Instructor’s Guide to the

Student’s Guide to Writing College Papers, 4th Edition

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How to Use This Guide

This Instructor’s Guide includes a variety of materials: tips, practices, and strategies that we have collected from the thousands of teachers who have used the approach embodied in the Student’s Guide, brief accounts of the key elements in the theory of writing and writing pedagogy that underlies our approach, and some basic advice for teachers new to this approach. Since we expect that you will turn to this guide in many ways for many reasons, we have organized it in discrete units, with links and bookmarks available (if your PDF reader supports them). If you are looking for a specific bit of information, use the search feature. If you are looking for a discussion of a specific issue, click the appropriate link (we have made them as descriptive as possible). If you want a coherent overview, read the units in the order listed.
Contents

What’s Old and What’s New in This Guide

Using the Student’s Guide as a Classroom Text

Using the Student’s Guide as Ancillary Class Reading

Using the Student’s Guide for Independent Projects

Using the Student’s Guide in a Multi-Section Writing Program

General Advice for Using the Student’s Guide

On Generating Questions in Class

On the Formalism of the Student’s Guide

A Quick Guide to Marking Students’ Papers
What's Old and What's New in This Guide

Since it first appeared in 1963, the Student's Guide has focused not only on matters of form and format in college research papers but also on the process of writing those papers. The fourth edition preserves that dual focus, but transforms the approach to each in order to accommodate the needs and habits of inexperienced students.

We designed part I, "Writing Your Paper," so that students can use it in two ways. For students willing to invest the time to learn how college research papers work and how they can best produce them, we present a complete treatment that they can use systematically as they write their paper, guided by their teacher and the needs of their assignment. For students invested not in learning about college papers but merely in producing an acceptable instance of one, we present highly directive, product-oriented advice in the form of immediately identifiable templates and checklists (printed in blue), advice students can follow without attending at length to the accompanying explanations. We have done all we can to induce students who take an instrumental approach to pause for some learning, but we do not force them to wade through explanations they won’t attend to anyway. We remain cautiously confident, however, that as those students face new research assignments, they will return to the book not only for its useful templates but for the education they avoided in their first encounter.

Part II, "Citing Sources," is entirely for reference, but here too we have taken a new approach based on what we have learned from experienced teachers and confirmed by recent research. No matter how much we might want students to learn the correct forms for citation, spelling, and format, they adopt a strategy based almost entirely on finding the right example to copy. Even when students are explicitly directed to read
explanations before looking at examples, the vast majority do not: they seek out an example that they think most like the citation form they need to reproduce, and then they copy the example point-by-point. Rather than fight a losing battle (and so fail to give students what they need), we have adopted an example-based approach to all matters of mechanical form. After a brief chapter on the ethics and rationales of citation, we offer students chapters that help them quickly find and copy the right example (again, printed in blue). We have not eliminated explanations entirely, but where we faced a choice between more explanation and more example, we preferred the examples.

Part III, "Style," is also focused on examples (in blue). An additional innovation is found in the chapter on punctuation, which is organized in a novel and we think more useful way, especially for students searching for answers to a specific punctuation problem. Rather than organize this section by kinds of punctuation, we have organized it by kinds of punctuation tasks. Students seldom come to a reference work asking themselves, What are all the ways I might use a comma? Instead they want to know what to do about a particular sentence structure, Do I need a comma after this introductory phrase? Accordingly, we have organized chapter 22 by punctuation tasks: what to put at the end of a sentence, what to put in the middle of a compound sentence, and so on.
Using the Student’s Guide as a Classroom Text

Few students learn to write by memorizing formal rules from a book like this. They need to write but also—before and after writing—to talk (see “General Advice: Talk, Talk, Talk”). And they need to learn about the written forms you expect them to produce not as your personal, quirky preference, and not as a fixed and inert formula that they will have reason to use “some” day, but as a practical way to accomplish a task they are engaged in. Students can get a quick overview of the whole research and writing process if you have them skim part I, but after that, do not grind your way through the book in class, disconnected from what they are doing. Use the chapters in “Writing Your Paper” to support the thinking and writing that students are actively doing as they write. Here are some suggestions:

- Do not assign just a final deadline for the paper. Instead, create a series of due dates that “stage” the research and writing. Students seldom manage their time well on long projects, partly because they do not recognize the importance of doing so, but also because they do not know how. Break your assignment into stages that will force them to practice the kind of processes outlined in “Writing Your Paper,” including stages where they must either share or talk about their written work as they go.

- Organize the portion of your class devoted to writing the research paper so that you model the writing process that they should be following (see “Activities and Assignments.” Plan for both classroom and homework activities that will make explicit what experienced writers do automatically.
Use your own experience: tell them about the research you are doing or have done, including why and how you did it that way.

- Move from intuition to principle. Students can learn the forms and practices that govern academic research, but they will use them well, remember them, and adapt them to new circumstances only when they can connect those forms and practices to their intuitions—linguistic, interpersonal, and practical. Consider, for example, our advice that students take notes on positions that do not help their argument (see 5.3). They understand why that is important (and take better notes) when they experience in class how unpersuasive someone is who merely states a view while failing to acknowledge that others think they have a sound basis for a different view of their own.

- If students have little or no experience with the genre you assign, show them models. Do not offer just one good example: it will become a straitjacket. Instead, distribute and discuss a range of relatively successful papers and, no less important, papers that did not succeed. We can never know what counts as good until we can contrast it with what is not. Identify for students those features you particularly want to see in their papers (along with those you don’t), coordinated with the section of this book that discusses them.

- Finally, when you respond to papers, coordinate your comments to particular pages in the Student’s Guide. Not only will that save you having to explain the same issues on paper after paper, but you will increase the chances that students will reflect on and learn from your comments. If you merely copyedit a paper or make comments that just suggest changes without explaining
them, you become not a teacher but an editor. Students are more likely to learn from your comments if you pick out specific passages or sections that they must revise (you do not have to re-grade the revisions for students to benefit from revising). You might also review with students chapter 15 on how to talk with an instructor about a returned paper.
Using the Student’s Guide as Ancillary Class Reading

Few students learn to write by memorizing formal rules from a book like this. They need to write but also—before and after writing—to talk. And they need to learn about the written forms they are expected to produce not as inert knowledge that they will use “some” day, but as practical guidance for a task they are engaged in. Students turn what they hear into practical knowledge only when you show them how by modeling it, something that is particularly difficult without the support of classroom instruction and discussion.

Here are some suggestions for ensuring that students use the book usefully even if you do not devote class time to it:

- When you assign a paper, don’t just assign a final deadline for it. Instead, create a series of due dates that “stage” the research and writing. Students seldom manage their time well on long projects, partly because they do not recognize the importance of doing so but also because they do not know how. Map out milestones that will force students to practice the kind of processes outlined in “Writing Your Paper,” including those where students must either share or talk about their written work so far.

- Coordinate reading assignments in the *Student’s Guide* to the staged due dates for the paper. If your students are inexperienced, they will not understand the research and writing process well enough to know when to look for help and what help to look for. They will get more out of the book (and present you with fewer problems) if you set milestones and tell them where to
find help in meeting them. For example, for a project that you expect to last a month, you might require students three weeks in advance of the due date to have either a tentative problem statement or, failing that, a list of three plausible candidates; coordinated with that deadline, you would assign sections 1.1–2, 2.1–3, and 13.1.

- Devote some class time to your assignment: explain what you want from students and why; have students discuss what they can do to fulfill the assignment; go over the table of contents of the Student’s Guide, explaining when and why students might consult specific sections as they work.

- If students have little or no experience with the genre you assign, show them models. Do not offer just one good example: it will become a straitjacket. Instead, distribute and discuss a range of relatively successful papers and no less important, papers that did not succeed. We can never know what counts as good until we can contrast it with what is not. Identify for students those features you particularly want to see in their papers (along with those you don’t), coordinated with the sections that discuss them.

- Finally, when you respond to papers, coordinate your comments to particular pages in the Student’s Guide. Not only will that save you having to explain the same issues on paper after paper, but you will increase the chances that students will reflect on and learn from your comments. If you merely copyedit a paper or make comments that suggest changes without explaining them, you become not a teacher but an editor. Students are more likely to learn from your comments if you pick out specific passages or sections that they
must revise (you do not have to re-grade the revisions for students to benefit from revising). You might also review with students chapter 15 on how to talk with an instructor about a returned paper.
**Using the Student’s Guide for Independent Projects**

Few students learn to write by memorizing formal rules from a book like this. They need to write but also—before and after writing—to talk. And they need to learn about the written forms they are expected to produce not as inert knowledge that they will use “some” day, but as practical guidance for a task they are engaged in. Providing that kind of support is particularly difficult for independent projects.

Here are some suggestions that help students without overburdening you:

- Work with the student to set milestones for important “stages” in her work, with at least tentative due dates associated with each. Students seldom manage their time well on long independent projects, partly because they do not recognize the importance of doing so but also because they do not know how. Even if you do not have time to review the products of these interim stages, make the student share them with you.

- At each milestone, discuss with the student what parts of “Writing Your Paper” are most relevant to the next stage. (Since this is an independent project, it would be appropriate for you to require that before you meet the student prepare a list of those parts she plans to consult for the next milestone.)

- If a student has little or no experience with the genre you assign, either show her models or have her investigate them on her own. Do not offer just one good example: it will become a straitjacket. Instead, identify and discuss relatively successful models along with models that illustrate common
failures. We cannot know what counts as good until we also know what does not. Discuss with the student those features you particularly want to see in her work (along with those you do not), coordinated with the pages in “Writing Your Paper” that discuss them.

- Finally, when you respond to drafts, coordinate your comments to particular pages in the Student’s Guide. That will not only save you from having to explain your comments, but encourage your student to reflect on and learn from them. If your comments only suggest or make changes with no discussion of the reasons for them, you become not a teacher but an editor. If you do so repeatedly, your student will have an incentive to reverse-delegate to you the final responsibility for her work. That not only increases your workload but deprives the student of an important learning experience.
Using the Student’s Guide in a Multi-Section Writing Program

When several colleagues use a common book in their classes, their collaboration can be an invaluable resource, especially if a director or coordinator makes it easy for teachers to support one another. There are many wonderful models of programs that orchestrate teacher’s efforts to support one another. Any efforts of this sort will amply repay the effort of both the program’s administrative staff and its individual teachers. Especially when teachers are overworked and underpaid, as most writing teachers are, it is essential that each teacher not have to reinvent for herself all of those local materials and procedures that no book can supply. What such materials are readily available, teachers not only bring better materials to their classrooms but they have more time to devote to those parts of the teaching process that only an individual teacher can do best. Here are just three minimal steps that we believe every program should take. In a large program, these efforts are valuable enough to warrant class release time for someone to coordinate them.

- Teachers need informal forums for talking about their experience using this book. Something as simple as a comfortable lounge where teachers can sit before or after class will foster all kinds of useful exchanges. More systematic venues include brown bag lunches or coffee and pastries in the afternoon, a teaching blog, or an e-mail discussion list devoted only to teaching issues (and never to administrative announcements).

- This book’s Web site includes a number of activities and assignments that help students learn the materials and processes in the Student’s Guide.
Several of these require examples and instructions, which teachers should create locally. Also, teachers will develop or adapt their own activities and assignments, also with examples, instructions, and other documents. All of these locally generated materials should be collected and made available in soft copies that can be printed or distributed as needed.

- The *Student's Guide* or any how-to book is far more effective if teachers accompany it with locally-generated examples and models. A writing program should make available to all teachers a server on which it collects proven classroom materials: local examples of problem statements, of effective conclusions, of ways to integrate quotations into the text, and so on; examples of typical *mistakes* in problem statements, conclusions, quotations, and so on; model papers, both good and bad, indexed by their most salient features. Collecting these materials may seem daunting, but it need not be. Teachers are creating these materials all the time for their individual classes. All the program must do is to collect and make available the good work that teachers are already doing—and to reward those who contribute to the common store.
General Advice for Using the Student’s Guide

Problems, Problems, Problems

If one issue makes or breaks a student research project, it is the quality of the problem that the writer poses. Students with good questions (ch. 2) find more useful sources (ch. 4–5), read more thoughtfully, and make better decisions in planning and drafting their papers (ch. 6–8). Students with not even a question to answer, much less a good problem to solve, are more likely to wander, to pursue dead ends, and to write for themselves rather than for their readers. Not surprisingly, inexperienced students find the challenge of inventing a good question/problem particularly difficult.

Since students without a good problem/question need more of your guidance along the way and more extensive feedback at the end, you’ll be amply repaid for any time you invest up front in helping students begin well. They must come to understand that their job is not merely to mound up facts on a topic, no matter how new or interesting, but to use those facts to help their readers understand something better by solving a problem important to them.

Different disciplines, of course, work on research problems not only of different kinds but of different degrees of novelty. There are exceptions, but researchers in the natural sciences tend to work on problems that readers already know about (or that obviously emerge from a line of established research). At the opposite extreme, those in the humanities more often invent research problems that are novel to readers, with new and unexpected consequences and significance. Some social scientists work on known
problems, some on invented ones, and some on problems whose question is widely recognized but whose consequence and significance are not well understood.

Students in a writing class not strongly tied to any particular discipline face special challenges. When they try to develop a question that seems significant to them, they gravitate to questions of widely known social significance, either because they are associated with oft-debated social problems or because they involve known, large-scale consequences. But both kinds of questions set students up for failure because they are, in the main, unanswerable. Oft-debated social problems are so debated because many, many bright and dedicated people have failed to find answers that provide workable solutions. Problems with large-scale consequences tend to be too large for any research paper to solve, much less one of 5–7 pages. On the other hand, inexperienced students who try to invent a novel question/problem as in the humanities have little sense of the target they aim for, and are more likely to produce a question not worthy of extending thinking and research (typically questions whose answers are well-established and only need to be looked up), a question they do not have the expertise to address, or a question that would take years to resolve.

So you have to help students not only ask more questions than they can at first imagine, but also find the ones that might support a thoughtful paper with the right depth (that is, length). Create an atmosphere of constant questioning, where no question is dismissed out of hand. In class, conduct regular exercises in which students invent, evaluate, revise, and reevaluate questions—at first, only for their interest and significance, but later also for their answerability. Once a student has some good questions, gently press her with the notion of So what? “How might answering this
question help us understand something important? I wonder who might be interested in seeing this question answered. How might it change their thinking?” Model a kindly reader asking such questions, but be firm in pursuing an answer.

You can also let students see how good questions work by using questions they generate and you approve to organize your class discussion. Help students experience the process of finding good answers by framing those discussions as though you were brainstorming a paper: have them list possible answers on the board; collect on the board evidence for and against each answer; revisit the answers to select the best one, revise one, or substitute a new and better one; and raise and respond to possible objections, complications, or alternative views. Once students see how you want them to answer questions and support their answers, they will be better able to select a question that requires the kind of research and argument you expect in their papers.

In short, take the time to put students through the exercise of generating questions, exploring their possibilities, then explicitly explaining what makes them interesting or pointless, consequential or trivial to specific readers. Use your own research as a model. Why did you pose the questions you did in your research papers? How difficult was it for you to find a good question? What kind of frustration did you experience? Make it clear that finding a problem that others might care about can take time, but that it is just part of a process that we all struggle through.

Less experienced students often want to frame their research not in terms of a narrow question they can answer but in terms of a question too large for any one research project to solve. So they may also need help both to narrow their questions and to focus their research on that narrow question.
For example, a student interested in the general problem of binge drinking could usefully narrow her question to how students assign responsibility for injuries associated with that problem. She could then collect data on how students react to injuries caused by a fight involving a binger: Do they blame the binger (for drinking or for not walking away)? Those with him (for letting him drink or for not preventing the fight)? The bar (for serving him too much liquor or for lax security)? And so on. Those data answer a specific question: When students assign blame for the damage caused by binge drinking, do they focus on the person who drank too much or on other factors? The answer to that question might help them answer a more useful question: Why don’t binge drinkers learn from the experience of their classmates? This might in turn help answer a still more useful question: How can schools help students appreciate the danger of binge drinking? But if the student researcher imagines she is (or should be) answering those larger questions, she will be less likely to stay on her specific topic; gather reliable, sufficient, and, most important, relevant evidence; and avoid overgeneralizing from insufficient data. And if in her report she claims to have solved the larger problem, she will be unpersuasive at best.

Cultivating and supporting the development of a beginning researcher takes time, patience, imagination, and a keen understanding that students require an environment that limits their challenges and increases their support. You can avoid some of the anxiety that this questioning entails by assigning your own, ready-made questions. But that increases the chances that students will see your assignment not as a rational activity with a purpose they understand but only as a classroom exercise whose only
goal is to satisfy you. And at some point, someone must help the newest students learn to find questions of their own.

**Talk, Talk, Talk**

Research can be a lonely experience: most students retire to the silence of their own thoughts and the distractions of their computers. The solitary way is comfortable for many students (not to mention many teachers). But everything we know about writing and thinking suggests that most of us work more slowly and less well when we work alone.

Some experienced researchers work as well or better alone. But they already know their readers: they have a sense of who cares about their work and why. They can anticipate what readers do and don’t know, can and can’t understand, will and won’t resist. None of that is easy for new students (or, the research shows, for most scholars). Most researchers rehearse their work all the time—for colleagues, friends, students, in seminars, at conferences, on e-mail lists, in grant proposals, and on and on. Your inexperienced students need that kind of interaction even more: create similar opportunities for them.

Orchestrate occasions and obligations for students to talk about what they are investigating, why it matters, what they are finding, what they still want to know, what parts are weak and need bolstering, and so on. It doesn’t always matter that they talk to someone who can guide them with hints, answers, references, or counter-arguments. Sometimes, the talk is as important as the reaction to it—students can benefit even from talking to their dog if it forces them to hear how clearly they can say out loud what they think they are thinking. Form writing groups; have student e-mail you regular reports; set
up speed-dating events where students have to summarize their paper for a classmate in two minutes, and then do it three more times for other classmates; have them talk to family, friends, anyone. Some students will be uncomfortable with the idea, so you will have to insist. But they'll be glad you did. And so will you.

**Think, Think, Think**

Few beginning researchers use their writing and research as tools for thinking. Like most people, they tend to see writing and speaking as merely “packaging” their ideas, not as a way to discover and improve them. Students are reinforced in that “container” theory of language—ideas first, words second—by many routine writing practices. In a science lab, for example, some teachers tell their students to record all their data (as though this were not part of the writing process), determine their results, and then, after they’ve done their serious thinking, to just “write it up.” A history professor also encourages this “think-then-write” approach when he asks for finished outlines of papers before students start drafting them.

Above, we encouraged you to create opportunities for students to talk about their work not only because finding the words helps them discover their ideas, but because hearing their ideas in words helps writers reflect on them more carefully and critically. You can also build thoughtful and critical reflection into other aspects of your students’ writing processes by “staging” their work with moments that encourage or even require reflection.

When assigning a paper, don’t just set a deadline. Instead, create a series of due dates that stage their research and writing. Map out milestones that will force students
to practice the kind of processes outlined in “Writing Your Paper,” including those requiring them to share, talk about, or reflect on their written work as they go.

Do not, however, let students allow those stages to limit their thinking. Treat problem statements (7.2.2), elevator stories (3.2.3), outlines (7.2.1), and the like not as templates but as speculative instruments—*Does all this fit together? What’s irrelevant? What’s missing? Might this idea help?* Vary the circumstances so that these moments of reflection do not become mere enforced rehearsals. But even if what students give you seems more like rote repetition than critical reflection, you are acquainting them with the kind of circumstances that lead to creative thinking, if not this time then perhaps the next.
On Generating Questions in Class

The key to motivating a written argument is focusing in a problem whose solution readers care about. One way to create that concerned community of readers is to use class discussion to lay the groundwork for the need to make an argument supporting such a solution. Here is a procedure for doing that.

1. Discuss in class some issue out of which an interesting question or problem might arise. Once different views start to emerge, they can become the basis for the problem to be solved.

2. Once the issues have been discussed, ask each student write down one question about the issue that he or she thinks needs an answer.

3. Pair up students and ask them to compare their questions and pick the one that they think would be more interesting to answer. They should be ready to explain why they picked the question they did.

4. Regroup the students into fours and from the questions that the two-person groups have picked, have the four-person group pick one question that they think might be more interesting to answer. This four-person group should also be ready to explain why they picked the question they did.

5. Given the time and opportunity, you can regroup the students into eights and ask them again to pick from the questions of each four-student group the one that they think would be most interesting to answer.
When this process is finished, you can then share the two, three, or four questions that the groups came up with. Have the groups explain why they made the choices they did.

Finally base a writing or storyboarding assignment on one or more of those questions.

The value in doing this is four-fold:

- Individual students have to come up with their own questions.
- They have to discuss the questions among themselves and decide why one question is more worth answering than another.
- When they use any of the questions as the basis for a writing, they are wrestling with genuine questions that were generated by their own community of readers, questions that they decided were worth answering.
- If the students engage in collaborative work, they constitute a genuine audience with a genuine stake in understanding the answers they read.
**On the Formalism of the Student’s Guide**

Some teachers worry that the formalism of our templates and checklists, and our more abstract frameworks for the parts of argument or of problem statements, allow students to write mechanically, even thoughtlessly, without any real learning. We acknowledge the danger, especially for students who *only* consult the templates and checklists without ever reflecting on what they are doing. But we believe that when teachers create the conditions for reflection in their classroom and assignments, our formal approach is the most successful for most students. Here are our responses to five of the most common concerns:

1. Formal plans are too abstract for writers to learn.

   We can respond only that our experience has been otherwise. We have taught students in high school, college, graduate schools, and professional organizations to use these frames and scaffoldings for more than 20 years, and those students demonstrate that they work.

2. Even if the plans can be learned, no plan can capture the variability and fluid reality of actual arguments.

   True, no plan can capture the fine detail of an actual argument, but that’s not what a formal plan is for. All social activities, especially communication, follow general plans: we do not invent grammar anew every time we write a sentence, or a new form of a paragraph, or a new plan for a business memo, scientific report, or law brief. Writers
invent new ways of realizing those forms, and from time to time. even new forms. But we can find and represent underlying regularities in all common forms of communication. We offer the formal plans in this book not to specify every detail of every research argument, but to provide a framework or scaffolding during their construction. The finished product is far more detailed, varied, and original than any plan, but without the plan, the finished product risks turning out to be a shambles.

3. Even if specific plans reflect deep regularities that can be used, such plans force us to write in ways that are wooden and mechanical. True, students who follow these plans will at first write in ways that seem mechanical and formulaic. But whenever we learn any complex skill that requires us to manage and integrate many units of behavior and thinking, we usually have to master the parts individually before we can assemble them into a smooth whole. It’s how we learn to play a musical instrument, dance, paint; it’s how we learn a sport at a level beyond sandlot baseball or playground basketball. There are musical and sports savants who play with no instruction, just as there are math geniuses who without the benefit of instruction seem to compute at a level far above average. But the rest of us need all the help we can get.

In the earliest stages of such learning, we unavoidably perform in ways that seem mechanical and awkward; our writing seems uninventive, repetitive, and awkwardly predictable. But at some point it begins to click and we are able to start integrating the mechanical moves into more of a seamless performance. And at that point, we are able to be creative and imaginative, to play with the parts. The problem with teaching
inexperienced students is that we rarely see them move beyond formulaic and mechanical arguments to something more inventive and original.

4. Even if there are abstract plans that students can learn and even if their mechanical performances are only temporary, left to their own devices, writers learn what they have to learn without formal instruction.

In some cases this is true—eventually. But the real question is how long it takes and whether uninstructed, everyone in fact learns equally well. We believe that if we can teach students to do something quickly that would otherwise take them years to learn, they become better at it faster and thus have more opportunity to refine their skills sooner. Moreover, not everyone learns to make research arguments well simply by reading lots of them, as has been pointed out for decades by teachers of students in advanced courses and graduate and professional schools and by employers in all fields.

5. Even if all that is true, when we simply tell students how to write, we deprive them of the opportunity for a deeper learning that comes with solving the problem on their own.

A good argument is a means to an end: It is a tool, a device that we use to solve a larger problem. We believe that it makes little sense to make learning the tool a learning problem. Deep learning occurs when we solve complex problems that have real consequences. In our judgment, it makes little sense to force students to invent the tools they use in solving a problem. An analogy is calculus: We use calculus to solve complex problems, but we don’t ask students to re-invent calculus in order to solve an engineering problem. What they have to learn is to solve the engineering problem with the tools available. To be sure, some novices and apprentices in some activities in
some cultures learn by watching and practicing on their own, making mistakes and learning from them. And if students wrote an argument a day and got good feedback on them all, we might rely on that form of learning. But life is too short for all that practice, and under any circumstances, who is going to read and respond to all those papers?
A Quick Guide to Marking Students’ Papers

1. **Distinguish marking papers (a learning outcome) from grading papers (an evaluation outcome).**

   We mark up papers so that students can learn from our response to their essays. Students seldom learn much of anything from a paper marked up to show all the errors that contributed to a grade (poor students get too many marks, good students too few). So never put marks on a paper just to justify a grade. (In practice, this might mean marking and grading separately and returning them at different times.)

2. **Let students help you decide when to mark their papers.**

   If you stage assignments, you are unlikely to have the time to respond to each stage in detail, and in any case students will not benefit if they see that you will take responsibility for each step. You should give students full responses only when it will do them the most good. If you wait till the end, students are unlikely to do more than pay lip service to your comments. If you respond when students have a complete draft, some will use your advice to improve their final papers, but others will have played out the consequences of a poor choice of problem—so that the only truly helpful response is to make them start over. On the other hand, students who find a good problem will benefit from a later rather than an earlier response. So if you respond selectively, discuss with your students what they can expect from responses at various stages in the process, and let them help you decide when each student will benefit most from the time you can give them.
3. **When you don’t respond, students can learn from their peers.**

To most teachers (and students), peer editing seems little more than the blind leading the blind. If students were good editors, they wouldn’t need our help as much as they do. But if students are generally poor editors, they are usually excellent surrogate readers. So create opportunities for writers to learn what their colleagues understand or not, where they struggle or not, where they resist or not. A student writer can learn a great deal from a colleague’s summary of her argument, especially when the summary is not what the writer expected. She can learn from a colleague’s list of possible objections or alternative conclusions, if not to identify weaknesses then to have issues for acknowledgement and response. Let students help each other, not by making suggestions (though of course suggestions are welcome), but by analyzing and responding to storyboards and drafts.

4. **Don’t mark as you read.**

The most efficient way to mark a paper is to analyze it before you read closely enough to mark it up. Start by reading the introduction, conclusion, headings, and the opening paragraphs to major sections. If the paper is coherent and reasonably well executed, those elements will constitute the best overview. If the paper is incoherent or poorly reasoned, you’ll see the problem right away. (When the introduction and conclusion are inconsistent, it is usually the conclusion that represents the student’s best thinking—or at least the thinking that has dominated the argument.) Once you have an overview, decided on a tentative agenda for your marks (see #6). Then read the paper carefully enough to pick out specific issues to address. It is generally better if anything more substantial than line editing comes to the student on a separate page, keyed to pages
or to numbers in the margins. Students learn better when your response respects the difference between their words and yours.

5. **In marking, less is more.**

The research is clear: for most students, the more you mark the less they learn. If you want to use marking to teach students something they can use in their next papers, you have to select one or two key points and focus on them. (In practice, this means reading and diagnosing the paper before you start marking it up; for most teachers this is faster than marking as they go.) If you line edit papers, you do not teach students anything about grammar or editing; you simply teach them that they can demote you to a copyeditor.

6. **Have a learning agenda for your marks.**

As teachers, we all know that students cannot learn everything at once. So when you mark papers, select the one or two most important matters you think that the student should work on. Then use your marks to focus the student on those matters and to explain both how to recognize the problem and how to avoid or mitigate it. We don’t help students by teaching them how to remedy all of the errors or infelicities we can find; we help them by teaching them how to avoid, or at least find and fix, the weaknesses in their papers that are most important and that they are prepared to learn how to fix.

7. **Mark papers “top-down.”**

In general, the problems in a draft cascade downward. A poor problem usually leads to a weak argument; an incoherent argument usually leads to a disorganized paper; a disorganized paper usually leads to poorly crafted sentences. When a writer struggles
with the higher-level features of a text, he usually executed lower-level ones less successfully than he otherwise could. So unless you have a specific agenda for an individual student, the best strategy is generally to focus the student on the highest level problems in a draft. Chances are that once the high-level issues are addressed, the low-level problems will disappear; or if not, they will then be more easily fixed.

8. **Don’t penalize good essays by leaving them unmarked.**

Although we all treasure a paper that seems not to need correction, you do not help good writers by returning clean papers that offer only general praise. Use the time you save by not editing to mark up good papers as well. If you cannot find something important that the student should change, use your marks to show students the most important things they should not change. Essays often succeed by accident, and students usually cannot explain even to themselves exactly why an essay worked. Use your marks to teach good students how to replicate their successes next time.

9. **The most effective marks focus on a reader’s response, not on the writer’s success or failure.**

We can criticize a student’s writing in three ways: (1) You put these points in the wrong order. (2) Your paper has its points in the wrong order. (3) I couldn’t see how these points fit together because their order confused me. Not only is the third gentler and kinder, but it reinforces the most important and most difficult lesson any writer must learn: what matters is not how your text seems to you but how it seems to your readers.

10. **The most effective marks about writing have three parts:** (1) point out the specific issue on the page, (2) articulate the relevant general principle, and (3) suggest a change or, better, direct the student to make a change.
In order for students to learn from our marks, they have to know exactly how they apply to the paper at hand. Your goal should be for them to learn something they can use to improve both the current paper and the next one; so they have to understand not just how to fix this paper but the general principle that they can apply to their future work (this part can usually be a canned response). And in order for them to be able to use our advice, they have to see it in practice or, best of all, practice it themselves.

For example, "I became confused when you raised the issue of Alexander Pope’s Catholicism in the middle of page 3, because nothing before this led me to expect that it would be a major issue in your paper. I was able to figure out the connection, but I had to work too hard to do so. Remember that your readers will do a better job of following your argument if they can anticipate (or at least not be surprised by) all of its major themes. So be sure that your most important themes are at least mentioned near the end of your introduction. I think you can probably find a way to mention Catholicism or at least religion in the last couple of sentences of your intro. Give me a revision of just the intro that does that by Monday the 3rd."

11. The most effective marks about argument—"content"—have three parts: (1) point out the specific issue on the page, (2) explain what gives you pause, and (3) make a suggestion or, better, ask a question pointing the student in a new direction.

You do not help students if your comments merely correct their misunderstandings or substitute your analysis for theirs. Students learn best when you comment on their positions (both favorably and unfavorably) in ways that convey your own reasoning.

For example, "You’re right, of course, when you say in the middle of page 3 that Alexander Pope’s Catholicism made him an outsider. That’s a shrewd observation. But
I’ve got a problem with saying that it’s the only factor in his attitude toward, as you say, “the rich and famous” (Pope would have called it the “beau monde”). After all, he was a short, unattractive hunchback with only middling family connections and at this point not a lot of money. In view of those factors, isn’t there an even stronger point to be made about Pope’s feelings of being on the outside looking in?"