

**ASSESSING STUDENTS' WRITING:  
COUNTERING SOME COMMON MISBELIEFS**

**by**

**Jerald E. Goldstein  
Adjunct Instructor  
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University  
College of Continuing Education  
European Division, Hanau Center**



**Abstract**

In their attempt to come to terms with evaluating students' writing, many instructors across the curriculum fall prey to several common misbeliefs, which themselves reflect a paucity of information on the part of evaluators on how to evaluate writing fairly and objectively. Besides being in a quandary about what to evaluate, instructors are not certain either about how to go about assessing students' writing. In this paper, these common misbeliefs are first identified and discussed, after which suggestions are made on how to counter or rectify these types of fallacious thinking. By countering these misbeliefs, instructors can use evaluation as a catalyst to promote better writing skills on the part of the students.



**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS . . . . .	4
FALLACY ONE: "THE POOR-COPY FALLACY" . . . . .	5
FALLACY TWO: "THE HIDDEN IDEA-FALLACY" . . . . .	7
FALLACY THREE: "THE ONE-PASS FALLACY" . . . . .	8
FALLACY FOUR: "THE HIERARCHICAL OR MONO-PERSPECTIVE FALLACY" . . . . .	11
FALLACY FIVE: "THE GRADE OBSESSION FALLACY" . . . . .	13
FALLACY SIX: "THE 'THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN DO ABOUT IT' FALLACY" . . . . .	14
FALLACY SEVEN: "THE OBJECTIVITY-IMPOSSIBLE FALLACY" . . . . .	16
FINAL REMARKS . . . . .	17



**ASSESSING STUDENTS' WRITING:  
COUNTERING SOME COMMON MISBELIEFS<sup>1</sup>**

by

Jerald E. Goldstein

Introductory remarks

Instructors often balk at grading and evaluating the stacks of papers that accumulate from semester to semester. Besides the almost insurmountable workload that evaluating papers entails, conscientious instructors rack their brains while asking themselves how they can best do justice to a student's attempts at expression while considering content and accuracy and the extent to which the student has demonstrated proficiency in writing skills.

The many questions that surface while evaluating student papers reflect several common misbeliefs or "fallacious thinking" on the part of colleagues. Outside of suggestions for evaluating students' compositions in dedicated writing courses, however, not much has been said about the problems colleagues in other disciplines encounter when confronted with evaluating students' attempts at written expression. Suggestions for rectifying this "fallacious thinking" have not been forthcoming. In fact, "professionals have not reached definitive conclusions about the problem of how to assess writing" (Elbow, 1993, p.187). Thus the question of what should be evaluated is as much a problem for many evaluators as is the question of how to actually go about evaluating student papers and assigning grades. Questions of

objectivity and fairness play an equally important role.

In this paper, I identify these areas of fallacious thinking and then suggest ways on how to avoid or rectify them. The misbeliefs I offer as examples of fallacious thinking run the gamut of problems associated with evaluating student writing.

Whether searching for information that has not been explicitly expressed by the student by reading between the lines, or utilizing a "skills approach" to evaluation, it appears that problems abound in evaluators' attempts to come to terms with determining what constitutes the legitimate province for evaluation. These problems are addressed in the "poor-copy" and "hidden-idea" fallacies. How to go about evaluating constitutes the second major nemesis of evaluation. Here evaluators have to come to terms with whether a single reading suffices and, if so, whose reading, the instructor's or the student's? These problems are addressed in the "one-pass" and the "hierarchical or mono-perspective" fallacies. Ranking (or grading) objectively, if at all possible, is discussed in the "grade obsession" and "objectivity-impossible" fallacies. The use of alternate means to evaluate student writing is discussed in the "there's nothing we can do about it" and

"grade obsession" fallacies.

I feel thus that with regards to evaluating students' writing several types of fallacious thinking have become firmly entrenched throughout our ranks. It is the intent of this paper to expose and explore, but also to offer solutions on how to avoid and rectify, these fallacies.

FALLACY ONE: *"The poor-copy fallacy"*

In this fallacy, instructors feel that evidence of a lack of proficiency in manuscript skills is to be equated with a lack of knowledge of the subject matter. Good writing is considered by these instructors to be writing that is error-free. Since instructors who share this philosophy usually cannot be swayed to examine the ideas present, students who have not mastered mechanics are victimized by the system (one might argue that they victimize themselves by not paying attention to "details").

But, is it true that good writing is reflected solely in error-free writing? It is my contention that we can't do justice to students' writing when we utilize a "skills" approach to writing evaluation, i.e., ensuring compliance with certain writing standards without simultaneously evaluating the students' ability to argue, reason, employ logic, and simply write convincingly about the topic at hand. And we can do just this in evaluating students' writing and in assessing grades. As Odell maintains,

it [is] important to establish evaluation as part of a larger epistemic process. If teachers in any discipline want

students to engage in meaning making, the students will surely benefit from evaluations that help them understand that process more fully...if the writing-across-the-curriculum movement is to flourish, we must persuade both colleagues and students that judgments about the quality of writing cannot be separated from judgments about the quality of meaning making reflected in that writing...If we persist in separating ways of writing from ways of knowing, we shouldn't be surprised if students persist in writing well about nothing (p. 98).

The skills approach to evaluation distracts us from what we really should be looking for. Instead of looking for a well-focused topic that is organized, coherent and well written, many colleagues try to determine the extent to which the student has upheld written conventions and turned in what some would consider "clean copy" or well-written prose.

Instead of trying to discern whether the student has presented the material in a way that indicates that s/he understands the topic being explored, skills-oriented evaluators maintain mental lists of things that can go awry in a student paper and search the papers for these flaws, while losing sight of the purpose of writing. Areas that are typically explored in determining the "efficacy" (or skills quotient) of a given writing sample include spelling, grammar, punctuation, usage, diction, style, logic, manuscript mechanics, and effective sentence structure. Oftentimes these areas are given more emphasis than is the extent to which the student has resolved the problem being explored, or the extent to which the writing reflects sound organizational patterns (structure) and the

extent to which the student has focused on a well-defined topic or delivered on the initial promise. We are blinded and benumbed by the number and severity of errors committed and lose sight of the reasoning and meaning making that the student has employed.

In attempting to do justice to students' attempts at written expression, we should devote more time to giving students meaningful written assignments so that we can better determine how their knowledge of a subject is reflected in their written responses. This very same emphasis must be reflected in our evaluation schemes. We have to strive for a shift away from a "skills" approach to evaluation.

**FALLACY TWO:**        *"The hidden idea-fallacy"*

Here instructors feel that it is their responsibility --as mentioned above-- to look for the meaning-making strategies, organizational patterns and logic in a student's paper by reading between the lines rather than by evaluating the copy presented. It is imaginable that instructors go so far as to reflect on what a given student might have meant--even if not explicitly expressed-- based on what the instructor feels this student is capable of.

In searching students' copy for ideas that might have been intended by reading between the lines, these evaluators try to make connections between disparate ideas, mentally reformulating the ideas that are perhaps partially apparent in the students' writing, while embedding these in more complex contexts, which were most likely not apparent to the student. These evaluators are not doing justice to students'

attempts at verbal expression; they allow students to believe that the ideas and concepts themselves--no matter how poorly formulated and even when expressed in isolation--account for the communication of ideas, without being aware of the meaning-making strategies required for the accurate dissemination of information within a discipline.

Instead of seeking particular bits of fragmentary information in students' papers, we should explore the ways in which students have presented their ideas. The focus should be on a student's ability to formulate ideas and defend them, to make connections that provide insights into the subject matter, as well as into the student's ability to synthesize information.

There are several ways to assess how well a student has dealt with an assignment. Since we are emphasizing the written expression of ideas, we are, above all, trying to determine to what extent a student has grasped the subject matter, how s/he is able to express these ideas in a standard readily understandable language and to what extent, perhaps, the student has expressed an in-depth knowledge in transcending the bounds of the subject s/he's exploring and even disciplinary bounds.

A piece of writing that reflects but stock responses in short, disjointed periodic sentences is probably not on a par with a piece of writing that shows the interrelationships, as well as the hierarchy of ideas as reflected in a tight focus, a sound structure and the auspicious use of transitional expressions. A student writer, on the other hand, who is able to assume the discourse of the discipline in which s/he's writing, especially if this discourse is

instrumental in enabling the student to express his knowledge of the subject, should be graded accordingly.

FALLACY THREE: *"The one-pass fallacy"*

In this case, evaluators do not subject students' writing to more than one reading. Instead, evaluators feel that content and correctness are inextricably linked. As in the "poor copy-fallacy," students who have not become proficient in manuscript mechanics are at a disadvantage. These students are not "writing well about nothing" as Odell warns us, but writing well, without having mastered the several skills required to produce "perfect" copy. Elbow (1993) warns us that "evaluation requires going beyond a first response that may be nothing but a kind of ranking...to mak[ing] distinctions between parts or features or criteria" (p.188).

One way to evaluate student writing fairly is to practice multiple evaluative readings. This entails our reading first for substance or content, before concerning ourselves with sentence structure, grammatical errors, punctuation, orthography, etc. This enables us to concentrate on essentials without becoming lost in the deluge of errors often encountered while evaluating student papers. Subsequently, we can read for sound structure and organization. A third reading would concern itself with style; the final evaluative reading would focus on correctness.

When we read for content or substance, we are looking for more than just the information presented; we have to focus

on the thinking that is evidenced in the student's writing. We cannot fall prey to the "formalist view of writing [that makes] a distinction between writing and content that separates the evaluation of writing from students' understanding of the subject...." Instead, we have to take "...an epistemic approach to evaluation that begins by identifying the ways of knowing that are valued for particular writing tasks" (Herrington and Moran, 1992, p. 46).

We are evaluating whether the intent of the writing assignment has been clearly expressed in the student's paper; we are controlling to what extent the paper is focused on a single, controlling idea. We are determining whether there is enough information and evidence to support the initial contention. At the same time, we are interested in discovering gaps or missing material, or even unnecessary repetition or extraneous material. We are questioning, too, whether the body and terminal sections of the paper keep the promise made to the reader in the introduction (thesis statement).

When reading through for information, we are also checking to see whether faulty reasoning has been allowed to creep into a student's paper through the use of opinionated adjectives or due to the student's falling prey to logical fallacies.

A second reading should concern itself with organization, or structure. We have to determine whether the composition has an introduction, a body, a conclusion. We ascertain whether the introduction states the controlling idea and announces, when necessary, the major parts.

We discover whether paragraphs are in a logical order and whether each paragraph completely develops its topic.

We discern whether transitions and summaries are used to aid the reader where appropriate. We question the conclusion's validity: does it return to the controlling idea and summarize, when necessary, the major parts?

These considerations are, of course, not exhaustive. They are intended merely as guidelines to follow when analyzing students' writing in multiple evaluative readings. In this regard, the four evaluative readings mentioned here are not to be considered mutually exclusive. Of course, there is substantial overlap, depending on the evaluator's views on "putting ideas on paper."

After determining the validity of the content and organization of a paper, we can direct our attention to stylistic matters. We can explore, for example, whether the student has used coherence to bind the individual sentences within paragraphs and from paragraph to paragraph. Has the student used coordination, parallelism, subordination, emphasis and variety in building sentences?

We can establish whether the language level is suited to the reader. We can look at sentence and paragraph length. We can examine word choice and see if active verbs predominate.

Only after we have subjected the composition to these first three consecutive readings should we pay attention to problems of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and format (correctness).

By evaluating these elements last, there is a manifold positive effect: first, we are not immediately swayed to give a student a poor grade based on what we

perceive initially as poor work due to spelling and other errors without first evaluating the paper according to the more significant criteria outlined above; second, we force ourselves to weigh the merit of a composition by determining how well it communicates and delivers on its promise to explain; and third, we are able to assess a grade based primarily on how well a student reveals to us that s/he has grasped the assignment and has been able to put his or her individual response into written communicable language.

By making multiple sweeps of students' writing, each time with a different emphasis, we can learn to appreciate how students enter into heuristic processes and use language to express themselves. We can also become aware--and better justify our assessment criteria of faulty reasoning and logic as evident in poor writing by momentarily isolating our focus while we evaluate the finished product. It is a way to justify our reluctance to "read between the lines," to look for connections that haven't been made, to seek logic where it isn't apparent, because the student himself has not organized his thoughts and thus cannot find adequate expression for these thoughts--if they indeed exist-- in language (cf. fallacy two!).

**FALLACY FOUR:** *"The hierarchical or mono-perspective fallacy"*

Too many instructors work under the assumption that they alone are capable of evaluating students' papers. Nothing could be further from the truth. This type of thinking discounts the use of other sources, including the students themselves, as potential evaluators.

In mono-perspective evaluation, the same individual who is the source of the information (the instructor) is also the individual who is evaluating. Evaluators who require that students regurgitate almost verbatim what they've read or acquired in class are guilty of this fallacy. This type of thinking encourages students to acquire a single perspective: that of the instructor. These evaluators are not aware of the potential of writing to enable students to explore areas outside conventional (disciplinary) boundaries. They are not aware that writing can be a tool to learn, not only in the sense of ordering and prioritizing random impulses, but, too, in terms of exploring remote, yet still related areas.

We should instead allow students to co-evaluate their own writing. Instead of looking for our own ideas reflected in the students' writing, we should swap roles and learn from the students as a source of information, since these are exploring ideas and giving these expression in writing. In any event, we should not view our own concepts of writing as a recipe to be religiously followed by our students. We shouldn't look for replication rather than reasoning in students' writing, but we should foster critical thinking and making connections on their part (Langer, 1992).

Since writing deals with learning and learning comes about by exploring the ways in which various disciplines deal with epistemic processes, including meaning-making and using particular discourses, then students who act as evaluators can benefit not only from the content of a paper they share with a classmate, but from the meaning-making strategies and from the specific language

used, as well.

Preliminary, non-binding grades could be assessed, too, by peer groups. Students who would have to assess a grade based on what they considered valid argumentation, proper focus, etc. would be more apt to think about good writing principles and meaning-making strategies when composing their own papers. Of course, this could work only if we required that these peer groups substantiate why they assessed a given grade.

Peer groups can learn as much ex negativo from fallacious thinking as it's reflected in a classmate's writing as they can from the reflection of logical thought processes. In both cases, however, students are learning.

In all cases, it is essential that we show flexibility in determining how best to assess how well a student has tackled a given written assignment. Our flexibility might include using other sources to help evaluate students' writing: we can solicit the help of colleagues and graduate assistants to make a "first pass" evaluation; we can under the cover of anonymity conduct group evaluations of essential parts of papers during classroom sessions by projecting (parts of) these on transparencies; we can even use newly developed software that allows an electronic interchange to provide almost immediate feedback while "blue-penciling" corrections.<sup>2</sup>

#### FALLACY FIVE: *"The grade obsession-fallacy"*

Although it is considered a "given" by most colleagues, evaluation does not have to be equated with assessing grades. If

writing is a tool to learn, then students should be given meaningful writing assignments that are evaluated and discussed, but not graded. By eliminating the pressure associated with grades, students will write more and, in so doing, learn more by writing, once the pressure of grading is eliminated.

According to Elbow, ranking or grading is "woefully uncommunicative" (1993, p.189). It is just as meaningful to give writing assignments to nudge students to explore uncharted territory within or without their disciplines even when these assignments will be read and discussed, but not graded.

This is the type of evaluation (and writing) fostered by advocates of writing-across-the-curriculum programs. It is manifested in journal writing and exploratory writing, writing that is accomplished to put ideas on paper for the sake of making and "seeing" connections but without the fear associated with grades.

If a grade must be assessed, then the evaluator evaluates the sum of papers (portfolio) turned in during the semester. In this case, we are not apt to penalize a student for a "false start" or a "one-time transgression," but rather apt to look at the entire product of the student's efforts. In so doing, we are more apt to measure progress--the result of delving into heuristic processes by writing.

Elbow offers several ways to use "less ranking and more evaluation in teaching." He encourages us to use portfolios even when "conventional institutions oblige us to turn in a single quantitative course grade at the end of every marking period." Even then "it doesn't

follow that we need to grade individual papers" and to think

that evaluation always translates into a simple number...Portfolios permit [the evaluator] to refrain from grading individual papers and limit [himself] to writerly evaluative comments...and help students to see this as a positive rather than a negative thing, a chance to be graded on a body of their best work that can be judged more fairly (1993, pp. 192-193).

Besides portfolio assessment, instructors can use an analytic grid for evaluating and commenting on student papers. An example is given in Figure 1.

Grids enable us to provide a response to students' writing and account for a number of potential errors without being obsessed with correlating faulty writing with a grade, although the grids can satisfy a student's hankering for ranking. By establishing the criteria by which an assignment will be evaluated (not graded!) and then determining the extent (strong, weak, ok) to which the student has fulfilled these criteria, evaluation takes place and the students are provided with valuable feedback, but the negative aspects of ranking or grading are avoided.

**FALLACY SIX:** *"There's nothing we can do about it-fallacy"*

Too many instructors are resigned to believing that there is not much they can do to improve students' writing skills--especially at the post-secondary level-- and that there is no viable tool to give the students by which they can "self-evaluate"

their writing efforts prior to submitting finished manuscripts.

This assumption ignores the possibility of communicating to the students what we expect of them. One way of communicating with students is by using checklists.

Checklists can be likened to the grids mentioned under fallacy five: criteria for completing an assignment can be brought into synch with the criteria used for its subsequent evaluation. The use of checklists helps the student recall the multitude of items for which s/he is responsible and keep a tab on the steps involved in the writing process. Analogous to the mandatory use of checklists in the cockpit environment, checklists governing the writing process provide a ready reference to ensure compliance with standards, completeness and serve to jar frozen memories.

Checklists outline the activities instructors expect students to engage in and the points they want students to consider while writing and proofing their copy. Checklists serve, too, to help the students through the process of self-evaluation so as to avoid a mono-perspective evaluation and they allow students to share the same checklist an instructor uses when evaluating student papers or even writing himself.

There are actually four types of checklists: one, a checklist of the writing process to ensure the essential parts of the writing process are considered (see Figure 2); two, a checklist for checking the rough draft to ensure that the writing is complete and accurate and logical in terms of information, organization, and style (see Figure 3); three, a checklist, against which the writer can check the finished product to

ensure compliance with a myriad of writing conventions, from spelling to commas, from variety to emphasis (see Figure 2, "revising"); and four, a checklist (see Figure 4) developed by the instructor for a particular writing assignment "outlining the activities [he] expect[s] students to engage in and the points [he] want[s] students to consider as they write" (Tompkins, 1992, p. 244). This last type of checklist can be formulated in conjunction with the students; thus, what is expected of a student in a given writing assignment will not be misunderstood.

FALLACY SEVEN: *"The objectivity-impossible fallacy"*

Colleagues who maintain that it is almost impossible to evaluate student papers fairly and consistently in concert with standards perhaps imposed on them by a department head are under the false impression that grading is necessarily a subjective pursuit.

If evaluators were to adopt the "multiple evaluation scheme" mentioned under FALLACY THREE above, they could improve their chances of assessing more fairly and objectively than hitherto possible by bringing grading criteria into synch with the considerations discussed in FALLACY THREE.

If we determine a partial grade after each evaluative reading, we are perhaps doing more justice to the total achievement of the student. At the same time, by separating the grade into several parts, we can provide positive motivation by first indicating to the student what s/he has achieved without regard to proficiency in

certain writing skills, and, secondly, by indicating to what extent the student has jeopardized an otherwise good grade by not paying attention to spelling, punctuation, etc.

For these errors, I would establish a system by which an initial grade would be established. From this, I would deduct points respectively for major deviations in each of the categories discussed above. Thus, a student who received an A- (90-93) for content might have 1-3 points deducted for serious stylistic or structural errors within the range of an A-, i.e., s/he might receive a "91" instead of a "93." If that same student were docked 5 or more points 3 for numerous spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors, that "91" could easily translate into a grade between "80" and "85" or even lower.

It would become clear to a student that s/he could compromise an otherwise good grade by not paying attention to these areas of correctness, with which we teachers are so concerned. This tripartite grading system would, I believe, motivate students to turn in clean copy. Another positive benefit is the shift of emphasis. The emphasis according to this grading scheme is on the presentation of ideas; yet, there is still adequate motivation to respect writing norms.

Yet, the grading scheme sketched above does not account for one of the most useful tools we have at our disposal when evaluating students' attempts at written expression. More meaningful to the student than a numerical grade are the written comments we should be making. We should strive to identify all well-written as well as faulty areas: gaps in or erroneous

information, faulty structure or organization, poor manuscript mechanics. These areas of concern parallel those areas discussed above under multiple evaluative readings. As we complete each of the 3-4 readings, we should substantiate why we consider the student's paper meritorious or not in each of the given rubrics.

### **Final Remarks**

By becoming aware of and rectifying the fallacious thinking identified in this paper, evaluators can ensure that they are not remiss when trying to do justice to students' writing.

They can learn to evaluate fairly and objectively while shifting the emphasis from a skills approach to evaluation to one that emphasizes assessing the ideas and the meaning-making strategies evident in the student's writing, without first having to connect loose ends and reconstruct what the student might have meant.

Evaluators will thus learn to subject students' writing to several evaluative readings rather than to one perfunctory reading that perhaps concerns itself more with the number of errors made than with content.

Evaluators can learn to accept students as co-evaluators, both parties profiting from this implied mutual learning experience.

Another lesson to be learned is that there are many ways to evaluate without being obsessed with grades and other types of "ranking." Whether by using portfolios to assess the total product of a student's efforts throughout a marking period or by using checklists to ensure completeness and

compliance with objectives established by both evaluator and evaluatee without assigning a grade, well-thought-out evaluation facilitates learning through writing.

Since "constant evaluation by someone in authority makes students reluctant to take the risks that are needed for good learning--to try out hunches and trust their own judgment," entering "evaluation-free zones," as Elbow labels these non-assessment evaluation schemes (1993, p. 197), is one means to promote learning through experimentation. At the same time we can suppress the urge to rank or evaluate.

If our evaluative criteria for student writing are to test not only students' ability to think on paper, but too their ability to assess how they are able to synthesize knowledge and express the resultant product, we must be creative and open to new ideas about "gauging" evaluative criteria. As Odell maintains, "...different ways of knowing have heuristic and epistemic significance: each can be a useful strategy for reflecting on one's subject matter..." (1992, p. 92). The knowledge we seek and transmit to our students when we assess their writing should require that students delve into heuristic processes.

Students will learn new ways of knowing and methods of thinking if we are able to assess with as much aplomb as they are able to deal with topics within their respective disciplines and with topics which transcend typical disciplinary boundaries.

Worthwhile criticism exercised in concert with the evaluative criteria outlined here can help motivate students to deal propitiously with--while assuming-- the discourse of their respective disciplines.

### References

- Elbow, P. (1993, February). Ranking, evaluating, and liking: sorting out three forms of judgment. College English, 55, 187-206.
- Goldstein, J. (1993). Utilizing writing-across-the-curriculum principles in the traditional classroom: rethinking teaching strategies and evaluation criteria. In Embry-Riddle First Annual College of Continuing Education Faculty Symposium on Teaching Effectiveness. Daytona Beach, Florida.
- Herrington, A. & Moran, C. (Eds.). (1992). Writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Langer, J. (1992). Speaking of knowing: conceptions of understanding in academic disciplines. In A. Herrington & C. Moran (Eds.), Writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines. (pp. 69-85). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Odell, L. (1992). Context-specific ways of knowing and the evaluation of writing. In A. Herrington & C. Moran (Eds.), Writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines. (pp. 86-98). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Tompkins, G. (1992, November). Assessing the processes students use as writers. Journal of Reading, 36, 244-246.

### **Figure Captions**

Figure 1. Sample use of a grid to establish non-ranking evaluative criteria.

Figure 2. Checklist of the writing process.

Figure 3. Checklist for revising the rough draft.

Figure 4. Assignment-specific checklist designed for co-development and -assessment by student/evaluator

**EVALUATION GRID**

Strong    OK    Weak

			INFORMATION: focus, insights, gaps, links
			STRUCTURE: reader orientation, organization
			STYLE: usage, syntax, voice, sent. structure
			MECHANICS: spelling, grammar, punctuation
			OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Figure 1. (Adapted from Elbow, 1993)



## CHECKLIST OF THE WRITING PROCESS

### A. PREWRITING:

- Establishing your objective
- Identifying the reader
- Determining the scope and form

### B. GATHERING:

- Taking notes
- Conducting library research
- Interviewing
- Creating and using a questionnaire

### C. SHAPING:

- Choosing best method of development
- Outlining
- Illustrations

### D. WRITING THE DRAFT:

- Choosing a point of view
- Developing topic sentences
- Writing paragraphs
- Writing an introduction
- Writing an opening
- Writing a conclusion
- Choosing a title

### E. REVISING:

- Checking for completeness (revision)
- Checking for accuracy (revision)
- Checking for unity and coherence
- Achieving effective transition
- Checking for consistent point of view
- Emphasizing main ideas (emphasis)
- Subordinating less important ideas (subordination)
- Adjusting the pace

Checking for clarity  
Defining terms  
Eliminating ambiguity  
Checking for appropriate word choice  
Eliminating affectation and jargon  
Replacing abstract words with concrete words  
Achieving conciseness

E. REVISING:

Eliminating clichés and trite language  
Making writing active (voice)  
Changing negative writing to positive writing  
Checking for parallel structure  
Checking for sentence construction and achieving sentence variety  
Eliminating awkwardness  
Checking for appropriate tone  
Eliminating sentence faults  
Checking for agreement  
Checking for proper case  
Checking for clear reference of pronouns  
Eliminating dangling modifiers and misplaced modifiers  
Checking for correct punctuation  
Checking for mechanics:  
    spelling  
    abbreviations  
    capital letters  
    contractions  
    dates  
    indentation  
    italics  
    numbers  
    symbols  
    syllabication  
    footnotes  
    bibliography

Checking for correctness of format and illustrations

Figure 2.

### CHECKLIST FOR REVISING THE ROUGH DRAFT

It is advisable to revise the rough draft by carrying out three separate readings with a different objective in mind each time.

#### A. Read through for INFORMATION

1. Repetition?
2. Gaps or missing material?
3. Extraneous material?
4. Do the body and terminal sections keep the promises made to the reader in the introduction?
5. Should some of the material go into the appendix?
6. Would additional illustrations reduce the text content or provide for clearer understanding?
7. Did you say what you meant to say? Or, did you depend upon your own experiences--or the reader's--to fill in the gaps?
8. Have you checked computations, quotations, citations, cross-references, formulas, dates, equations?
9. Have you allowed a biased attitude to creep into your report through the use of opinionated adjectives?

#### B. Read through for ORGANIZATION

1. Does the structure of the report suit reader requirements?
2. Are paragraphs in logical order?
3. Does each paragraph contribute to the general structure of the report?
4. Does each paragraph completely develop its topic?
5. Have you used transitional devices?
6. Have you inadvertently shifted your point of view?

#### C. Read through for STYLE

1. Is language level suited to reader?
2. Eliminate gobbledygook, jargon?
3. Examine sentence and paragraph length?
4. Check variety in sentence construction?
5. Have you missed opportunities for parallel construction?
6. Is your grammar correct?
7. Have you used any abstract words that can be replaced with concrete words?
8. Do active verbs predominate?
9. Most frequent grammatical errors:
  - a. disagreement between subject and verb
  - b. faulty pronoun references
  - c. incomplete sentences
  - d. improper use of subordinating conjunctions
10. Check for punctuation and spelling.

Figure 3.



### ASSIGNMENT-SPECIFIC CHECKLIST

Use the following questions to 1) guide you through the assignment step-by-step, 2) help you determine how well you have understood and met the objectives of the written assignment, and 3) allow you to co-determine how your grade for this assignment will be assessed.

**MOCK ASSIGNMENT:** *Describe the aerodynamic factors affecting rotorwing aircraft approaching transonic flight. If you consider one aspect of this topic particularly noteworthy, feel free to focus on that one aspect alone. Similarly, if you feel it's warranted to tie this topic into a related field for the purpose of elucidation, do so! Although I will refrain from demanding a predetermined length or scope for this assignment, think in terms of writing 2-3 typewritten pages (this restriction is intended to help you determine the actual focus of your topic. If you decide to write more, then adjust the focus accordingly).*

1. Is the focus you have established adequate to solve the problems you are addressing here? Or is it too narrow or too broad? What promise have you made to your perceived audience? Can you fulfill it within the scope of this paper? Have you determined what aspects of transonic flight pertain directly to the point-of-view you want to pursue here? Have you linked these to specific aspects of rotorwing flight: controls, rotorblades, powerplant, instrumentation, etc.?
2. Can you relate (aspects of) this topic to other topics you've explored? Or to areas of expertise in other disciplines (perhaps compressibility and heat transfer as they were discussed in a physics class) ?
3. Have you based your supporting data on personal observations or brainstorming or have you used other information-gathering tools (computer searches, questionnaires, interviews)? Have you substantiated and annotated all such information? If you decide to use secondary literature, have you first determined your own position, i.e., have you developed a tight focus mirrored in a well-formulated thesis statement?
4. If you are using highly technical jargon or a slew of acronyms, have you taken your audience into consideration? Is there a need to write a glossary?
5. If you decide to discuss transonic aerodynamic forces as they affect rotorwing aircraft on a highly theoretical plane, have you again taken your audience into consideration? Have you defined terms or used analogy to express highly technical applications in layman's terms?
6. Would illustrations or diagrams aid the reader in comprehending this complex topic?
7. *Additional aspects of this assignment considered significant by evaluator and evaluatee.*

Figure 4.



### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Some of the ideas presented in this essay derive from a paper I presented at the 1st Faculty Symposium on Teaching Effectiveness in April 1993. The suggestions I present here to rectify common fallacies in the evaluation of student papers are intended for instructors in all disciplines--primarily at the undergraduate level--but not exclusively those instructors who teach writing skills in the English or allied departments. Most of what is presented in this paper is compatible with writing-across-the-curriculum programs.

<sup>2</sup> Elbow (1993) uses "peer groups not only for feedback, but for other activities, too, such as collaborative writing, brainstorming, putting class magazines together, and working out other decisions" (202).

<sup>3</sup> For each minor error made in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, etc., I would deduct 1/2 point. For more serious errors such as basic sentence faults (comma splices, fragments, run-on sentences), I would deduct a whole point.