

**Encouraging, Thoughtful, and Helpful Responses to High Stakes Writing: How Do Writing Teachers Do It ALL?**

Jennifer Rygalski

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**QUESTION**

How does my written feedback on students' "high-stakes" writing assignments affect their writing as well as their attitudes toward writing?

**DEFINITIONS**

Throughout my research, I refer to "high" and "low" stakes writing. Peter Elbow coined these terms in the article, "Low Stakes and High Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing," written in 1997. He uses these two terms to distinguish between different types of writing assignments. He defines them as follows, "The goal of low stakes assignments is not so much to produce excellent pieces of writing as to get students to think, learn and understand more of the course material. Low stakes writing is often informal and tends to be graded informally...High stakes assignments also produce learning, but they are more loaded because we judge the writing carefully for soundness of content and clarity of presentation."

**RATIONALE**

My research question developed as I spent uncountable numbers of hours responding to students' formal writing assignments. As I "graded" my students' high stakes writing, I often wondered whether I wasted not only my time, but the students' time as well. I questioned whether the comments I wrote in response to the students' work assisted them in improving their writing as well as their attitudes and confidence about writing.

I found that many other teachers asked these same questions. Donald Graves, (1991) a well-known and respected teacher of writing suggests that writing teachers must maintain an awareness of the students when responding to their writing. This very notion, a concern for the students themselves as well as their writing, often fogged the clear mindset I needed to respond effectively to students' work. Linda Christensen, a high school Language Arts Coordinator for Portland Public Schools, raised similar issues in an article titled, "The Politics of Correction," recently published in The National Writing Project Quarterly Newsletter (Fall 2003). She stated, "So how do we both nurture students in their writing and help them learn the language of power?"

We start by telling them what they're doing right. All too often teachers scar students' esteem about themselves as writers by wielding their pens in the margins with, "You're wrong. Wrong again. Ten points off for that comma splice. Where is the past tense?" These had been the same thoughts that I struggled with as I tried to write comments on students' papers.

These same thoughts clogged my brain as I struggled with the comments I wrote on students' writing.

It is no "secret" that teaching writing is one of the disciplines that teachers find the most difficult. In 2003, The National College Board and the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges conducted a study which culminated in a report titled, "The Neglected R: The Need for a Writing Revolution." One of the major challenges outlined in the report states that "...writing is a prisoner of time. Learning how to present one's thoughts on paper requires time. The sheer scope of the skill required for effective writing is daunting. The mechanics of grammar and punctuation, usage, developing a "voice" and a feel for the audience, mastering the distinctions between expository, narrative, and persuasive writing (and the types of evidence required to make each convincing)—the list is lengthy. These skills cannot be picked up from a few minutes here and a few minutes there, all stolen from more "important" subjects" (*The Neglected R*, 20). The report touched on key issues surrounding how to teach writing, how to effectively respond to students' writing, as well as the issue of who is responsible for teaching writing. The large body of research on writing in schools acknowledges the intensity and controversy surrounding this topic.

Furthermore, in light of the recent increase in emphasis on standardized testing, assessments, teaching writing once again faces increasing controversy surrounding the "best" way to teach it as well as "measure" it. As stated in the "Neglected R," "...as everyone understands, student performance and growth in writing are difficult to measure, for many reasons... Writing assessment is a genuine challenge" (21). This challenge continues to remain in the forefront of my mind as I assess my own students' work. As a result, I set out to determine how to better inform my assessment of my students' work.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As Nancie Atwell (2001), a "guru" in the world of teaching middle school reading and writing, states, "Young writers want to be listened to. They also want honest, adult responses. They need teachers who will guide them to the meanings they don't know yet by showing them

how to build on what they *do* know and *can* do” (218). She further suggests that students need suggestions and feedback when they are in the middle of developing their ideas and that the feedback needs to guide them in the “right” direction. She maintains that when teachers respond to student work, they must focus on what writers know and what they have done. She maintains that, “a piece of writing that isn’t working yet *isn’t working yet*; it’s not bad” (225). As a middle school English teacher, I continually struggle with the fact that middle school adolescents are at a tender developmental stage in their lives. In addition, as eighth graders they face an onslaught of testing throughout the entire school year. Daily I attempt to maintain the balance between preparation for “the” tests, while also encouraging thoughtful writing. At the same time, I did not want to create negative attitudes toward the process of writing. Ultimately, I want to guide the students toward developing their greatest potential as writers.

As Tom Romano (1987) mentions, “We speak a word of praise or a word of criticism, and someone we’ve known only weeks may be permanently changed in some way” (103). Teachers of writing must maintain extreme caution when they respond to students’ work. Most authorities on the teaching of writing, including, Atwell, Graves, Murrary, and Romano all agree that writing teachers need to address both what is working in a piece of writing as well as what can be improved upon. “In practice, the effective conference teacher does not deal in praise or criticism. All texts can be improved, and the instructor discusses with the student what is working and can be made to work better, and what isn’t working, and how it might be made to work” (119). Adolescent writers are vulnerable and desire feedback that will guide them in the right direction. They need to be able to trust that the feedback they will deserve will be honest, directive, and helpful. Often times it is not only their writing on the page, but their essential selves as well.

### **CONTEXT**

I teach eighth grade English Language Arts at a public middle school in Manhattan. I teach at one of the newer “small” schools, which have evolved as one of the latest trends in the city. The school has about 300 students, approximately 100 in each grade level. The school day is broken into four seventy-minute periods, with time built in for lunch, electives, and advisory. The school’s population is extremely diverse. The student population is a genuine mix of Latino, African-American, Asian, and Caucasian students. There is about an equal number of boys and

girls in the school. We have very few English Language Learners, although about twenty percent of our students do speak fluent Spanish, especially at home.

### **DATA COLLECTION TOOLS**

I collected data using several different tools including, surveys, for parents and students, interviews, student work, emails, and reading journal entries. In the beginning of the school year, I asked students to fill out informal general surveys about their experiences with both reading and writing. I used the responses as benchmarks to gauge how the students felt about reading and writing. Periodically during the year, and specifically when I returned high stakes writing assignments with grades and comments, I asked the students to fill out surveys about their reaction to the responses written on their papers. The first sets of these surveys had only a numerical rating responses format in which the students read a statement and then circled a number one through five, which corresponded with how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement.

In addition, I asked the students to take home a survey for their parents and/or guardians to fill out toward the end of March, after the students completed several high stakes writing assignments as well as completed the New York State English Language Arts exam. Throughout the year, I also collected unprompted feedback about my comments on students' writing. Occasionally both parents and students would send me notes, emails, or write in their reading journals about a particular paper they recently completed. I also used samples of students' work throughout the year to compare how I maintained my comments on their work. Finally, I completed several informal interviews with students at various times throughout the school year. I purposefully made these interviews as casual as possible in the hopes that I would receive the most honest feedback possible. Often I would stop students in the hallway or sit with them during lunch and inquire about their attitudes toward writing, a recent assignment, or a paper they had recently received back.

### **SUMMARY OF DATA**

#### **Student Surveys**

For the most part the data shows that in the directed response surveys, those surveys on which students used a numerical rating system, students found the comments on their writing useful, encouraging, honest, fair, and sufficient. (see figure 1) This information was useful in

attempting to grasp a general sense of how my comments influenced the students' writing as well as their attitudes toward my comments. However, I gathered more informative data from the opened ended responses that I later added to accompany the numerical rating surveys. Although many students wrote that they remained satisfied with my comments, for the purpose of my research I was much more concerned with their constructive criticism. One of the most repeated requests was that students desired more specific comments on their writing. They made some of the following suggestions:

- Give us back our drafts so we know what to change
- If she would give us a grade based on the draft what would it be? This would let us know where we stand, and we can use your constructive criticism to reach our goals.
- I think you should always comment on it, otherwise I don't know what to do and sometimes that makes me not do it.
- For Ms. Rygalski to explain more on her comments. Sometimes I don't understand what she is trying to do to make my story better.
- There are too many after a while and it gets hard after a while to keep track of all of the feedback.
- Be more specific with comments. Give examples
- Instead of saying "expand on this," tell me how I can expand.

### **Parent/Guardian Surveys**

Although I distributed a survey to each of my eighth grade students, unfortunately I only received seventeen of them back. Of the seventeen surveys returned, only twelve of them had the numerical ratings completed. Like the student surveys, these were for the most part positive and most parents/guardians seemed satisfied with the written feedback and comments their students had received on their writing. (see figure 2) In addition, similar to the student surveys, the parents/guardians offered more constructive feedback in the open-ended responses. Some of them included:

- So far, all the comments are very helpful but maybe some examples can be given to whatever changes you make or in any comments.
- I think to add grammar, spelling, sentence structure should be incorporated in the writing.

- Maybe more feedback could be given about genre or specific strategies and less on content
- I saw some comments early in the year and thought they were academically helpful and personally supportive

### **Student Work**

In examining and analyzing different samples of student work from the beginning of the year until the end, many students demonstrated drastic improvement in several areas including:

- Sentence structure
- Sophisticated vocabulary
- Organization
- Fluency

### **Individual Student Interviews**

I conducted several informal interviews with students from the eighth grade at the end of the school year. Many of these interviews developed organically out of a conversation about writing in general. Most importantly, I wanted to find out how the students' thinking and attitude about writing had shifted if at all from the beginning of the school year to the end. Some of their responses included the following:

- "I am now more in tune with what I want to write and how to express my feelings."
- "I feel I am better organized."
- "The comments showed that you read our essays and paid attention to what we wrote."
- "Seeing that you commented so much on everyone's papers showed that you really read all of our essays and that you paid attention to what we wrote and we couldn't 'B.S.' because we knew you read it."

### **Other Sources of Data**

Throughout the year, I occasionally came across students and parents' feedback about writing. This data was unsolicited, but I believe it is equally important to the overall research.

- (email from parent) "Thank you for copying ....'s essay for me. Of course, I was proud of his work. But I was also greatly impressed by your comments, which provided such clear feedback and gentle guidance, indicating what .... would need to do to reach the next level. I am beginning to believe that he will, too! All the more because you hold

him responsible and require him to be accountable, so he knows that your praise is genuine.”

- (student reading journal) “I have to thank Ms. Rygalski! She taught us tips and tricks. She also helps us a lot with essays. I’ve learned about active and passive voice. I have to admit that now I want my essays fully active.”

### ANALYSIS

The data collected suggests that there are multiple steps that can be implemented at several levels (student, teacher, administration, parent/guardian) to increase the efficiency as well as the usefulness and helpfulness of teachers’ comments on students’ work. On the surface the data points to the students’ general satisfaction with the comments written on their work. However, when analyzed with a more critical stance, the data suggests that there is a great deal of room for improvement in responding to student work. Given the feedback from students and parents that I need to be more effective and precise in my comments on their writing, I plan to revise my response system.

I plan to create a method for response that allows for greater dialogue between the teacher and the students when discussing a student’s respective piece of writing. As a teacher that has spent countless hours responding to students’ formal writing assignments, I feel that it is important to develop a more efficient system for responding to students’ work. I believe a more efficient system is necessary to prevent burnout and simple exhaustion. I plan to address more of the students’ writing needs, questions, and revisions during class time, where the two actors, teachers and students, can discuss and write together.

Furthermore, I think that teachers across disciplines and curriculums need to work together to create a writing response system that will allow teachers to respond constructively, but in a more time efficient manner. The data suggests that students need encouragement. Students’ attitudes and confidence can be scarred easily if they constantly face too much criticism on writing that they worked tremendously hard to complete. Students do not want to read statements such as “You need to put more effort into this.” They especially do not want to receive this same feedback from five different teachers. I believe that if teachers in different disciplines notice that a student consistently makes the same error or mishap in their writing, there must be communication between the teachers so that the student can work on improving this part of their writing process and move on to

something else. I am firmly convinced that when teachers respond to students' writing, they need to focus on two areas: the positive aspects of the work as well as the constructive criticism that will help improve the work, in all of the respective curriculum areas.

Finally, I think it is essential that students have some voice in the type of feedback they receive. This empowers the students and allows them to have some control over their endeavor as a learner. I believe that students must be able to sit with their respective teachers in a writing conference and discuss what type of advice or feedback they need based on their individual strengths and weakness as well as the requirements of the individual writing assignment.

The individual conferences will allow the teacher to further explain and substantiate why they might have written on a student's paper, "Expand on this." This comment might be necessary, however when meeting one-on-one, the teacher can "really" explain what specifically needs to be expanded upon. The comment suggest that something is working in the writing, but simply stating this on the students work does not help the student recognize what is working and in fact might impede their desire to continue to expand on what is already working in the piece. However, a writing conference would help facilitate this information. This is the honest and real feedback that writing experts, Nancy Atwell, Donald Graves, and Tom Romano call for.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Collecting the data for my research question and an in-depth analysis of the data, pointed toward several policy implications for several different actors involved in the teaching of writing, including teachers, administration, parents/guardians, and school districts. I believe that teaching writing is a collaborative effort—not one that rests solely on the shoulders of "the" English teacher. Teachers, administration, literacy coaches, and school district officials must work together on common goals in order to help students write to their greatest potential. This large goal begins with responding to students in an encouraging, strategic, honest, and effective manner. That said, I make the following recommendations:

- Teachers and students need to work together to create a safe and caring school community where students feel comfortable to discuss their writing and take risks with their writing.

- Students need time to meet one-on-one or in small groups with their teachers to discuss their writing and their writing goals.
- Students need positive praise as well as constructive criticism to support their improvement as writers.
- Teachers across grade levels and disciplines need to collaborate to create writing standards and guidelines, which will facilitate more consistency in expectations for student writing.
- Teachers need time built into their schedules during which they can conference with students about the student's needs.
- Teachers need to be trained to effectively comment on students' writing in a way that encourages and motivates the students to pursue improvement in their writing.
- Teachers need to encourage students while they are in the writing process in order to help the students maintain a positive attitude about writing as well as themselves as writers.
- Schools need to increase parent/guardian involvement by clearly communicating expectations for students' writing across disciplines as well as create meaningful ways parents can assist students while they write at home.
- Teachers and students need time to work collaboratively toward achieving the student's individual writing goals based on their individual needs.
- Principals and staff developers need to provide professional development that allows teachers to learn "best practices" surrounding responding to students' writing, across all disciplines and grade levels.

There is little controversy that teaching writing is challenging and time consuming. However, it remains one of the academic disciplines that is least understood by those that are responsible for teaching it. All of those involved in the writing process, from the writers themselves to those involved in the teaching of the process, must work together so that the students reach their greatest possible potential as writers. Ultimately, in order to teach students to write with power, they must have teachers who will guide them confidently toward that goal. Writing teachers' confidence begins with knowing how to effectively comment on students' writing.

Figure 1

## Student Survey Numerically Rated Responses

Students were asked to rate on a scale of ONE to FIVE, with FIVE as the highest, the written comments and feedback they received on FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS, based on the criteria of HELPFULNESS,

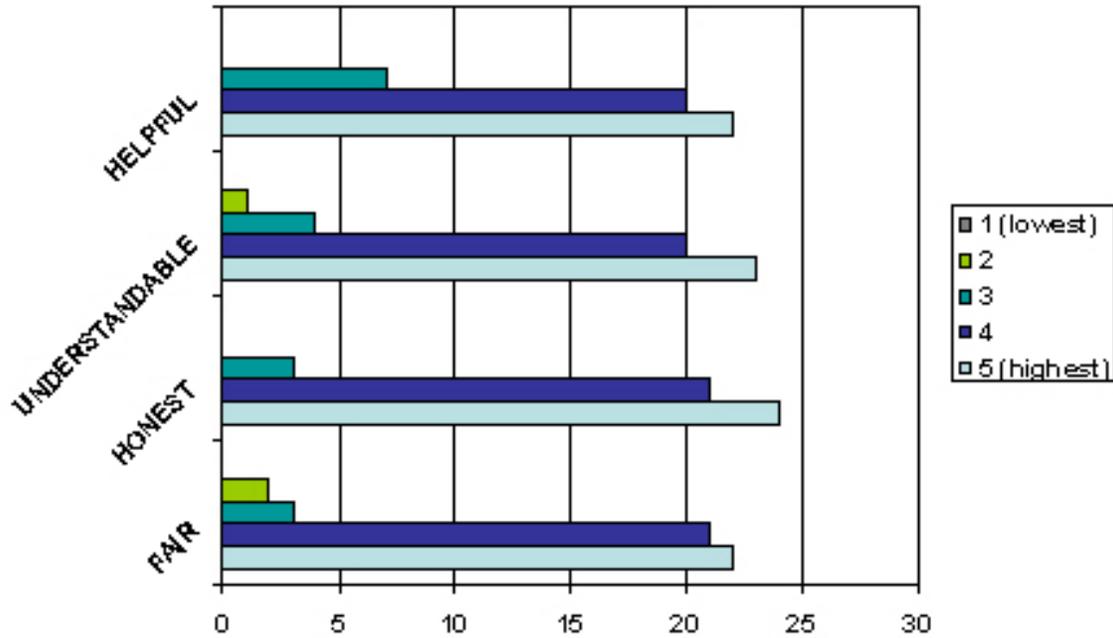
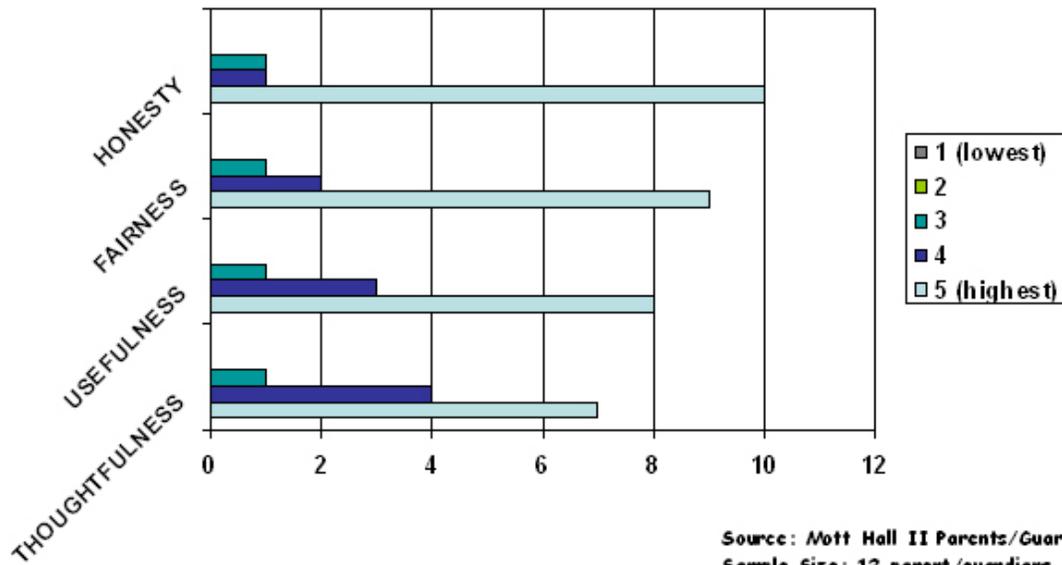


Figure 2

## Parent/Guardian Feedback Survey

Parents/guardians were asked to rate the written comments on their student's work based on honesty, fairness, usefulness, and thoughtfulness.



Source: Mott Hall II Parents/Guardians  
Sample Size: 12 parent/guardians