

“Fixin’ a Hot Mess”: Using Multiple Drafts and Rubrics to Improve Student Writing

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Introduction

It should be no surprise to criminal justice academicians that the writing skills of our criminal justice students are sorely lacking in a number of respects. Many students write how they talk (or worse, text), plagiarize, and use inappropriate internet sites as academic sources for materials (i.e. wikipedia.com, about.com, crimelibrary.com). These three issues alone describe some of the greatest challenges criminal justice professors must face when assessing the quality of student writing, in both element and content. At the same time, colleges and universities are being held to stricter standards for assessment, including the documentation of efforts to improve student performance and the provision of evidence to support the findings. Clearly, criminal justice programs need to focus attention on the writing of our students for both their improvement and to demonstrate assessment efforts within the unit. On a more practical level, good writing skills are essential for criminal justice graduates as the documents they prepare can have an impact on many peoples' lives, including a suspect/defendant/offender, victim, and family and friends of these individuals. Working with our students to improve their writing skills is often time-consuming and arduous, but the benefits can be immense and far-reaching. This article will present readers with an overview of a project implemented to improve student writing through the use of paper revisions, professor feedback, and detailed rubrics.

Background literature

Writing issues are not unique to criminal justice. Indeed, the lack of good writing skills among college students affect disciplines across the higher education domain (Carlson & Kimpton, 2010; Mason, Benedek-Wood, & Valasa, 2009). One of the main problems with student writing is the inability of students to prepare documents that demonstrate their

knowledge on the assigned topic and to do so with minimal writing mechanics errors (Mason, Benedek-Wood, & Valasa, 2009). A great deal of research focuses on this issue and how to improve student writing – both in content and mechanics. Some authors have focused on the use of drafts and revisions so a student can cultivate their writing skills through focused feedback from professors, while others contend that providing rubrics by which students can evaluate their products and address areas that may be weak or missing altogether are beneficial (Brown, 2010; Kessler & Swatt, 2001; Taylor, 2010; Thaler, Kazemi, & Huscher, 2009). Both of these techniques are evaluated in the current study, so a brief background on each will be presented.

Drafts and revisions

Many researchers have reported on the benefit of offering students the opportunity to revise their papers (Kessler & Swatt, 2001; Mason, Benedek-Wood & Valasa, 2009; Prince, 2007; Taylor, 2010). One example is a study conducted by Kessler and Swatt (2001), who evaluated the impact of a mastery learning approach project in three criminal justice research methods courses over the course of a year. Students were given the opportunity to revise their assignments as many times as they wanted (mastery learning) to earn a perfect score. Their findings suggest that allowing students to continually revise their papers through multiple submissions which receive detailed feedback from the instructor assists in both gaining knowledge about the topic and in presenting that knowledge appropriately. Ultimately, Kessler and Swatt (2001) found that the more effort students put into the writing assignments, the better their grades were overall. They concluded that giving writing assignments with the option of doing revisions not only improved writing skills overall, but assisted the students in learning the course material.

Another study, conducted by Demaree (2007), suggests that professor feedback by itself appears to be effective in improving student writing. Demaree (2007) found that providing feedback to students on short writing assignments resulted in marked improvement in the body of the writing assignments, which resulted in higher grades for those students as well. Unlike Kessler and Swatt (2001), Demaree (2007) did not require students to revise their assignments but the findings do suggest that the students used the feedback to improve their writing in subsequent assignments.

Finally, Prince (2007) reminds us that according to the Writing Program Administrators of America, first-year composition students should recognize that multiple drafts of a writing assignment are necessary to develop a successful end result and that revision is as much of the process of writing as the original product. Therefore, this should become part of the culture of the university community – revisions based on feedback as part of the writing experience versus a single submission. The learning involved in both improving the content of one's paper and the mechanics of writing can be best accomplished through revision opportunities that are facilitated by detailed faculty feedback.

Rubrics

Another technique that has been researched is the effectiveness of using a rubric to assist students in the development of their writing assignments. Barringer (2008) states that there are a number of benefits to using rubrics. These benefits include explicit descriptions of the expectations for assignments and a transparent grading process that is easy to understand (and may be somewhat predictable). Additionally, Pfeifer and Ferree (2006) indicate that rubrics are useful in assisting students with self-identifying strengths and weaknesses in their own writing.

This enables students to revise their assignments in a more constructive and focused manner, in that they can use the rubric as a pseudo-checklist and focus on those areas that haven't been "checked off." Brown (2010) echoes this as he suggests that rubrics assist students in understanding what is required in a writing assignment and can also introduce the student to the particular instructor's standards. Brown (2010) also suggests that rubrics can be a safeguard for the student as they require that the professor follow them for grading rather than grade in a seemingly subjective or arbitrary nature (see also Thaler, Kazemi, & Huscher, 2009). Given the potential benefit of rubrics, it is no surprise that studies have illustrated how the use of a rubric, especially when combined with the opportunity for a student to revise his/her work, improves the overall product and subsequent grade earned by the student for their writing assignments (Brown, 2010; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007).

Current study – purpose of project and methodology

The Criminal Justice program considered here completed self-studies for both ACJS Program Review and ACJS Certification. Through the creation of those self-studies, the program crystallized its assessment approach including identifying program objectives and how they were measured within core and elective courses in the major. After ACJS Certification was earned, the university in which the department exists started preparing for its Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reaffirmation visit. Each unit was required to choose at least one program objective that they wanted to evaluate over an academic year. Because writing is such a consistent issue within our department, the faculty decided to focus on Communication Skills as represented in our capstone course, CRJC 450: Seminar in Criminal Justice. The professors associated with teaching that course for the semester met to discuss the implementation of a rubric to assess student strengths and weaknesses in their capstone papers.

Essentially, the pilot project was designed to assess whether or not the implementation of a standardized rubric assisted students in understanding what was required for their research papers. In addition, we were interested in whether or not the use of a multi-step research paper would improve student writing over the course of a semester. In other words, the research paper was divided into three segments (literature review, analysis, recommendations – see Appendix A). Though it was not a formal component of the pilot project, two of the instructors required that students resubmit all components of the paper at the end of the course incorporating their revisions based on professor feedback. The following sections of this paper detail the implementation, findings and recommendations resulting from the rubric/multi-step project.

Why the capstone course (CRJC 450)?

The decision to use CRJC 450 for our Assessment Pilot Project was based on data collected during the 2008-2009 school year, which demonstrated that changes made to the format/requirements of the required final paper resulted in positive changes in student performance. In the Fall 2008 course, the professor simply assigned a paper that was due at the end of the semester, as is likely the practice of many professors. She provided a basic description of her expectations in the syllabus and in class, and students participated in developing a very basic rubric. In the Spring of 2009 the instructor did many of the same things, though the class was considerably smaller and she was able to provide more attention to helping students develop their papers. Additionally, she provided them with a detailed rubric which she required them to submit with their work and a timeline of tasks (e.g., gather data, begin writing, etc.) to help them avoid procrastination and required a brief proposal and an annotated bibliography for their paper as their first homework assignment. Data (presented below)

indicates that the changes made in the Spring semester increased the number of A's and B's earned by students, and decreased the number of C's, D's, and F's.

FALL 2008-SPRING 2009

GRADE	FALL 2008	SPRING 2009
A	38%	47%
B	19%	24%
C	12%	0%
D	0%	0%
F	31%	29%

Given the data above, and the importance of CRJC 450 as a measure of our department's ability to meet our program outcomes (including communication skills), all three of the offered sections of the class (1 online, 2 face-to-face) were chosen for one of our two Fall 2009 Assessment Pilot Projects. Accordingly, a detailed rubric seemed a necessary component of this pilot project. The success found through implementation of a timeline for turning in parts of the paper was the impetus for choosing a multi-step process in all three classes. We hypothesized that the student's success in the Spring semester was in part due to the manageability of writing a paper in stages.

Methodology

In an effort to build upon the improvements seen in the 2008-2009 school year, it was decided that the goal of the pilot project would be to improve final paper grades even more. Thus, a common and detailed rubric was developed to be used by all three instructors of the course (see Appendix B). The rubrics focused on mechanics, organization, citations/sources and content, and were provided to students on the first day of class. Each instructor used the rubric for assessing student work for every assignment that was submitted, thus limiting subjectivity as much as possible. Our belief was that providing students with a rubric in advance would clarify

expectations, demonstrate consistent expectations to students, facilitate consistent grading among professors, and hopefully result in better grades on these capstone projects.

“Success” was operationalized as the percentage of students receiving a C or above on the paper. We had to identify an “acceptable goal”, what we would be comfortable with our students achieving, and an “ideal goal”, what we would like to see our students achieving. Our acceptable goal for overall success was that 70% of students would receive a C or above on the assignments and our ideal goal for overall success was that 90% of students would receive a C or above on the paper. The acceptable and ideal rates were chosen by the department as part of a larger assessment effort, so our goal was predetermined for this project.

Results

A common rubric was used to assess paper quality and provide feedback to students. However, only in Classes 1 and 2 did professors incorporate a Final Paper which included revisions based on feedback from professors in parts 1 through 3 of the paper. The professor in class 3 gave students the option of turning in revised sections of the paper, but did not offer a Final Paper option. Therefore, the results will focus on Classes 1 and 2 as their assignments *and* rubrics are identical. The overall number of cases in this study was 35 students, all of whom took the course in the classroom. The small sample size is a result of our class caps and offerings. Accordingly, the results are too limited to be generalizable. Each section of 450 is initially capped at 25 students so that professors can have meaningful interactions.

Class 1, n=20, (Face-to-Face)

GRADE	ASSIGNMENT #1	ASSIGNMENT #2	ASSIGNMENT #3	FINAL PAPER
A	20%	40%	80%	65%

B	10%	30%	15%	25%
C	25%	15%	0%	10%
D	10%	0%	0%	0%
F	35%	15%	5%	0%

As the table above indicates, the pilot was overall a success in this course. Over the course of the semester, the number of A's increased dramatically, while the number of F's declined. Indeed, no student who remained in the course earned a D or an F on the final paper, which means that in this case there was a 100% success rate (i.e., papers earning a C or better).

Class 2, n=15, (Face-to-Face)

GRADE	ASSIGNMENT #1	ASSIGNMENT #2	ASSIGNMENT #3	FINAL PAPER
A	0%	20%	33%	66%
B	33%	46%	27%	7%
C	40%	20%	13%	7%
D	20%	7%	7%	0%
F	7%	7%	20%	20%

In this course the implementation of the pilot steadily brought more students in to the A range as the individual assignments progressed, and importantly earned A's for 66% of the students on their final papers. Unfortunately the D and F's across the assignments and the final paper mostly reflect papers which were not turned in at all. Overall the pilot steadily helped the students earn better grades as the semester progressed, resulting in an 80% success rate on the final paper.

Note

As stated previously, a third class did take part in the Assessment Pilot Project, however the professor provided an assignment that was not identical to Classes 1 and 2. Professors in Class 1 and 2 *required* that students submit drafts and revise their work; whereas, Class 3 *merely suggested* that students submit a draft for her to review. Moreover, Classes 1 and 2 required all

three assignments to be put together as one paper reflecting revision based on feedback. The results in Class 3 were quite different than those in Classes 1 and 2 (see table below).

Class 3 (Online)

GRADE	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
A	27%	17%	39%
B	0%	0%	5%
C	17%	6%	0%
D	22%	5%	6%
F	33%	72%	50%

These essential differences between the courses are what we believe to have resulted in the successes evident in Classes 1 and 2 and the lack of success in Class 3. Furthermore, in all three classes it was noted that students who revised their work, as a requirement or voluntarily, did significantly better in the course.

Discussion/Recommendations

Two findings stood out as very informative to the professors in CRJC 450. First, the rubric provided students with an easy to comprehend guideline of what would be expected of them in their papers and how it would be evaluated. Second, the opportunity for revisions and utilization of multiple drafts coupled with the rubric resulted overwhelmingly in improved performance by students in CRJC 450. Assigning the paper in multiple steps allowed for students to concentrate their efforts on one section at a time but the revisions allowed them to consider feedback in a more focused manner. Students appear to have relied on the rubric to inform them as to what they needed to change to improve their papers through revisions. It is the combination of rubric, multi-step projects and revision that made the true difference and the lack of any of these may result in poorer performance. For that reason, the overall recommendation

resulting from this project is to utilize common rubrics as often as possible, divide large projects into manageable segments, and require students to revise their work as part of the writing and evaluation process.

Appendix A

Assignments & Final Paper

You will be evaluating formal and informal policies throughout your career in Criminal Justice, whether you are working in policing, courts, corrections, or in some other capacity. Thus, each student in this class is expected to identify a criminal justice related policy or program that they are interested in and write a paper that:

- describes the policy and its historical development
- situates the policy within the existing criminal justice literature
- evaluates the policy's effectiveness and social implications
- offers defensible suggestions for making the existing policy better or for creating a new policy.

This paper will be broken up into 3 different assignments (see below), each of which will be graded independently and are worth 50 points each. This will give you the opportunity to get feedback on and make revisions to each section prior to turning in the final paper, which is worth its own 100 points. You will be graded on mechanics, organization, citation, and content (see rubric for detailed explanations).

To start your project, you need to select an informal or formal policy that you would like to focus on for the remainder of the semester (see "Policy on the Web" for ideas). Try to select a policy on which there is a fair amount of material readily available to you or you will have a difficult time doing the research. This means that you should do some preliminary research before settling on a topic.

Assignment #1: Policy Description & Literature Review (Due 2/3/10)

Using a *minimum* of six sources (including the policy in question where applicable), describe the policy that you have chosen to focus on, answering the following questions in essay format: How did the policy come to be? What prompted such a policy? What are the requirements of the policy? Who is the policy supposed to affect/protect/serve? Where is the policy used? In what cases is it used? In short, your description should be geared towards informing a reader who has never heard about the policy. Then, conduct a literature review on your policy and related issues. A literature review provides your reader with an overview of any research (**this means *scholarly* work) that has been done on your topic already. You are not limited to studies specifically connected to your policy – you should also consider related issues. For example, if you are researching the Amber Alert, you should look at studies related to child abduction and kidnapping in addition to looking at works specifically focused on the policy. The ultimate goal of a literature review is to tell your reader what we (the discipline of criminal justice) already know about the topic at hand, with the assumption that they don't know anything about your policy/issue. This section of your paper must be at least 5 pages long, double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font. Proper in-text and bibliographic citation (APA style) is absolutely required. You should submit your assignment using the "Assignments" link on Blackboard.

**Note: the policy description and literature review is not a place for analysis. It is, simply, a description. Any issues/problems you see with the policy should be reserved for assignment #2.

Assignment #2: Analysis (Due 3/3/10)

Now that you have conducted thorough research on your policy, you are expected to evaluate its effectiveness. First, you need to decide what would make the policy "effective." How would you measure "effectiveness"? Then,

using a *minimum* of three new sources and referring to your literature review when appropriate, provide several defensible arguments for why this policy is or is not effective. This is not a place for uninformed opinion – you must use facts to defend your position. Presume that your reader has no prior knowledge of policy implications and it is your duty to make them an informed citizen. This section of your paper must be at least 5 pages long, double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font. Proper in-text and bibliographic citation (APA style) is absolutely required. You should submit your assignment using the “Assignments” link on Blackboard.

Assignment #3: Recommendations (Due 4/2/10)

Now that you have provided your reader with arguments for why the policy you have chosen is or is not effective, offer your recommendations for the future. If the policy is effective, should it continue to be used as it currently is, or should there be some changes? If so, what should those changes be? Should the policy be expanded to apply to other cases/states/jurisdictions/etc.? What might future researchers consider if they plan to re-evaluate the policies effectiveness? If the policy is not effective, how should it change? Why? Should it be completely eradicated or replaced with a new policy? What would that new policy look like and why would it be more effective? This section of your paper must be a minimum of 2 pages long, double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font. Proper in-text and bibliographic citation (APA style) is absolutely required. You should submit your assignment using the “Assignments” link on Blackboard.

Final Paper (Due 4/28/10)

Your final paper is where you put all of your assignments together (once you have revised them according to my comments, of course). Your final paper should have a brief introduction that captures the reader’s attention, and then the following sections: Policy Description & Literature Review, Analysis, and Recommendations. You must have a minimum of 9 sources that are properly cited both in-text and in the bibliography using the APA style. The final product should be at least 12 pages long, double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font. Proper in-text and bibliographic citation (APA style) is absolutely required.

Appendix B

Assignment Grading Rubric – 50 pts (All classes)

Category	Excellent (Needs little improvement)	Satisfactory (Needs some improvement)	Unsatisfactory (Needs much improvement)
Mechanics (10)	10 points: Paper has no spelling, grammatical or sentence structure errors.	7-9 points: Paper has some spelling, grammatical and sentence structure errors, but not enough to detract from the content	0-6 points: An abundance of spelling, grammatical and sentence structure errors detracts from the content
Organization (10)	10 points: Paper follows the format requested by the professor, progresses in a logical manner, and has appropriate transitions	7-9 points: Paper has some problems with format, logic and transitions, but not enough to detract from the content.	0-6 points: An abundance of format, logic and transition issues detracts from the content
Citations/Sources (10)	10 points: All sources are properly cited both in-text and in the bibliography	7-9 points: Only minor issues with citation placement and bibliography	0-6 points: An abundance of citation errors in-text or in the bibliography
Content (20)	20 points: Author addresses all aspects of the assignment, has fully developed ideas, uses description and analysis appropriately, demonstrates critical thinking skills and uses appropriate sources	16-19 points: Author needs to make minor improvements to addressing assignment, developing ideas, describing/analyzing, demonstrating critical thinking skills or using appropriate sources	0-15 points: Author fails to address the assignment, develop ideas completely, describe or analyze appropriately, use critical thinking skills or use appropriate sources.

Final Paper Grading Rubric (Classes 1 and 2)

Category	Excellent A/B	Satisfactory C	Unsatisfactory D/F
Mechanics (15)	12-15 points: Paper has no spelling, grammatical or sentence structure errors.	10-11 points: Paper has some spelling, grammatical and sentence structure errors, but not enough to detract from the content	0-9 points: An abundance of spelling, grammatical and sentence structure errors detracts from the content
Organization (15)	12-15 points: Paper follows the format requested by the professor, progresses in a logical manner, and has appropriate transitions	10-11 points: Paper has some problems with format, logic and transitions, but not enough to detract from the content.	0-9 points: An abundance of format, logic and transition issues detracts from the content
Citations/Sources	12-15 points:	10-11 points:	0-9 points:

(15)	All sources are properly cited both in-text and in the bibliography	Only minor issues with citation placement and bibliography	An abundance of citation errors in-text or in the bibliography
Content (55)	44-55 points: Author addresses all aspects of the assignment, has fully developed ideas, uses description and analysis appropriately, demonstrates critical thinking skills and uses appropriate sources	39-43 points: Author needs to make minor improvements to addressing assignment, developing ideas, describing/analyzing, demonstrating critical thinking skills or using appropriate sources	0-38 points: Author fails to address the assignment, develop ideas completely, describe or analyze appropriately, use critical thinking skills or use appropriate sources.

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