

4-1-2007

Giving the Middle Grade: One Teacher's Private Controversy

Anne Regan

California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo, aregan@calpoly.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius>

Recommended Citation

Regan, Anne (2007) "Giving the Middle Grade: One Teacher's Private Controversy," *Moebius*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol5/iss1/8>

This Essay and Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Moebius by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact mwyngard@calpoly.edu.

GIVING THE MIDDLE GRADE: ONE TEACHER'S PRIVATE CONTROVERSY

Anne Regan

As an expository writing instructor I find that my most difficult task is grading student work. I have not yet found an equation that easily balances my own writing style preferences with the rules that govern writing (mechanics, grammar, and punctuation). Many writing instructors have discussed the frustrations of grading, so I will illustrate the most contentious part for me, what one of my students calls the “big fat C.”

Most of the time C papers exhibit a general lack of interest on the part of the writer to intrigue the reader. Kate Ronald argues that these essays show their writers abrogating responsibility to commit their “ideas to [the] reader.”¹ I think of writing commitment as “depth” in writing—the writer’s willingness to explore details to make a connection with the reader. Writing depth is an easily identifiable element for me, and I am not bothered by giving a C to the uncommitted paper.

For example, one of my students recently wrote about how writing an essay is like doing a crossword puzzle. She said that a crossword puzzle often has a theme, just as an essay does, and solving the puzzle requires finding the right words and putting them in the right places, just like writing an essay. A “word search” begins as you try to put your words to work in your essay.² I liked her analogy and it intrigued me. She had made a great leap out of the norm as a student writer.


In her essay, this student used vivid descriptions to include her reader in a mutual understanding of the analogy, but the first draft was underdeveloped. She needed to illustrate and expand her theme. For example, she wrote about Memorial Day’s “meaning, purpose, and relevance” to her life but never specified how or why Memorial Day was

relevant to her. I gave her careful criticism and a C-. I hated—but felt I had to—give that essay a lower grade, a grade that is less than satisfactory. I hoped the grade would not dissuade her from developing her ideas.

This essay was written in response to the first assignment I give my students, which asks them to reflect on their own writing experiences. This assignment sometimes elicits uncommitted essays. These C papers are underdeveloped, full of sentences like “writing is like *fill in the blank*,” or “writing frustrates me,” with no reasoning or follow-through from the writer expanding on their assertion. I often grade these uncommitted papers C- because doing so encourages their writers to push harder and dig a little deeper to explain their reasoning with interesting detail. They need to find a way to commit their ideas to the reader.

However, sometimes a student *has* committed to their idea and created a strong interest in me (the reader) but has written a mechanically flawed paper. In this case, it is impossible to give the student any grade higher than C. This kind of “C” paper has adequately—or even admirably—fulfilled the assignment, yet it is flawed. The flaws can vary: problems with transitions or structure, sprinklings of vague words, extra-wordy sentences, or a few mechanical errors—just enough to confuse the writing. This is for me the touchy and controversial side of giving a C grade. My anxiety begins when a student makes a great leap, breaking through the normal “why I do what I do” paper to create mutualism with the reader: a tentative moment when writer and reader have a relationship that sustains both of them. In this moment, the writer creates meaning and the reader clearly comprehends it, and is even intrigued by it. I dread grading an essay like this because I naturally want to applaud the effort being hindered by the flaws in the writing style, but I have to give the paper a middle grade. I want to encourage the student who has tried to develop and push their ideas, yet I feel bound by the laws of composition. These laws of grammar, punctuation, and mechanics dictate that I cannot give a grade higher than a C when there are too many errors; thus, there is a conflict for me as the grader.

Even if the grammar and punctuation are flawed, I tend to want to give higher marks to a C- paper if it has given me, the reader, something new to contemplate. As a composition teacher I know the moments I enjoy the most are when a student startles me with a new concept, a remarkable analogy, or a spectacular descriptive paragraph. I can honestly say that perfect grammar and punctuation do not give me nearly as much joy. I struggle to balance the two, because a grade must be applied with both criteria in mind—content and mechanics. Luckily, after much revision and thought, my student reworked her word search essay into an “A” paper. I agree with her that “just as a word search has a theme supported by words which are circled in a style...writing has a thesis supported by evidence which is written with a voice.”³ These voices are hard to grade; they cause me much

anxiety, especially if they are out of the ordinary, attempting something new in a world where “C” is just satisfactory. 

Notes

1. Ronald, Kate. “Style: The Hidden Agenda in Composition Classes or One Reader’s Confession.” *Figuring in the World*. 208.195-209.
2. Beal, Elizabeth. “You Don’t Have to Read to Learn How to Write.” 17 October 2006.
3. Ibid.