Tired of “Reeding” Bad Papers? Teaching Research and Writing Skills to Criminal Justice Students

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One of the most common complaints among criminal justice educators is that students have very poor writing and research skills. In particular, educators cite that students’ papers are poorly organized, replete with grammar and spelling errors, are missing key elements in their discussions, and are often plagiarized. Despite the need for research and writing classes, very few social science faculty members teach writing-intensive courses because of the amount of time such a course requires. Accordingly, this paper presents a model criminal justice writing class that outlines specific teaching methods to overcome the most common problems found in criminal justice writing and research.

Introduction

You will be judged by how well you write because no one really knows how well you think: they only know how well you communicate with them. (Gray 1998:140)

At colleges and universities across the United States, educators are becoming increasingly aware of a serious but common problem: students cannot write. In particular, educators find that students’ papers are poorly organized, replete with grammar and spelling errors, and missing key elements. In a survey conducted by the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (NCW) (2003), researchers found that over half of the first-year college students’ papers contained writing errors and that most of those students were unable to analyze arguments. To further complicate matters, educators also

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found that students plagiarize papers, or sections of their papers, often without realizing they have committed a serious infraction (Clement 2001). The problem, Clement notes, is that "many students know that plagiarism is taking someone’s words and using them as their own. What they have failed to understand is that every word that comes from someone else’s work has to have quotation marks around the exact words and a citation or reference to the source with a page number" (Clement 2001:7).

The problem with poor writing is not limited to undergraduate programs; it is also found at the graduate and Ph.D. levels (Gibbons 1996, 2004; Gibbons and Farr 1998). However, at many schools, the graduate programs do not include classes designed to teach the students how to write (Gibbons and Farr 1998). Moreover, if students are required to write, the guidance they receive is often substandard (Blowers and Donohue 1994; Gibbons 1995; Gibbons and Farr 1998).

Despite the fact that educators and school officials are aware of students’ poor writing skills, little has been done to remedy this problem. However, it is essential that this problem be addressed because students must be able to write well in order for them to be successful in their careers. For example, in a survey of mid-career professionals, 90% cited the “need to write effectively” as a skill of “great importance” in their day-to-day work (Light 2001, as cited in NCW 2003). Interestingly, very little formal research has been conducted not only in criminal justice but in other disciplines that examines either the reasons why students cannot write or offers practical solutions to remedy the problem. Instead, most of the information about the problem is shared anecdotally among educators.

Literature Review

There are several reasons why students have poor writing skills. First, and most simply, they are not required to write in college. In a national study of social science faculty (N = 793), Boice (1990) found that less than 10% incorporated writing into their curriculums. More disturbingly, only half of those instructors required their students to write out-of-class term papers. Thus, overall, very few students were required to write. In a similar study of corporate finance faculty members, Saunders (2001) found that 56% of the faculty incorporated writing assignments in their courses. While this number may appear to be high, Saunders points out that the papers counted toward the student’s final grade in only half of those classes.

Students also have poor writing skills because, for a number of reasons, they are reluctant to take writing-intensive classes.¹ First, students do not enroll in the classes because they lack confidence in their writing abilities (Blowers and

¹ Writing-intensive classes are those classes in which students are required to complete a significant number of writing assignments. These assignments may include in-class assignments in the form of essays, or out-of-class assignments in the form of essays or papers. In some classes, students are required to write both in-class and out-of-class assignments.
Donohue 1994; Boice 1990). Second, students are often intimidated by writing assignments. Specifically, they are afraid they will make mistakes, that they will not be able to find a good topic to write on, and that their papers will be too short because they will not be able to find enough material (Fishman 1989). Third, students feel that writing-intensive classes require too much work, and they do not have enough time outside of class to write papers (Boice 1990).

Even if students are willing to take writing-intensive classes, a problem arises because sometimes those classes are not offered. The most commonly cited reason for a lack of writing-intensive classes is that instructors do not want to teach them. In particular, educators find that the classes are too time consuming and that they increase instructors’ already burdensome workloads (Blowers and Donohue 1994; Boice 1990). According to Blowers and Donohue, this increased workload is especially difficult for tenure-track professionals who need that time to write and publish articles. Similarly, some instructors do not teach writing because their course schedules are already full and there is no additional time in the curriculum to incorporate writing assignments (Boice 1990).

Instructors are also reluctant to teach writing because they lack confidence in their own writing skills, or simply do not like to write. As such, they are not comfortable teaching writing (Blowers and Donohue 1994; Boice 1990). Other instructors feel that it is not their responsibility to teach writing; rather, it is the responsibility of the English Department (Blowers and Donohue 1994). Additionally, some instructors are reluctant to teach writing because they have not been formally trained in the discipline. Thus, while they may be strong writers who like to write, they are not willing to teach writing-intensive classes because they feel they lack the requisite training and teaching skills. Finally, some instructors do not incorporate writing assignments into their curriculums because they fear that the students will not like the extra work they require, and that dislike will be reflected in teacher evaluations at the end of the semester (Boice 1990).

Because little research has been conducted on writing-intensive classes at the college level, only a few recommendations have been made on how to improve them. According to Gibbons (1995), one recommendation is to have graduate programs hire one or two instructors who write well, and have them teach the students how to write. In making this suggestion, however, Gibbons acknowledges that just because an instructor writes well does not necessarily mean that he or she can teach it well. Another solution offered by Gibbons is for a member of the school’s English Department to teach writing to students in other disciplines. However, he notes that a shortcoming of this approach is that it is generally more beneficial for a student to learn how to write from an expert in his or her own discipline.

In contrast to Gibbons’ (1985) suggestion that institutions provide students with instructors who are trained in writing, Gray (1988) recommends ways in which educators can decrease the amount of time spent grading papers. In particular, he recommends that instructors focus on the “big picture” rather
than on the details, such as grammar and spelling. He suggests that by paying more attention to the overall organization and content of a paper, rather than to the sentence-level errors, educators will spend less time editing the students’ papers. However, a shortcoming to this suggestion is that it is very time consuming for educators to read students’ papers that are replete with grammar and spelling errors. Thus, although educators may not spend as much time editing those papers, they will instead spend an inordinate amount of time deciphering what the student is trying to say. Thus, in the long run, little time would be saved when grading such assignments.

Because many students are reluctant to enroll in writing-intensive classes, researchers have recommended ways to encourage students to do so. Specifically, Boice (1990) suggests that instructors encourage students to talk to each other in class about the problems they are having with their writing. According to Boice, doing so reduces the students’ anxiety levels. Boice also suggests that the instructor allow the students to talk about their fears associated with writing. By doing so, the instructor is better able to identify the students’ obstacles to writing and devise ways to overcome them. Accordingly, if one fear is that the student has too much work, the instructor can break the assignment into smaller pieces and set deadlines for those smaller assignments. This, in turn, may help a student feel less overwhelmed and prevent him or her from putting off the assignment until the last minute. Furthermore, it provides the student with time to rewrite sections of his or her paper, if necessary (Shields 2000).

Another approach to remedying the problem of a student’s reluctance to enroll in writing-intensive courses is to increase the student’s self-confidence about his or her writing skills. According to Boice (1990), one way to do this is to have the instructors encourage students to “just write.” This practice, commonly known as “free writing,” is a method by which students write without regard to spelling, grammar, grades, or review by an instructor. They simply write. By “just writing,” students learn that they can, in fact, write. Once they realize this, their self-confidence increases. Another recommendation, proposed by Gray (1998) is for educators to explain to students how a writing assignment will be graded. Thus, students know ahead of time what to expect and do not have to second guess the instructor. Students who know the parameters of the grading scale are more likely to approach their assignments with confidence.

To date, despite the nationwide concern over the poor writing skills exhibited by students in colleges and universities, and the recognized need for improving writing programs, very few articles have been written about successful writing programs. Accordingly, this paper presents a synopsis of a writing and research course specifically developed for criminal justice students. The purpose of the course is to help students strengthen their research and writing skills. It is also designed to teach them the appropriate writing and citation standards used within our field.

A writing class geared specifically towards criminal justice students is essential for several reasons. First, although most college students have been exposed to compositional writing, very few have been trained in either
academic or technical writing. Second, most faculty do not have the time or the
desire to incorporate writing into their classes. In addition, a problem arises
because many faculty assume that students possess writing skills when they
enroll in the class. However, shortly after the semester starts, it becomes clear
to the instructor that students lack writing skills. In response, some instructors
attempt to squeeze a brief tutorial into an already full curriculum while others
respond with apathy and expect the students to learn these skills on their own.
Both of these resolutions are ineffective.

This paper presents an alternative solution to the problems that faculty have
with students’ writing. In particular, this paper will discuss the development of
a course expressly designed to teach students the research and writing skills
used within the professional and academic fields of criminal justice. Specially,
this paper presents a model course, entitled “Professional Studies in Criminal
Justice,” currently offered within the Division of Criminology, Criminal Justice
and Social Policy at the University of Baltimore (hereafter the “Division”).

Course Development

The course was developed in response to Division faculty members’ increased
frustration over the poor quality of writing submitted by both our undergradu-
ate and graduate students. In particular, the faculty noted that students were
unable to decipher the quality of research (e.g., what is and is not an
"academic" source), could not properly cite the literature (which introduced
problems of plagiarism), were unable to adapt their writing to an “academic”
audience, and failed to present well-organized discussions. Based on conversa-
tions with Division faculty, it was clear that we needed to design a course that
would achieve two objectives: (a) help students improve their overall writing
skills (e.g., organization, grammar, etc.), and (b) teach students the specific
research and writing skills required to meet the standards in our field.

In order to meet our objectives we designed the course to teach five skills: (a)
how to adapt one’s writing style for an academic audience; (b) how to locate
appropriate sources; (c) how to present one’s research in an organized and
cogent manner; (d) how to cite one’s sources properly; and (e) how to edit one’s
work. Each skill is taught in a separate unit. At the end of each unit, students
complete a combination of in-class exercises and take-home assignments
designed to allow them to practice the skills they have just learned. After the
students turn in their assignments, they are evaluated by both the instructor and
their peers. By having both the instructor and peers review their work, students
learn not only from their mistakes but also from the mistakes of others.

Although we teach each of these skills as independent units, we reiterate to
the students that the skills are all interrelated. Therefore, in some units, we
incorporate the skills that students learned earlier in the semester to allow
them more time to practice them. The following discussion provides an over-
view of how each of these skills is taught.
Writing for an Academic Audience

The first unit of the course focuses on familiarizing students with the concept of "academic" writing. Unlike compositional writing, academic writing is more concise and formal. Therefore, in the unit we teach students to avoid the use of "informal" terminology and not to write in the first person. For example, a common mistake that the students make is to place themselves in the paper by using such phrases as "in our society" or "I will address." Therefore, in one in-class exercise, the students must complete a worksheet in which they identify first-person terminology, and then rewrite the sentence without that terminology.

A somewhat more challenging lesson is teaching students how to write in a formal tone. Because many students instinctually write like they speak, they often use informal or "slang" terminology. For example, they may refer to "teens" instead of "adolescents" or to "cops" instead of "police officers." To help students overcome this tendency we require them to complete a worksheet in which they must identify informal or slang writing and replace those words or phrases with more formal terminology.

Another way we help students become more familiar with this style of writing is by requiring them to read academic research. Throughout the semester, students read a variety of journal articles, research reports, and monographs. In doing so, students are exposed to words and phrases commonly used in academic writing, such as how authors present the findings of other scholars (e.g., "According to Smith (1999)," "researchers found") or how researchers describe the relationship between two variables (e.g., "youth who are exposed to community violence are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior"). Students are then expected to try to incorporate those phrases into their own writing. However, we recognize that adapting one's writing to a more formal and academic style is not an easy skill to learn and it takes practice. Accordingly, when we grade the students' papers, we write detailed comments and suggestions on them, and offer ways in which students can improve their writing. In addition, we allow students to rewrite their papers so that they can draw on and learn from their mistakes.

Quality of Research

Unfortunately, much of what students learn about crime and the criminal justice system comes from popular culture and the media. Consequently, their first instinct when given a research assignment is to turn to newspapers, magazines, or the Internet. To combat this, early in the semester we dedicate one unit to teaching students what is and what is not an academic source. In the first part of this lesson, we introduce the students to the concept of "peer-reviewed" research and discuss with them why we assign more merit to this type of research. In particular, we describe the practice of peer review as the "gatekeeper" for the dissemination of research. Because the research must go
through multiple stages of review by experts in the field, peer review acts as a method of quality control and ensures that the studies meet the highest academic standards.

One of the greatest problems we find with the students is their inability to find academic sources on the Internet. Often, they use common search engines such as “Google” or “Yahoo” to find information. This creates a problem, however, because those sites typically lead them to articles that are not academic. Therefore, early in the semester, the students are required to attend a tutorial at the library that is taught by one of the reference librarians. During this tutorial, the students are introduced to some of the more well-known academic criminal justice databases (e.g., Criminal Justice Abstracts, Academic Search Premier, National Criminal Justice Reference Service [NCJRS], National Institute of Justice [NIJ], etc.) and assigned in-class exercises designed to teach them how to navigate these different databases.

One exercise that the students must complete teaches them how to construct a search using a “mapping” technique. First, they are given a research question and asked to identify key terms and phrases in it. Students are then asked to think of synonyms for those key words. Finally, they are asked to combine words or phrases in various ways that will allow them to conduct a search. For example, for the research topic “The history of the death penalty for juveniles,” a student’s map might look like that shown in Figure 1.

After the tutorial, students then use these skills to complete a take-home assignment. In it, they are given a general topic and asked to write synonyms and key words, and are then required to find various types of academic sources in specific criminal justice databases (see Appendix A). To reinforce these skills, students are evaluated on the “quality” of their research for every subsequent written assignment.

**Figure 1** Sample map for topic search.

2. To provide students with additional support, the reference librarian constructed an individual webpage for this course that provides students with information on locating and accessing print and online resources from the university’s library. To see this page, go to [http://langsdale.ubalt.edu/research_aids/course_websites/crju304_pfeifer_fa04.htm](http://langsdale.ubalt.edu/research_aids/course_websites/crju304_pfeifer_fa04.htm)
Organization

The next unit focuses on teaching students two interrelated skills—how to construct a well-formed thesis statement and how best to synthesize their research material. Specifically, the first part of this unit helps students refine the scope of their thesis statement so that it complies with the requirements of the assignment. The second part helps them become more organized and disciplined writers.

Too often, students write a thesis statement that is not consistent with the scope of the assignment. They either write a thesis statement that is so broad it prohibits them from engaging in a substantive discussion of the issues within the specified page limit, or one that is so narrow that they are unable to find enough empirical research to support their position. Therefore, in the first part of this unit, we teach students how to write a "tight" thesis statement (e.g., not too broad, not too narrow).

To help students learn how to write a strong thesis statement, we begin by working through an example of how to narrow a topic. In particular, we choose a general topic and then list out a particular type of behavior, a particular population, or a particular solution to a problem. Thus, for example, we may start with the general topic of juvenile delinquency. For this topic, a particular type of behavior may be underage drinking, a particular population may be adolescents in rural communities, and a particular solution to the problem may be after-school activities.

After we teach them how to narrow a topic, we then have them participate in a series of in-class exercises designed to help them practice this skill. For their homework assignment they are given a general topic from which they must formulate a tight thesis statement which they will use later in the semester to write a two- to three-page informative essay.

The second part of this unit is designed to help students become more disciplined and organized in their writing. Often, students collect a significant amount of research material but do not know how to synthesize the information. Therefore, in this part of the unit, we teach students how to synthesize their research and then organize it into a logical format. To accomplish these objectives, we teach the students the "T-model" (Gray 1998) and how to write outlines.

The "T-model" is designed to help students begin to organize their thoughts. On a piece of paper, we instruct students to draw a large "T" that fills up the page. Along the top edge of their T they must write their thesis statement. Along the left-hand side of the T they must list all of the major components of their thesis statement. On the right-hand side of the T they must provide a minimum of two facts (or questions they intend to investigate) that provide specific details about each of the components. In doing this exercise, we teach the students to just jot down "trigger" words or phrases rather than complete sentences. We also tell them not to worry about the order of their information. Instead, we emphasize that the point is just to write. In doing so, students find
that, once they start writing, new ideas are triggered and their writing process becomes easier.

To help the students understand the steps in creating a T-model, we have them first create one using a “fun” topic. In particular, we ask them to create one for the benefits (or detriments) of Internet dating. To do this, we have them list all of the benefits of Internet dating. Once they have made that list, we then have them write all of the detriments. We then ask them to pick one side (typically, they choose the detriments) and, using the list they have created, we then fill in the T-model.

First, they are instructed to write their thesis statement across the top of the “T” (“The detriments of Internet dating”). On the left-hand side of the “T” they then list the main arguments against Internet dating. For example, they may include such arguments as “safety,” and “honesty.” Once they have written those they are then instructed to look at the right-hand side of the “T” where they will list at least two specific points in support of each argument. For example, for “safety” they may write, “public or private meeting place for date” or “criminal background of date.” For “honesty” they may write, “marital status” or “accuracy of what the person tells you.” Typically, the students like this exercise and they become very engaged in the discussion. After we complete the T-model for Internet dating, we then have them write one for a topic related to criminal justice (for a sample “T-model” about the relationship between depression and substance abuse among juveniles, see Appendix B).

The second step of this exercise is for the students to create an outline. Accordingly, after the students complete their “Ts,” we help them assess the information and determine how it should be organized into an outline. To do this, we first have students concentrate on the left side of their “T” and tell them that the components they have listed represent the main sections in their paper. Thus, on the blackboard, we begin to create an outline, with each of the main sections listed as the roman numerals. Once we have done this, we discuss whether the order in which they have listed the components is best or whether they should be rearranged in a more logical fashion. Once the students have determined this, we then have them fill in the subheadings under the roman numerals with the information they have listed on the right-hand side of their “T.” At the end of this exercise the students will have created an outline which they will then use as a “road map” for writing their paper. This “road map” will, in turn, help them start the writing process and allow them to write a more disciplined and organized paper.

Citation

Presently, one of most serious problems on college campuses is plagiarism. In a national study of 18,000 students conducted by researchers at Rutgers and Duke Universities, 40% reported they had “cut and pasted” material from written sources and inserted it into their own papers without citing the source (“New
Study Confirms” 2003). Almost an identical proportion reported similar infractions using Internet sources (38%). While some students engage in such behavior out of laziness or a lack of confidence in their writing skills, others commit plagiarism out of ignorance. In particular, students often misunderstand what needs to be cited, and what does not. In addition, many students simply do not know the proper way to cite their sources. Because plagiarism is such a large problem in academics, we have a unit in which we teach students the APA style of citation and specific strategies to help them avoid plagiarism.

While most students are familiar with the concept of citing (e.g., “when I quote something, I need to tell the reader where I found that quote”), very few have been exposed to the complexities of the APA citation format. In addition, many students who have been exposed to it have been taught it incorrectly. Accordingly, to overcome these problems, we begin by giving the students a brief lesson on the basic rules of citation. These include: (a) the elements of a citation; (b) the proper placement of a citation within the text; and (c) the proper way to cite on a reference list.

In discussing the reference list, we teach the students how to cite to the types of sources that students typically use (e.g., journal articles, chapters in books, technical reports, Internet articles). To overcome the extremely technical (and dry) nature of the material, we use several hands-on exercises. These keep the students engaged and allow them to practice identifying and correcting APA format errors. We also provide students with several handouts that summarize the basic rules of citation and that contain helpful hints for them to keep in mind when they are proofreading their paper and reference list. One of these handouts is provided in Appendix C. For students who would like additional practice, we direct them to an online tutorial that is affiliated with one of the textbooks we adopted for the course (see www.dianahacker.com/pocket).

While most students have a general understanding of plagiarism and the possible penalties associated with such an infraction, we make it a priority to ensure that students clearly understand the concept. To accomplish this objective, we first review the university’s definition of plagiarism, as stated in the student handbook.\(^3\) We then lead students through a series of in-class exercises that illustrate different forms of plagiarism.

One exercise that is particularly useful requires the students to paraphrase a paragraph from a research report. At first, the students are simply instructed to read the material and then summarize what they just read. As the students complete the exercise, we watch whether the students glance back and forth between the article they are reading and their paraphrased summary. We also watch for how often students scratch out what they just wrote, because that

\(^3\) After reviewing the university’s policy, every student is required to sign a plagiarism contract that signifies that he or she has been informed of the policy and has been counseled about the penalties that will be assigned by the university, as well as by the instructor, if the student is caught committing this infraction. A photocopy is made of the signed document and it is returned to the student. The original is stored by the instructor.
indicates that they are editing themselves as they write. After students finish the exercise, we randomly select a few students to read their summaries to the class. More often than not, the students’ summaries share a great deal of similarity with the original source, either in how their sentences are structured or in the particular phrases they use. We use this exercise to discuss the more subtle forms of plagiarism.

To help students learn how to take notes without plagiarizing, we advise them to read the material, remove it from their field of vision (e.g., close the book, turn the article over, etc.) and take a moment to reflect upon what they just read. We then instruct them to write whatever comes to mind as quickly as possible, without editing it. This strategy accomplishes two things. First, it prevents the student from relying on the writing style or jargon of the original author, and it forces the student to write in a manner consistent with his or her own ability. Second, it forces the student to actually think about what he or she just read. This, in turn, increases his or her comprehension of the subject.

Continuing with this strategy, we then have students repeat the exercise using a different paragraph from the same article. What we routinely find is that the incidence of plagiarism significantly decreases and the students are genuinely surprised at how much easier it was to take notes when they could just free-write. This exercise is also helpful because it allows students to move beyond simply regurgitating what they have just read and, instead, teaches them to analyze what they read. As one of our students sheepishly commented at the end of the exercise, “I had to actually think.”

Editing

The final unit of the course focuses on teaching students the importance of editing and how to become better editors. We introduce the unit by asking the students to reflect on two scenarios. In the first scenario, we ask how many students have bitten into something that is aesthetically pleasing, only to discover that it tastes horrible. For the second scenario, we ask how many students have eaten something that on the surface looks unappetizing but, upon tasting it, discover that it is really good. Each of these scenarios, we tell the students, is tantamount to a poorly written paper. The first scenario represents when a student turns in a paper that is grammatically well written, but substantively lacking or poorly organized. In contrast, the second scenario describes the situation where the student’s paper contains good material, but is replete with grammatical errors and poor sentence structure. Fortunately, we tell the students, both problems can be corrected with editing.

Teaching students proper editing techniques is essential because often they think of editing as a cursory chore to be completed as a last step before they turn in their final draft. Worse yet, many students do not bother to edit at all. To overcome these problems, we teach the students that editing is an integral part of the writing process itself, not merely a final step in it.
To help reorient the students' perceptions about editing, we introduce them to two types of editing: global and local. We instruct the students that global editing refers to the big picture, while local editing focuses on the details of the paper. We further instruct them that global editing analyzes a paper on its content and overall structure. Thus, to properly edit globally, we tell the students to ask themselves the following questions: (a) is there a sufficient amount of evidence to support the proposed thesis statement; and (b) does the paper present a thorough explanation of the issue(s), or does it leave gaps in the reader's mind?

If the student discovers in editing his or her paper that there are gaps in it, we refer him or her back to the "T-model." On his or her T-model the student has previously listed out all of the main points encapsulated in the thesis statement and the specific facts that lend support for each point. Therefore, by referring back to the T-model, the student can determine where the gaps are, and ways to fill them.

Once the student has determined that the content of his or her paper is acceptable, he or she is then instructed to evaluate its overall "flow" or structure. While we encourage students to write an outline before they actually begin writing their paper, they can also evaluate the overall organization of their paper by constructing an outline after their paper has been written.

To create this type of outline, we first have the student write down the main point of each topic sentence that starts every paragraph. This summary will serve as the section headers, or roman numerals, in the outline. We then instruct the student to list all of the facts or examples presented in each paragraph that support that main point, and to place them under their corresponding section headers. Once the outline is written, the student can then evaluate whether the material is well organized. We instruct the students to ask themselves the following questions: (a) are the section headers presented in a logical order; and (b) do all of the facts or examples provided relate directly to the topic sentence of the specific paragraph they are placed in? Once the student has addressed these global issues satisfactorily, he or she can then begin editing the paper on a local scale.

In contrast to global editing which looks at the big picture, local editing focuses on the details of the paper. Specifically, it requires the student to evaluate every sentence on its grammatical and mechanical structure. Unfortunately, many students view this step as tedious and, therefore for both spend a minimal amount of time on it. To overcome their reluctance to do this type of editing and to illustrate the importance of this step in the writing process, we give students a refresher workshop on the most common grammatical and mechanical errors found in students' writing. After the lecture, we have them complete a series of worksheets to help them fine-tune their editing skills.4

4. For students who need additional practice with these skills they are encouraged to complete the online grammar tutorial available at www.dianahacker.com/pocket
At the end of the unit we have students edit an actual paper written by a former student to illustrate the need for both types of editing. To give students ample time to complete the exercise, we ask them to critique the paper outside of class. We then discuss their opinions about the paper at the next class. Because they are editing someone else’s writing, the students are usually more objective and, therefore, better able to recognize global and local errors. This exercise is also helpful because it allows students to see firsthand how difficult it is to read a paper that is replete with errors. As one student commented, “How do you do this without pulling out your hair!?” Ultimately, we hope that by completing this exercise the students will become more aware of the importance of editing and, in turn, dedicate more time to this process.

Discussion

Currently, this course is a core requirement for all incoming undergraduate criminal justice majors. As such, the students are required to take the course within the first two semesters of their admission to the program. By imposing such a deadline, we can be assured that students will learn the requisite skills early in the program and then use those skills in their upper level courses.

Although the course is presently not a core course within the graduate program, we devised a way to filter some graduate students into the class as well. This is accomplished in two ways; a student is either required to take the class as a condition of admission to the program, or the student is told that he or she must take the class in order to continue in the program. Students are required to take the class as a condition of admission to the program if, during the application process, the graduate director has determined that the student’s writing sample showed deficiencies. Under these conditions, the student will be conditionally admitted into the program, and will be required to take the course for non-credit during his or her first semester. In the second scenario, faculty who teach the “gateway” courses in the graduate program (e.g., the core courses that students are required to take within their first two semesters after being admitted) forward to the graduate director at the end of the semester the names of students whose writing and research skills are perceived as substandard. The graduate director then informs the student that, in order to continue in the program, he or she must take the course the following semester for non-credit. Ultimately, we hope that this course will become a required course for all graduate students.

While this course can greatly benefit both students and faculty, we recognize that it is not an easy class to teach and it is not easy for a university to implement. In particular, it requires that the instructor spend a substantial amount of

5. To protect the identity of the student, no identifiers are left on the paper. In addition, the paper must have been written at least three years prior to the class and the author must no longer be in the program.
time on the class and, as such, requires a great deal of resources and support from the university for it to be implemented correctly.

As one can see from the description of the course format, this is a very labor-intensive course. Not only do we work with the students inside the classroom, but we routinely meet with them individually outside of class to review their writing assignments and provide additional guidance. For example, for one of their writing assignments we require the students to turn in a draft of their paper so we can assess where they are in relation to their research, writing, and citation skills. We then meet with each student independently to go over our evaluation. This allows the students to learn where their strengths and weaknesses lie, and to make the necessary revisions before handing in their final paper. Although such an exercise takes a great deal of time, there are a number of strategies that can help reduce the amount of time teachers spend grading students’ writing assignments. The most valuable strategy that we have discovered is the use of rubrics.

Rubrics are scoring guides that use a set of clear and well-defined criteria on which to evaluate a student’s performance. For example, on our rubric, the students’ papers are evaluated on the quality of their research, their organization, their citation, and their proofreading. Each criterion is then scored using a fixed scale (e.g., 1 = Needs Improvement; 3 = Satisfactory; 5 = Very Good). To help students understand the differences in level of performance on each of the respective criteria, they are also provided with a list of the criteria ahead of time, as well as a description of the characteristics we look for in each score. A sample rubric used in our course is provided in Appendix D.

By clearly delineating the criteria and the characteristics of performance that we use to evaluate students’ writing, it is easier to assess students’ papers. This, in turn, leads to less time spent grading assignments. In addition, the rubric helps students see more clearly where their strengths and weaknesses lie and, therefore, where to direct their focus in the future. We also find that the students are more likely to accept the grade they receive on an assignment because there is less ambiguity in how their paper was evaluated. Currently, the U.S. Department of Education provides a free online tool called RubiStar that provides faculty with generic rubrics they can use for a variety of projects and assignments (see http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php). In addition, the site allows faculty to customize templates to fit their own projects.

Another strategy to help relieve the teacher’s workload is to break the students’ papers into a series of small assignments rather than have them turn in one big paper at the end of the semester. There are a number of benefits to this approach. First, we spend less time grading a small assignment than we do reading and critiquing a lengthy paper. As a result, there is less turnaround time and the students are able to receive feedback quickly on their writing and research skills. This allows the students more time to make the necessary changes to their papers so that they can turn in a better quality product the next time. In addition, when a student turns in a well-written paper, it takes less time to grade than when a student turns in a poorly written one.
In addition to the time demands that the course places on the instructor, in order to implement it correctly, the course requires significant resources from the university. In particular, the class requires that the university have a sufficient number of qualified instructors to teach the course. Further, because the course requires a high level of individual instruction and a large workload for the instructor, the course cannot be taught to large classes. Rather, enrollment must be kept to a manageable number. Currently, we have capped enrollment at 15 students per section. Although this may seem to be a prohibitive requirement for larger criminal justice programs, the course can be modified so that it is taught in a lecture/lab format. Similar to many "Introduction to Criminal Justice" courses, universities could require students to attend lectures twice a week, led by the primary instructor, and a one-hour lab once a week taught by a graduate teaching assistant. In the lectures, the students would learn about the different research and writing skills, and in the labs the students would learn how to apply those skills.

The final obstacle this course poses to the instructor and university is that it is not the easiest class to "sell" to the students. In a field whose classes are typically filled with exciting topics, it is not very exciting to learn APA citation rules. Nevertheless, the reluctance of students to take this class can be overcome by giving them many hands-on exercises and engaging them in discussions. Further, although the material is dry, we routinely interject humor into the lessons. What we find is that when we present the material with a sense of humor, the students participate more in the class discussions and are better at retaining the information.

Conclusion

Although many of our students grumble at the beginning of the semester about having to take this course, almost all of them have later remarked that it was one of the most valuable courses they have taken. They feel more confident with their research and writing skills and, in turn, feel more prepared for their other coursework. Given the current state of writing and research skills among college students, it is essential that universities require students to take a writing-intensive course, and that universities dedicate the time and resources needed to address these issues early on in students’ academic careers. After all, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

References


Appendix A: Take-Home Assignment #1

1. Locate a journal article on prison overcrowding in Criminal Justice Abstracts. Print out the abstract and write out the keywords (e.g., your “map”) you used to find this source.
2. Locate a research report on drug treatment programs in NCJRS. Print out the abstract and write out the keywords (e.g., your “map”) you used to find this source.
3. Locate a book on child abuse in Psych Info. Print out the abstract and write out the keywords (e.g., your “map”) you used to find this source.
4. Locate a statistical report on homicide trends in BJS. Print out the abstract and write out the keywords (e.g., your “map”) you used to find this source.
5. On each abstract, write the keywords you used to find those sources and write out the keywords (e.g., your “map”) you used to find this source.

Appendix B: Sample “T” for Research Paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depression among youth</th>
<th>Common signs of depression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Different types of depression (e.g., “major,” “dysthymic,” “bi-polar” ... NIMH, 2004)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why difficult to diagnose (misinterpreted as “typical” mood swings)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIMH (2000) estimated that 3% of children suffer from depression. Higher among adolescents (9%) But other studies say numbers are even higher (e.g., see NHMA (2004) stat).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many negative effects on behavior (e.g., drop in grades, withdraw from friends and family, attempt suicide, and drug use)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug use among youth</th>
<th>How many kids use drugs (ex. “Monitoring the Future Survey” stats)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most common = alcohol and marijuana</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship between drug use and depression</th>
<th>How many kids who are depressed use drugs? Most common (alcohol)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for use—self-medication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danger—use of these other non-Rx drugs can counteract their Rx-drugs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: APA Reference List Cheat Sheet

**Journal article**
Title of article—no caps (except initial caps) proper nouns, and first word following colon, no italics
Title of journal—initial caps only, italics
Volume—italics, no “vol”
Issue—in parentheses right after volume #, no italics
Pages—no “pages,” no “pp.,” just start-end

**Research report**
Title of report—italics, no caps (except initial caps), proper nouns, and first word following colon
City, ST—postal abbreviation for state. Remember some cities do not need a state
Publisher—write out full title of agency (no acronyms). If agency is both author and publisher, then note “Author” in place of publisher’s name.

**Book**
Title of book—italics, no caps (except initial caps), proper nouns, and first word following colon
City, ST—some cities do not need a state (i.e. Chicago, New York)
Publisher—no “Publisher, Publishing, Inc., Co.” but keep “Books” or “Press”

**Chapter in a book**
Title of chapter—no caps (except initial caps), proper nouns, and first word following colon, no italics
Book authors—present first initial, then last name (reverse order of all other cites)
Ed. or Eds. for editor(s)
Title of book—italics, no caps (except initial caps), proper nouns, and first word following colon
Use “pp.” for pages, enclose in ()
Same publishing rules as Book

**Internet article**
Title of article—italics, no caps (except initial caps), proper nouns, and first word following colon
No “on”—“Retrieved February 20, 2003, from (web address)”
No publishing info

**Items to remember**
Label it “References”
Do not number
No first names of authors, only initials ... include middle initial if provided
Use “&” instead of “and” if more than one author
Do not abbreviate months
For dates, year goes first "(2002, August)"
If no date, write "n.d."
If no author, title takes place of author’s name (place in alphabetical list by first word)

Appendix D: Rubric for Term Paper/Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Very Good 5</th>
<th>Satisfactory 3</th>
<th>Needs Improvement 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideas and Content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Fluency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proofreading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grading Scale:

30 (A+) 24–25 (B+) 18–19 (C+) 12–13 (D+) ≤7 (F)
27–29 (A) 22–23 (B) 16–17 (C) 10–11 (D)
26 (A−) 20–21 (B−) 14–15 (C−) 8–9 (D−)

Performance Characteristics

Criterion #1 "Ideas and Content"

5 Paper: Paper is focused and detailed
  • Paper is clear and rich in details
  • Paper demonstrates knowledge of literature
  • Details go beyond the obvious or predictable
  • Writing has purpose, makes a point
  • Every piece adds something to the whole

3 Paper: Paper is beginning to define topic, but still pretty basic
  • It’s easy to see where the writer is headed, but there are gaps
  • The ideas are clear, but need more specifics
  • Doesn’t go far enough to make the point

1 Paper: Paper has no clear purpose or central theme
  • Information is limited or unclear
  • Writing is repetitive, random, or both
  • Lacks focus

Criterion #2 "Organization"

6. Adapted from http://mrcoward.com/slcusd/rubricwr.html
5 Paper: Clear direction
- Introduction gets reader’s attention and provides direction as to what will be covered
- Every detail adds a little more to the main idea
- All details are in the right place—the material fits like a puzzle
- The paper concludes at a good spot—doesn’t drag on too long, and leaves the reader with something to think about

3 Paper: Some really smooth parts, others need work
- Has an introduction, but doesn’t grab the reader’s attention or give any kind of direction as to what will follow
- Sometimes it is not clear how the details presented connect to the research question
- Some of the details are in the right spot, but others should have been discussed earlier or later
- Lingers too long in some places, and too abrupt in others
- Has a conclusion but it goes on for too long, ends abruptly, or leaves the reader waiting for more information

1 Paper: Paper has no clear purpose or central theme
- There isn’t really a beginning or ending to the paper. It just kind of takes off
- Leaves reader confused about how the details fit with the main research question
- Thoughts seem scrambled, jumbled, and disconnected. Overall, it’s confusing
- No conclusion

Criterion #3 “Sentence Fluency”

5 Paper: Varied and natural
- Sentences are clear and the paper is easy to read
- Sentences vary in length
- Good use of transitions, shows how sentences connect
- Writing is succinct and there is a sense of a careful selection of words

3 Paper: Routine and functional
- Some sentences are smooth and natural, but others are halting
- Sentence beginnings are more alike than different
- Lack of transitions to show connections between sentences
- Some sentences should be merged, others need to be separated
- Too wordy in parts—need to pare down

1 Paper: Needs work
- Lack of sound sentence structure makes the paper difficult to read aloud, even with practice
- Have to keep re-reading sentences and groups of sentences to figure out what is being said
- Sentence patterns are repetitive
• Sometimes words are left out or additional words need to be added in order for sentence to make sense

Criterion #4 "Proofreading"

5 Paper: Mostly correct
• There are very few errors, it needs very little additional editing
• Punctuation is used appropriately
• Spelling is accurate
• Grammar is consistent and shows control

3 Paper: About halfway home
• The paper presents itself more like an early draft, rather than a finished product.
• A number of spelling errors are identified
• A few problems with grammar and punctuation cause the reader to stumble or pause now and again.

1 Paper: Paper has no clear purpose or central theme
• It takes a first reading to decode and then a second reading to get the meaning of the paper
• Spelling errors are common
• Replete with grammatical errors and misuse of punctuation

Criterion #5 "Citation"

5 Paper: Information is well documented
• All sources cited in the text match those presented on the reference list
• Everything that needs to be cited, has been cited
• Citations are done correctly and are varied in style (e.g., some at end of sentence, others incorporated into the text)
• Limited use of quotations

3 Paper: Good start, but needs some more practice
• Makes a good attempt at citing, but there are some errors in the format
• Some cites are placed in the wrong place
• Limited variation how cites are used in text—over-reliance on one style of citation (e.g., most are placed at end of sentence etc.).
• Over-rely on quotations, although they are cited properly
• May have an errant missing citation or two

1 Paper: Grounds for Plagiarism
• Missing a significant number of citations, or does not cite at all

Criterion #6 "Sources"

5 Paper: Quantity and quality
• Uses at least the minimum number of sources required for the paper
• All of the sources are academic
• Sources vary in type (e.g., journal articles, chapters in books, technical reports, etc.)
• Reference list is consistent with APA format
• Provides a complete set of all sources cited

3 Paper: **Paper is beginning to define topic, but still pretty basic**
• Uses the minimum number of sources but there are few that aren’t considered academic
• Not much variation in the type of sources used
• Good attempt at presenting the sources in APA format on the reference list, but it needs some additional editing
• The majority of the sources are turned in, but may have forgotten one or two or are not complete

1 Paper: **Paper has no clear purpose or central theme**
• Does not use the minimum number of sources
• Many of the sources are not academic
• Relies heavily on one type of source
• Reference list is barely in APA format
• Fails to turn in sources