**Making Drafts Count**

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Many a professor has required students to submit their first drafts only to end up reading a lot of superficial papers. Students tend to see the required first draft as a hoop we make them jump through before the main event. They figure they might as well conserve their energy, turn in whatever they can come up with the night before, and wait for your precise instructions on how to end up with an A.

[Last month, I wrote](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1129-getting-them-to-read-our-comments) about the challenge of getting students to pay attention to our comments on their writing. I suggested that the majority of our feedback should be in response to their drafts, instead of their final papers, so that they can make use of our suggestions. When we concentrate our attention on our students’ writing process rather than on their finished products, we ensure that they still care about what we’ve spent time marking up, and we communicate to them the importance of process in academic work. Our goal should be — beyond whether students got the “right answers” this time — that they are able to find those answers themselves in the future.

The challenge is: How do we make sure students actually buy in to this approach? What can we do to make their drafts count?

The first thing we can do is grade the drafts. Make the good-faith completion of a draft a component of the assignment grade — 25 percent, perhaps—or count it as homework. Either way, telling students that drafts are mandatory will be meaningless unless you back that up with their preferred course currency.

Second, expand the concept of what counts as a draft. There’s no rule that says a draft has to be in the same format as the final product. Remember: One of the main benefits of students actually taking the time to create drafts is that they learn how to develop, and then revise, their ideas. How those ideas are expressed in draft form is less important than the opportunity to express them at all. So if your assignment is a research essay, have students turn in an annotated bibliography — that’s a draft. If the assignment is a personal essay, for the first draft, ask students to write letters to their younger selves, offering wisdom and advice. Have them deliver speeches, or make screencasts, or storify a series of tweets. Don’t be hamstrung by an overly strict conception of what makes a draft.

Rather than dry runs at the finished product, think of drafts as more like a series of projects that help students refine and improve their ideas along the way to the finish line. By making the invention process creative, we encourage students to take the components of that process seriously. And the more seriously that students treat their drafts, the more likely the process will be useful to them.

Along those same lines, instead of requiring several essentially independent assignments throughout the semester, design some of your assignments to build on one another. Whether you call them drafts is not important. By having students take an assignment, revise it, and adapt it to new requirements, you provide students with opportunities to develop ideas over time, to see how their thinking can change, to understand that complex work does not emerge, fully formed, in a single fit of inspiration.

Here at the University of Iowa, the [Iowa Digital Engagement and Learning Initiative](http://ideal.uiowa.edu), a pedagogy lab co-founded by my colleague [Matt Gilchrist,](http://clas.uiowa.edu/rhetoric/people/matt-gilchrist) has developed a project along these very lines. In the [Iowa Narratives Project](http://ideal.uiowa.edu/projects/iowa-narratives-project-inp), students begin by writing an analysis of a public space — an assignment that itself includes several drafts.

Students then build on that first assignment by researching, composing, and recording a podcast on a story in the public sphere that they think deserves more attention. This second assignment begins with the students reviewing the first assignment, looking through their public space paper for inspiration. Ideas that began to take shape within their analyses can be developed into more complex and fully formed concepts in their final projects.

By broadening our ideas about drafts — and enshrining them in our syllabi — we can offer students more and better opportunities to take time with their work, to sit patiently with complex ideas, to value and understand the revision process as it applies to a variety of intellectual tasks.

I bet the last thing you wrote went through a number of drafts before you were finished (this one certainly did!). Let’s give our students that same opportunity.

- See more at: https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1150-making-drafts-count?cid=rc\_right#sthash.MSUWUEyM.dpuf