

# LET'S GET CONSISTENT: THE MERRILLVILLE HIGH SCHOOL WRITING PROGRAM

---

AGNES LYNCH and CHRISTINE PAVEL

To paraphrase, not irreverently, from Scripture, "Wherever two or more of you are gathered in the name of grading student themes, there is disagreement in the midst of you!" We have all experienced certainly the plight of having several English teachers assessing a student composition with grades ranging from A to F. The problem exists at all levels of education: from a grade school report freely borrowed from *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia* to a college thesis complete with footnotes.

Yet consistency in grading high school students' themes is of the utmost importance, especially in this time of teacher accountability. Many problems that composition teachers now face may be eliminated if a prescribed method of grading is employed by every English teacher in every school. Students will come to expect, even demand, high standards of grading, and teachers will find that their work loads will become more manageable if agreed on criteria for grading are employed by each member of the English department, with appropriate support from members of other departments.

Phase-elective classes are offered at Merrillville High School, but the majority of students (there are, of course, a

Agnes Lynch is Chairperson of the English Department at Merrillville High School; Christine Pavel teaches various English courses at the same high school.

few exceptions) must complete and pass a course entitled Intermediate Composition. Merrillville High School is a grade 10-12 school, and students are fed into the school from two junior high schools. In the spring, all ninth graders write a diagnostic composition in their English classes. Teachers from our high school read these papers and determine whether the students will be placed in Basic Composition or Intermediate Composition when they enter the high school. If students seem to have difficulties in writing, they will write themselves into Basic Composition, a one semester writing class in which the student learns to compose a coherent paragraph. Upon the successful completion of Basic Composition, these students must enroll in Intermediate Composition for the following school year. In Intermediate Composition, they are taught how to master the five paragraph essay. On the other hand, if freshmen students can write a logical paragraph they are placed in Intermediate Composition as sophomores and, upon successful completion of that class, they need not take another writing course. Composition is stressed throughout the English curriculum at M.H.S., and other writing courses are offered as electives.

Standards of grammar, usage, and punctuation are employed in almost all courses at Merrillville High School. A few years ago, a committee was formed, and teachers from each department agreed upon standardized correction symbols for marking papers (see Appendix A). Strategically, a business teacher chaired the committee, not an English teacher. The correction symbol chart has since been posted in a conspicuous place in every classroom. All teachers at the high school make an effort to use the symbols when grading students' work. This outward dedication toward improving writing skills in every discipline required the cooperation of all teachers.

In any school system, all teachers, to be sure, must first be persuaded that writing skills affect the courses they teach and that by checking students' tests and papers for designated mechanical errors, as well as course content information, they will be doing themselves and their students an invaluable service. Even English teachers must be persuaded that consistency in grading is a crucial step in the writing process.

We English teachers are acutely aware that composition and substantive writing are never stressed enough throughout the curriculum. Most English teachers have ironically

taken a multitude of literature classes but very few writing courses. And even we English teachers may feel as inadequately prepared as, let's say, the history teacher, to grade student themes in a prescribed fashion. Lack of preparation affects not only students but teachers as well. Even we English teachers must be assured that we are capable of grading themes, understanding the finer points of grammar, and marking papers intelligently. We must be shown what errors to look for; otherwise, we may feel we cannot give maximum feedback to our students. Working together is always important. Setting goals and writing a standard for *all* English teachers to follow must be done as a group effort, and each of us must be given a voice in the process. The input of all teachers is vital to the formulation of a workable set of standards, and no teacher should be made to feel inferior. We all have much to learn in the teaching of writing.

After we put into place at Merrillville High School both a diagnostic writing procedure and across the curriculum guidelines for mechanical correctness in students' papers, one nagging problem remained: While we may come close to agreement on a theme's obvious mechanical flaws such as fragments, misspelled words, and dangling participles, we face a greater problem when trying to evaluate the strength of the *content* of that same student's theme. Attempts have been made to resolve this difficulty through holistic grading, and while these efforts have been somewhat successful, the student is not given a great deal of direction in determining *why* his paper was thus evaluated, nor *how* to avoid similar problems in future writing efforts.

To complete our program of consistency in grading at M.H.S., the English department chairperson asked our principal for permission to run an in-service workshop on paper grading in order to train the members of the English department. Permission was easily secured from our principal and superintendent. We have found most administrators are extremely supportive of teacher efforts when the outcome benefits everyone concerned. Involving the twelve English teachers in evaluating student themes, the workshop was so gratifying for all that we are eager to share our success with you in hopes that you will find something of value to take back to your own school systems.

Let us assume that the writing program at your school is fairly well defined. (If this assumption is overly optimistic, you will have to go back to square one; but we must use that

premise now.) In our case, the students are separated, not by grade level, but by writing ability, as determined by the writing sample already explained above, a sample graded holistically by a team of high school English teachers. The objectives for these two courses — Basic Composition and Intermediate Composition — are fairly well delineated: the mastering of both paragraph and essay form.

We had previously wrestled with the problem of assigning a point value to certain kinds of mechanical errors and had agreed that a penalty of 10 pts. would be assigned to major errors (fragment, run-on, comma splice) and a 3 pt. penalty assigned to all other mechanical errors, this on the basis of a possible 100 pt. score for mechanics. So that much was behind us. But that part was easy! Mechanics in writing is, after all, a very objective quality. What had yet to be done was the difficult part — deciding on the content evaluation, admittedly a more subjective appraisal.

We prepared a Statement of Standards for grading the content in both Basic Composition and Intermediate Composition, and distributed this rubric to all the writing teachers at the high school. (See Appendices B and C.) One week later we met after school to discuss these standards. Input from staff resulted in several adjustments, with freedom to suggest further modifications pending developments at the workshop.

The next step was to compile the sample essays. Staff members were invited to submit student themes to be used at the workshop. After consideration of some forty papers, we selected fifteen Basic Composition paragraphs and five Intermediate Composition essays, with an attempt to include a variety of writing problems. The papers were duplicated in the student's handwriting (or a reasonable facsimile), and assembled in folders for each teacher participating in the workshop.

On the day of the actual workshop, we began the session with a reminder of our purpose: "Since we already have a sequential composition program and a set of standards for grading mechanical errors, we need a uniform method to measure the effectiveness of *content* in student themes. We are not here to test or trap one another, to see who can find the most errors in a given paper, but rather to arrive at a consensus regarding the merit and quality of what the student has written." We took time to review the grading symbols and the Statement of Standards. Now that we were im-

mediately faced with the task, teachers once again had an opportunity to question and discuss.

The first sample paper in the folder was read and marked. Scores were recorded on the chalkboard for comparison. Variance was noted, especially in content, as expected. Discussion of the highs and lows resulted in clarification, and eventual agreement within a range of one letter grade. A second sample paper was read and marked, compared and discussed. The same procedure produced the same results as in the first paper. And now . . . to work!

Each reader considered a set of the next four papers, with a time limit of fifteen minutes (trying to approximate the time a teacher can spend grading a student's composition, realistically), and marked each paper according to the accepted Statement of Standards, using the accepted list of symbols. Results of each paper were then recorded on the board and comparisons noted. Highs and lows were discussed, disagreements were "hammered out." In several cases, the Statement of Standards did not adequately express the particular fault revealed in a paper. At that point, a discussion resulted in a modification of the Statement of Standards.

As the day progressed, uniformity was increasingly apparent. The most difficult papers were those in the average range; extremely bad or extremely good papers were fairly easy to identify. But even in that "middle range" we were eventually able to reach a consensus.

The results were most gratifying. Everyone gained! Points of grammar were explored; differences between actual errors and purely individual preferences were clarified; a sympathy for the student's point of view was developed. Teachers' uncertainties were removed or greatly reduced. There were many favorable comments, although it was a *busy* day of *hard* work: "Best workshop I ever attended." "Wish we had had a chance to do this in college." "More useful than anything I did in student teaching."

Potential uses of such a workshop are many. Composition teachers not in attendance at the workshop could be given the folder, with directions to proceed with the marking and grading and to meet with the department chairman or a designee to discuss results. Composition teachers new to the system could be introduced to the objectives and methods of the system by the use of this same procedure. Refresher courses could be offered at the beginning of each

school year to reacquaint teachers with the process. As a result, students will have a clearer idea of what is expected of them, since each composition student will be provided with the Statement of Standards and the list of correction symbols at the beginning of the semester. And although it may seem *more* time consuming at first, once teachers are familiar with the Statement of Standards (and the number assigned to each particular kind of problem), they can simply refer to a particular number as an indication to the student of what needs to be improved, as well as writing more specific lengthy comments and suggestions for improvement. In order to monitor the system, frequent spot checks can be made, with the department chairperson collecting a few of the most recently graded papers from each teacher and either personally reviewing them or having a committee do so.

No longer will the plaintive cry be heard: "The C – I got in Ms. Stricto's class would have been an A in Ms. Softie's!" We may not be the easiest English Department in the community, but we are consistent! In addition, a K-12 writing program in the Merrillville system has been developed and will be put into effect by the second semester of this school year. Once again, it was through the efforts of teachers that the writing program was developed. A standardized system of grading student themes will be employed for the first time ever in the Merrillville system, and all teachers and students will reap the fruits of the program in the not-so-distant future.

## Appendix A

### MERRILLVILLE HIGH SCHOOL'S STANDARDIZED CORRECTION SYMBOLS

SYMBOL	MEANING
1. ¶	Error in paragraphing
2. wuz	Spelling or capitalization error (Option: <u>wuz</u> )
3. ^	Something was omitted
4. <del>word</del>	Delete material that is crossed out (Option: Place an R for repetitious)
5. SS	Error in Sentence Structure, i.e., Agreement, Fragment, Awkward, Run On
6. ?	Is this right? Did you mean to say this?
7. <u>word</u> ↘	Move encircled material to place indicated by arrow

- 8. WC            Problem in word choice or use
- 9. P            Error in punctuation

This form is used in *all* departments and is posted in all classrooms.

### Appendix B

#### STANDARDS FOR DETERMINING CONTENT GRADE IN BASIC COMPOSITION

An "A" paper does all of the following well:

1. Thesis and/or Topic Sentence is direct and focused (limited).
2. Arrangement of ideas is logical, orderly, and consistent.
3. Supportive details are concrete, definite.
4. Choice of material is relevant, convincing, appropriate (level of maturity).
5. Style is vivid and effective.

A "B" paper has one of the following weaknesses:

1. Thesis or Topic Sentence is indirect, unfocused, or missing.
2. Arrangement of ideas is not orderly, or even when orderly, transitions are not provided; the reader must assume those links.
3. Details are not concrete or definite, somewhat vague generalizations used instead of specific support.
4. Choice of support material is not totally relevant, or even when relevant is unconvincing or inappropriate.
5. Style is simplistic.
6. Paper lacks an appropriate conclusion.
7. Paper is too short.

A "C" paper has two of the weaknesses stated above.

A "D" paper has three of those weaknesses.

An "F" paper has weaknesses in four or more of the content characteristics that were the student's responsibility.

If a paper repeatedly commits any error, the grade will be lowered commensurately.

If a paper would be "saved" by a good grade in mechanics, it is the reader's responsibility to mark the content grade sufficiently low so that the student will not be deluded into thinking that he has written a paper of passing quality.

## Appendix C

### STANDARDS FOR DETERMINING CONTENT GRADE IN INTERMEDIATE COMPOSITION

An "A" paper in Intermediate Composition does all of the following well:

1. Introduction progresses properly, narrowing to a direct and focused thesis; i.e. in literary essays the thesis will reflect the method which will be used to develop the paper; in nonliterary essays it must be argumentative.
2. The first support ¶ must contain the concession for the "pro" of the paper (exception, literary papers).
3. All topic sentences must directly contribute to the development of the thesis.
4. All ¶s are linked by appropriate transitional devices.
5. All sentences within each ¶ must directly contribute to the development of the topic sentence.
6. The conclusion begins with a restatement of thesis and moves logically to a final generalization.
7. Arrangement of ideas is logical, orderly, and consistent.
8. Development of details is concrete, definite.
9. Choice of material is relevant, convincing, appropriate.
10. Style is vivid and effective.

A "B" paper in Intermediate Composition exhibits ONE of the following weaknesses:

1. Intro does not move smoothly from general to specific.
2. Poor thesis . . . too broad, too narrow, or not argumentative.
3. Inappropriate use of concession  
-or-  
Poor transition between ¶s or within ¶s
4. Poor topic sentence.
5. There are occurrences of support material that is either irrelevant, unconvincing, inappropriate, or inadequate.
6. Support is repetitious.
7. Style is simplistic.
8. Conclusion lacks restatement of thesis or proper development from thesis to generalization.



A "C" paper exhibits any TWO of the weaknesses.

A "D" paper exhibits THREE of the weaknesses.

An "F" paper is guilty of more than 3 of these flaws, or repeatedly commits violations of any 3.

