

# Why I Don't Edit Their Rough Drafts

[chroniclevitae.com/news/1682-why-i-don-t-edit-their-rough-drafts](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1682-why-i-don-t-edit-their-rough-drafts)



January 27, 2017

With Support From

*Image: Discussion about the text, by Jérôme Dessommes*



Like most professors who teach composition, I require my students to write multiple drafts — three, in fact — of each essay. That's not because three is a magic number. It's just a number that fits well with the amount of time we have in the semester, and it reinforces the idea of working through multiple drafts. If there is a "secret" to good writing, I'm convinced, multiple drafts is it.

And, like most of my colleagues, I regularly have students work in "peer editing" or "workshopping" sessions where they read and offer comments on one another's work.

None of this is groundbreaking pedagogy. In fact, it's pretty standard fare for a college-level writing course.

What I don't do, however — unlike most of my colleagues — is read all of my students' rough drafts before they turn in a final paper for a grade. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that I don't *edit* any of their drafts, because I actually do end up reading a fair number. But I don't mark up each and every draft, and return it for revision.

That's enough of a departure from classroom norms that I can well imagine a lot of raised eyebrows at this point: "How can you not edit your students' drafts? What do you do with them, then?" My approach is a calculated strategy, designed to accomplish certain specific goals.

**Workload management.** Some readers may assume I'm just lazy — declining to read and edit students' drafts because it's simply too time-consuming. While I would dispute the first part of that statement — what you call

"laziness," I would characterize as "workload management" — I do agree wholeheartedly with the second. Editing students' essays would, indeed, require many additional hours (that I don't have). More important, it's also unnecessary and even counterproductive.

But first let's run the numbers. Most semesters, I teach five composition courses, with 20 to 24 students apiece. They each write five essays, so I'm grading more than 500 essays every semester. Obviously that takes a lot of time. There's no way I could read, edit, and grade three times that many essays and still be able to fulfill my other professional responsibilities, not to mention have a life.

*My rule is that I will read specific passages, and answer specific questions. But I won't read and edit an entire draft. That way, they learn to be their own editors.*

If I were going to edit students' rough drafts, I'd have to cut back on the number of papers they write (assign three instead of five) and probably cut back, too, on the number of drafts (two instead of three). Or I could use some version of the portfolio method, requiring students to continually revise the same two or three essays throughout the semester — as I know some of you do. That's a legitimate approach, and I have no problem with it.

Personally, however, I prefer to have students write more essays so we can cover a variety of genres. I also believe it's better for students to learn from their mistakes on an essay, put that one behind them, and move on to the next, rather than reworking the same piece until they (and I) are sick of it. (In lieu of a final exam, I allow students to revise one of their earlier essays and resubmit it for a higher grade.)

**An audience they care about.** One of the biggest obstacles to teaching writing skills is the inherent artificiality of the college environment. The classroom, after all, is not the real world. Nowhere else, outside of a classroom, do we find people writing essays for a grade.

An employee writing a report for a boss seems similar but there's a key difference: That boss might do any number of things with the report — praise it, ignore it, take credit for it, demand that it be rewritten. But one thing she *won't* do is mark it up with red ink and put a C- at the top. And that changes everything.

The pioneering composition scholar Donald Murray once observed that many composition mistakes simply disappear when writers care about their audience. When I first read that — some 30 years ago as a graduate student — I thought it couldn't possibly be true. Why would "caring" make errors go away? I have learned over the years, however, that Murray was exactly right: One of the keys to clear writing is a sincere desire for your audience to be able to understand what you're saying.

One of the best things I can do for my students, then, is to provide them with an audience that they just might care about. Clearly, that's not me; they don't care a whit about communicating with me, one human being to another. From me they only care about getting a good grade, which experience has taught them means minimizing errors — something that, paradoxically, makes them more error prone. (That's something all performers, from ballet dancers to closing pitchers, understand intuitively: You're much more likely to screw up if you're focused on not screwing up rather than on getting the job done.)

One of the main purposes of the workshopping is to provide students with a realistic audience of their peers — a group of people with whom they might actually wish to communicate. And one of the reasons I don't edit their drafts beforehand is so that students know their peer group will be the first to read what they've written.

Over time, students begin to write for each other — not for me — which leads to better writing.

**Teacher versus editor.** In recent years, I've done a fair amount of freelance editing — something quite different from teaching. The aim of an editor is to "fix" a piece of writing and make it suitable for publication — not necessarily

to teach the writer how to do better next time (although that may be an important byproduct).

A teacher's main goal, on the other hand, is not to improve a particular essay but rather to help students grow and improve as writers. In that process, it is vital for them to learn from their mistakes and their successes — to find out for themselves, with our guidance, what works and what doesn't. Ideally, students will begin to make connections and recognize grammatical, structural, and thematic issues on their own.

That's less likely to happen if you as the instructor simply mark the errors, make some comments, and hand the paper back for the student to fix. In that scenario, students have no need to look critically at their essays; they know you are going to do it for them. Students are unlikely to make any changes beyond the ones you have suggested. In that scenario, they aren't learning much, they are simply exhibiting a Pavlovian response.

My rule is that I will read specific passages, upon request, and answer specific questions. But I won't read and edit an entire draft. That way, I make clear — by my actions, as well as my words — that they must learn to be their own editors and that they are ultimately responsible for the form and content of their essays.

The challenge here is that reading like an editor differs significantly from reading for information or enjoyment. Editing involves far more than just "fixing mistakes," or what you or I would call "proofreading." It requires seeing what's on the page while constantly thinking about what *could have been* on the page instead. It requires us to juggle, in our minds, multiple scenarios, in terms of diction, sentence structure, organization, and so forth.

That kind of thinking does not come naturally to most of us, and certainly not to most students. We have to train ourselves to do it. And what better way to help students develop that cognitive skill than to regularly put them in a position where they have to apply it, or at least attempt to? That, to me, is the main benefit of having students workshop their rough drafts in small groups: Students are, more or less, forced to think like editors.

Most of them aren't very good at it, at least at first, but they become more comfortable and adept. I start each workshop session with a 10-to-15-minute training module on some aspect of editing, helping them understand what to look for. By the end of the course they've become better at editing each other's work and, more important, their own.

All of those potential benefits are negated if we simply fix everything that's wrong with rough drafts. Students don't learn to improve their own writing, nor do they reap the rewards of helping others improve. Call me lazy, if you like, but that's why I don't edit students' drafts for them — and why I believe you shouldn't, either.