. Do not bother to respond to a student’s ideas and efforts. You already know the paper will be inadequate; why bother to take a student’s ideas seriously?

7. If you feel obligated to respond, limit your responses only to the flaws in the paper. You do want to motivate the student to get rid of them, don’t you?

8. Encourage students to use as much jargon and as many seven-syllable words as possible (try oligocythemia or integrodifferential). How else will they learn to impress their readers?

9. Structure assignments so students are writing only for you, the teacher. They’ll have plenty of time to write for real purposes and real audiences out in the real world!

10. Require students to write on the topics you are interested in; allow no options, encourage no exploration of personally meaningful topics. That’s the kind of paper you were assigned in school; why shouldn’t they have the same?

There you have it: ten easy, foolproof steps to guarantee poor papers. I suppose it’s always possible one or two effective papers might sneak in, no matter how carefully you follow the guidelines. But if you get more than five well-written papers, dinner is on me!

Diane Boehm is director of the writing program at Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan. She is a teacher consultant with the Minnesota Writing Project.