

Evaluating Short Writings

Shorter assignments need not be evaluated as polished products; they simply help students begin to see the value of writing for clarifying and developing their ideas. To check whether students are writing on the topic of the writings, teachers can walk around the room and read over shoulders, ask a few students at random to read theirs aloud, pick up a few to grade or review at random each time, or collect all but read them only to see if most students understand the material.

- Journals can be checked (a few each day or week) simply to see that work is completed.
- Out-of-class short writings can be read for content only: Did the student answer the question correctly, or get the main idea of the chapter?
- Preparatory writings can be read for content only: Do they show that the student is actually working on the assignment and making progress towards its completion?

Few or no comments need be written on any of these writings; teachers can respond with a simple check, plus, or minus, or with a point system. When students turn in extra credit work, engage in personal response writing, or write in journals, the instructor's response might be a +___ (points), C/NC (credit, no credit), or a letter grade with comments, such as:

"This really moved our discussion forward. Good beginning. Clarify your ideas in the discussion. I'm not clear how this pertains to the topic."

"+3 Glad you found the film useful for understanding gradualism."

"NC Mark the journal pages you want graded. Feel free to hand it in again (with pages marked) next Friday."

"C+ You gave many hints about the conflict in values between you and your parent, but I remained unsure of its connection with St. Augustine."

When you do grade assignments, remember that you are the expert reader. Teachers' responses as expert readers in their own fields will be the most helpful to students. Every error need not be marked: based on the teacher's goals for a particular assignment, he or she can mark a paper selectively to reflect the student's attainment of those goals. If errors of grammar, punctuation, or mechanics interfere with clear communication, they can be noted simply by circling a few or even by writing an end comment such as, "Your many spelling errors are distracting."

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