“Feed-Forward” Tutorials, Not “Feedback” Reviews

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Introduction

Too often, students become frustrated during the writing process because they feel like they are working in the dark. They are required to produce an assignment with little input from their instructor and then wait out the grading process to see if they “get it.” Weeks later, when the students have, at best, tired of the subject matter or, at worst, forgotten it entirely, rewriting feels like punishment for their lack of understanding the first time around. On the other hand, instructors—who have spent hours preparing lectures, developing in-class learning exercises, and carefully selecting readings meant to provide explicit guidance—are frustrated to find that their stack of assignments demonstrates that half the students did not “get it,” despite their efforts.

The fact is, many students need substantial individual attention early in the writing process to avoid the feeling they have been set adrift in unknown seas with no one at the helm. At Hamline University, we have attempted to address students’ need for individual direction by implementing a “feed-forward” philosophy in the first-year legal writing program, as opposed to the more traditional “feedback” approach. We provide substantial individual attention to students during the critical weeks before an assignment is due. These individual feed-forward tutorials are consistently evaluated by students as one of the greatest strengths of our program.

The Hamline Program

Hamline employs full-time writing instructors who each work with 35 to 40 first-year students. Our major assignments include a “closed memorandum” due about six weeks after fall semester begins, a research memorandum due about seven weeks later, and an appellate brief due nine weeks after spring semester begins. Students attend four weeks of classes, two hours per week, before the closed memorandum is due; two weeks of classes before the research memorandum is due; and five weeks of classes before the brief is due. For 10 weeks during fall semester, they also participate in a weekly one-hour research lab taught by a third-year teaching assistant.

Feed-Forward Tutorials

In the two to three weeks before each major assignment, students are required to participate in two individual tutorials with the instructor. The first (or “Alpha”) tutorial is 30 to 45 minutes long and focuses on a student-produced detailed outline, a research source list if applicable, and the smaller pieces of the assignment. Thus, for the Alpha tutorial that precedes the closed memorandum, students must bring an outline of their project, a draft of the question presented, a draft of the brief answer, and a draft of the facts section of the memo. For the research memorandum’s Alpha tutorial, they bring the same elements and a research source list. For the brief’s Alpha tutorial, they bring an outline, a draft of point headings, a draft of the facts, and a research source list. Students are also required to bring a list of questions to each tutorial. The goal of the Alpha tutorials is to make sure the students understand how to frame the issues in the assignment, the basic large- and small-scale organization of the assignment, and the function of each part of the particular legal writing format (e.g., office memorandum or brief) assigned.

The second (or “Beta”) tutorial is 45 to 60 minutes long and focuses on the student’s complete draft of the assignment. In the Beta tutorial, the instructor may discuss a wide range of issues with the student: organization, analysis, types of arguments, paragraph structure, grammar and mechanics, and citation. Thus, the instructor can tailor the discussion to that particular student’s progress through the writing process. The goals of the Beta tutorials are first, to ensure that each student has carefully walked through a draft of the assignment with the instructor and addressed problem areas, and second, to ensure that each student has had the opportunity to address all the niggling questions accumulated during the writing process.

Most instructors then reserve the last two days before the assignment is due for 15-minute, non-mandatory “quick question” sessions and open office hours. Attendance at tutorials is rewarded with two points, with a total of 12 “tutorial” points available out of a possible 100 points for all course assignments during the year.
Because feed-forward tutorials are quite time-consuming, we made the hard choice to eliminate feedback conferences and rewrites, although students are encouraged to schedule time with the instructor to discuss returned assignments if they wish. Thus, we advise students to consider their papers due at the time of the Beta tutorial. The rewriting they do in response to the discussion at the Beta session then results in their final paper for that particular assignment.

The Upside

Our students consistently evaluate the intensive feed-forward tutorials as a highlight of our first-year writing program. Receiving individual critiques during the writing process and having the opportunity to discuss their work while actively engaged with it encourage students to feel like the instructor’s job is to help them learn, not simply to judge their final product. Students seem less inclined to just finish the assignment and get it over with, expecting the instructor to respond with a written cookbook on how to fix it to get a better grade. They also seem more inclined to work through their analytical and organization problems because they have an authoritative sounding board and someone to tell them immediately if they are heading in the wrong direction.

Further, students have a larger stake in the quality of their written work when they must discuss it face to face with the instructor for an hour. It is easier to decide not to worry about an assignment and just get it done when no one will ask you to explain why you made particular writing choices.

The tutorial opportunity also allows instructors to tailor their instruction to each individual student’s needs and progress through the learning and writing process. Students who have few basic writing problems, understand the basic analysis of the assignment, and have produced a well-organized draft can benefit from an hour-long discussion of depth of analysis and creative argument that classroom instruction might be unable to provide. On the other hand, students who need help understanding basic organization despite hours of class time spent on fundamental concepts may finally see the light when they get individual attention from the instructor, who can try different avenues of explanation when the usual ones fail.

Further, the tutorial schedule requires students to move away from the less successful time management strategies many developed as undergraduates. Students can no longer get by with writing a paper from scratch the night before the due date. They must produce an outline, complete their research, and be able to defend their management of the early writing process before one date, and must produce a complete draft a week or two later, well before the final due date. This schedule builds in time for mechanical and stylistic editing by requiring that the analysis appear on the page ready for the instructor’s critique in the middle of the writing process, not at the end.

Finally, the tutorial process is rewarding to both student and instructor because it allows time to develop a more individual teaching relationship. Students become more comfortable asking “stupid” questions because they can do so in private with someone they have come to trust. Further, when two people spend a couple of hours together sweating over a draft, both have a stake in the final product. Students appreciate the instructor’s stake and are motivated to do their best, knowing the instructor is on their side. Overall, the tutorial process seems to be more intellectually and emotionally satisfying to the students and to the instructors.

The Downside

Multiple individual tutorials for all first-year students are time- and energy-intensive for instructors. Even with a student/teacher ratio of 35-to-1, engaging in 45 to 55 hours of intensive work with students over two or three weeks causes most instructors to wish that, first, they had never heard of IRAC, and second, they never again had to open their mouths to utter a word. By the end of a six- or seven-tutorial day, it can be hard to think straight enough to find your way home, let alone answer that one additional question posed by the student waiting outside your door.

Further, the feed-forward tutorial system will not work if the educational institution is unable or unwilling to commit resources to achieve a student-to-instructor ratio of about 40-to-1 or lower for full-time instruction or comparable ratios for part-time instruction. Practically, full-time instructors simply cannot schedule more than five or six Beta tutorials per day, and they usually need to schedule all tutorials within a few weeks of the assignment’s due date to achieve the desired goals. Hours must also be reserved for other responsibilities, such as attending meetings, preparing necessary materials, teaching classes if classes and tutorials are scheduled in the same week, and answering
questions for students who are not scheduled for a tutorial that particular day.

Tutorials can also leave students with a false sense of security because the instructor cannot possibly notice and address all the problems present in a 10-page assignment in 45 minutes, despite students’ expectations to the contrary. Students can come to view tutorials as all purpose fix-it sessions, and thus take no responsibility for noticing and correcting errors on their own. Further, when the instructor misses a problem in a draft, or simply does not have the time in the tutorial to address a problem, students may resent it. They expect the tutorial process to lead them to produce a perfect assignment because the draft has been “preapproved” by the instructor. Of course, tutorials never result in the perfect assignment, but getting students to understand this can be difficult.

Students also resent perceived inconsistencies between tutorial discussions and commentary provided during grading. Sometimes no inconsistency actually occurred and a student simply misinterpreted the instructor or just did not understand a point. Yet sometimes inconsistencies are hard to avoid. Over the course of a tutorial week, the instructor’s understanding of the best approach to an assignment or a particular issue may change. Students who attended tutorials early in the process may receive a different answer to some questions than students who attended tutorials later. Inconsistencies can be avoided to some extent if the instructor takes careful, if brief, notes on both the evolution of his or her thinking about the assignment and on the discussion with each student.

In addition, etiquette will sometimes prevent students from letting on that they are completely confused during the tutorial. The student who nodded and agreed throughout an hour tutorial will spend the next hour crying in a library study room with a friend. Similarly, the instructor’s desire to help the confused student sometimes makes it difficult to strike a balance between spoon-feeding the student and helping the student figure it out. An instructor may also be inclined to offer an overly positive critique of a paper when the sad-eyed student actually sits across the table. So even if a draft direly needs to be thrown in the recycling bin so the student can start all over, it is hard to break that news three days before the due date. Thus, students sometimes go away with an inaccurate impression of the quality of their draft.

Practically, feed-forward tutorials also pose some problems. If students fail to take the tutorial process seriously, and thus miss the learning opportunity substituted for rewrites, they may be worse off than if rewrites were required. Less motivated students are more likely to complete and hand in a final graded assignment like a rewrite than to come prepared to a two-point tutorial. Logistics with less motivated students can also be difficult. Deciding when and whether to reschedule tutorials for students who come unprepared, students who do not show up, or students who come 30 minutes late can cause the instructor many headaches.

**Conclusion**

Despite the labor-intensive nature of feed-forward tutorials and the difficulties they sometimes present, we have found tutorials well worth the effort. Tutorials provide students with opportunities for individual attention, which most of them crave in the midst of the confusion and stress of the first year of law school. This individual attention increases students’ confidence in their ability to succeed at legal writing. We have also found tutorials to be an efficient and direct way to address each student’s unique package of writing strengths and weaknesses early in the writing process, thus ensuring the best possible success on the final graded product.

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