

# Academic Programs

*From the Office of the Associate Dean*

## Death by Paper: Ten Secrets for Survival

From *The Teaching Professor*, June-July 2006

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Numerous researchers have identified the correlation between writing and thinking. Others have explored the complexities involved in the writing process. Despite the volumes of research that document the multiple benefits that accrue from writing, many faculty are reluctant to assign much, because if assigned it must be graded. Getting out from under the piles of research papers, reflective essays, reaction papers, and journals can be daunting. Electronic media expedites student writing, but what appears in blogs, wikis, and Web discussions need a response. In the past 20 years as a writing teacher, I have found several techniques that can help faculty in any discipline use writing to achieve its many benefits and still manage the paper load.

**1. Grade with a timer.** Set it for 10-15 minutes. When the bell goes off, write final comments and then move on. This activity can help train you to be more mindful of your time and keep you focused. In most instances, after spending 15 minutes with an essay, you already have a grade in mind.

**2. Read the whole paper, but correct and line edit only a few paragraphs. Leave the rest unmarked—read, but unmarked. Add a final comment.**

Correcting every grammar, content, and punctuation error is you doing the student's work for him or her. Correct a short section of the paper. Ask the student to do the rest and come to your office with the revisions.

**3. Use minimal marking.** Minimal marking is a system for grading that puts a great deal of responsibility for corrections and revisions on the student. Instead of putting in commas, fixing sentence errors, or

addressing other mechanical problems, put a check on the line to indicate a problem exists there. Save your comments for matters of substance.

**4. Make and use a rubric.** Providing a rubric for the writing assignment benefits you and your students. Creating it forces you to think of the major and minor elements of the assignment, and to clarify any hidden expectations you have. You can assign points to criteria, use a scale of poor to excellent, or just use check minus, check, and check plus. In addition to saving time, a rubric makes your grading more effective and focused. Rubrics also benefit students: knowing what's expected helps them to prepare the assignment.

**5. Write a letter or memo to the class about strengths and weaknesses of the papers.** Often many students experience the same problem with an assignment. In report writing, the formats may be incorrect. Documentation may be a problem. On the other hand, maybe everyone

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## Death by Paper: Ten Secrets for Survival

wrote a particularly good thesis statement. Effective feedback addresses both strengths and weaknesses. Take all those comments you would normally write 20 or so times and put them in a letter addressed to the whole class.

### 6. Make positive comments on one side of the paper and negative comments on the other.

Ample research documents that instructors make many more negative comments than positive ones. Not only that, but the negative comments are much longer, while positive comments are brief (“good job”). If you write negative comments on one side of the paper and positive comments on the other, you will become conscious of how your comments are proportioned and make adjustments.

### 7. Scan the papers and sort into three stacks; very good, average, poor.

A quick read can tell you a great deal. This fast review of writing with no marking is called holistic reading. It helps you make an early evaluation of the paper’s overall quality.

### 8. Select one to three major problems to comment on.

Many teachers think they need to point out every flaw and problem with an assignment. This is not only unnecessary, it frustrates students. They become confused and don’t know what to fix first. Comment on the major issues in a paper or report. Give clear instructions for revision. Leave the rest alone.

### 9. Reduce your comment wording.

Try learning to write shorter phrases like “Needs development,” “Needs a clear focus,” “Needs a ‘so what,’” or “Lacks required sources.” This strategy has the added bonus of adding a level of consistency to your grading.

### 10. “See me briefly.”

Many times it is more efficient to explain something verbally than it is to write it down. It may take me a long time to explain that I assigned an argument and received a report, or that the experiments in the lab report were incorrectly performed. Telling the student not only saves you time, but also it allows the student to ask you questions. Students grasp the problem better after even a short conversation.

## The trials of customer service

TECH: Hello, Friendly Internet. May I help you?

CUSTOMER: Oh, hello young man. I was wondering if you offer online banking?

TECH: We’re an Internet service provider, ma’am.

You can certainly use our service to connect to online banking.

CUSTOMER: What do I need to do that?

TECH: You just need the modem in your computer. That plugs into a phone jack. Sign up for an account, and sign up for online banking with your bank.

CUSTOMER: But where does the money come out?

TECH: I’m not sure I understand?

CUSTOMER: You know...Does the money come out from that slot on the computer?

—From the Basic Jokes Web site

*The*

*2007*

*Student Awards Banquet*

*will be held on*

*Sunday, April 22nd*

*at 12:00 noon*

*at the Hawthorn Suites in*

*Champaign, IL.*

## Office Hours in a Different Format

This article is from *The Teaching Professor*, November 2006 issue and is used with the permission of *Magna Publications*.

Faculty regularly face the problem of getting the students most in need of help to come to the office for help. Not only do a small number of students take advantage of office hours, typically those who show up are not those who most need to be there. In previous issues we have reported on research that offers some reasons why this happens. When students start getting feedback that they are doing poorly, some begin to doubt their abilities. They conclude that they just don't have what it takes and so getting help isn't going to make any difference. Other times, it's the stress of having to face the professor with their failure. Some students are so lost, they don't even know what to ask, and their confidence is so shaken, they have trouble processing helpful information when it's delivered.

Two professors report on their experiences with a reformatted kind of office hours: something they call "course centers." They scheduled one- or two- hour time blocks in unoccupied classrooms. Students were invited to come individually or in groups, and they could work on whatever they wished during that time. The course instructor and/or TA were available during the time block. IF students wanted help, they could ask for assistance. Otherwise the instructor just floated around the room, moving from group to group. Students were free to come and go as they wished dur-

ing the session.

The professors of these two courses (an introductory physical course and introductory symbolic logic course) wanted to create an environment in the course centers in which students felt welcome getting together with other students for a study session; and where they felt no pressure to have a set of questions ready to ask the instructor.

Course centers, these instructors stress, did not replace traditional office hours—they supplemented them. In the physics course, they instructor still had two office hours a week and three to four course center sessions. In the logic course, they were four weekly office hours and one weekly two-hour course center session. Students were invited to get help at either: during traditional office hours or at one of the course center sessions.

The instructors surveyed the large student cohort involved in multiple sections of these courses during the three semesters course centers were used. They results indicate the effectiveness of the approach. Students were asked to list all the options they knew of for getting help in the class. Ninety-three percent listed the course center versus 68 percent who noted the traditional office hours. When asked if they had to choose between the instructor's office hours and the course center for getting help which they would select, 54 percent said the course center versus 46 percent who said office hours. Bus the most telling response was to this question: "Did having a course center in the class make you more likely to get

help?" Seventy-nine percent said yes.

In response to several open-ended queries, students identified those features of the course center they most appreciated. They listed convenience, although it was not clear how or why a course center was more convenient than traditional office hours. They also noted that they could get one-on-one help during the course center sessions. They could get that same kind of help during office hours too, so faculty found this response equally puzzling. Students further reported that they found the opportunity to work in groups useful during the course centers. Not only did they get help from other students, but several noted how reassuring it was to see other students also struggling with the content. And finally students indicated they liked the "laid-back" atmosphere of the course centers. They felt as though the instructor and the TAs were more approachable in that context.

The professors conclude with this summary: "Although instructors will need to continue offering traditional office hours, alternative formats such as a course center can do as good or a better job of delivering help and of motivating students to seek that help." (p. 257)

**Reference:** Chung, C., & Hsu, L. (2006). Encouraging students to seek help: Supplementing office hours with a course center. *College Teaching*, 54(3), 253-258.

# ACADEMIC/ ADVISING DATES

**Monday, January 8, 2007**  
**Beginning-of-semester Inter/  
Intra Collegiate Transfer Period**  
**January 8-22, 2007**

**Friday, February 9, 2007**  
**Deadline to drop or elect credit/  
no credit for a 1st half-session  
course**  
**1:00 a.m. – 1:00 a.m.**

**Monday, January 22, 2007**  
**Deadline to add a 1st half-  
session course**

**Tuesday, February 27, 2007**  
**Spring Engineering Career Fair**  
**February 27-28, 2007**  
**10:00 a.m.—4:00 p.m.**

**Monday, January 29, 2007**  
**Deadline to add a full-semester  
course**

**Thursday, March 1, 2007**  
**Teacher Placement Day**  
**9:00 a.m.—3:00 p.m.**

**Tuesday, January 30, 2007**  
**Winter Business Career Fair**  
**January 30-31, 2007**  
**11:00 a.m.—4:00 p.m.**

**Thursday, February 8, 2007**  
**Spring Employment Expo**  
**9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.**



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