Turnitin Relieves Grading Miseries

ROBERT CLARKE

For years, the Accounting Department has sensed that accounting students do not write very well. All of the industry publications, as well as the firms that hire our students, tell us that new accounting graduates lack good writing skills. We always want to spend time during the semester helping our students write better, but there never seems to be time in the schedule.

As a department, we understand the importance of helping our students become good writers, and most courses require some amount of evaluated writing. I, however, have been reluctant to include writing assignments in my courses because every time I do, I end up being miserable. Miserable because I don't feel competent to evaluate mechanics, grammar, and style. Miserable because it is hard to grade writing assignments, it takes a long time, and (for me) requires great focus. And, miserable because the students, for a variety of reasons, simply do not write well.

Nevertheless, every few semesters I think I have stumbled upon the grand cure to poor student writing and assign a newly contrived writing assignment. Alas, by the end of those semesters, I (and I think my students also) end up miserable once again because it has taken so much time to evaluate the writing assignments that the students no longer really care about their feedback, only their grade. I'm miserable because I'm not sure I was accurate, consistent, and fair in the grading of the writing assignments. And I'm miserable because I realize the students still aren't writing well, and I wasn't able to teach them to write any better. I just ask them to write and then take a really long time to tell them they aren't very good at it. The students are glad it's over, and I'm ecstatic it's over.

Recently, I found some help that really worked for my students and me. My department chair helped me to understand that writing assignments don't need to be long to help students learn to write. I also have come to believe that a plan to help students learn to write has to involve a quick, thorough evaluation of the students' work and an opportunity for the students to incorporate the feedback in other writing assignments. Assigning short, meaningful writing assignments gives students the opportunity to learn and develop writing skills and allows me the opportunity to evaluate and respond quickly to their work.

> My department chair helped me to understand that writing assignments don't need to be long to help students learn to write.

Here's what I did. First, I picked topics that are relevant to accounting and the course content and developed seven prompts for the writing assignments. Second, I asked the students to respond to each prompt in no more than three paragraphs, using their own words. Since I am interested in the student's ability to express their understanding of course content, and not in citing authority, no quotations are allowed. Finally, I made each of the seven assignments due on successive weeks, with the commitment to provide

the students with feedback on their writing assignments within 48 hours of the due dates. (Each assignment is due on Monday morning at 8:00 AM, so my commitment is to have the feedback to the students by Wednesday morning.)

Forty-eight hours is not much time to evaluate up to 60 writing assignments, even if they are three paragraphs or less. A colleague recommend that I consider using "Turnitin," for which the university had just purchased a license. Desperate, I investigated. I found Turnitin to be the tool set I needed to help me thoroughly evaluate students' writing assignments within the 48-hour time limit.

It's not perfect, but it is a great tool for identifying areas of concern and where to start looking.

Turnitin is a learning management system (LMS) which focuses on writing assignments. It is not integrated with I-Learn, so teachers have to create classes within Turnitin and invite their students to register for the class at no cost. (When a class is created, Turnitin provides the instructions for students to register.) The teacher creates assignments for the class from the class home page. All assignments can be configured for open date, due date, grade post date, etc., as would be found in any LMS.

Turnitin has four main tools to assist teachers in grading writing assignments. Each is listed and briefly described below.

Originality Report: This tool generates a report detailing any and all specific content matches found on each assignment. The Originality Report tool searches a repository of all student papers submitted to Turnitin, current and archived web pages, periodicals, journals, and publications for matches to content in the students' writing assignments. The teacher can set match sensitivity and specific exclusions.

Finally, the realization hit me: the students don't understand what I want. They know they need to write well, but they don't know what "well" means.

GradeMark: This tool allows teachers to create three types of rubrics to help grade writing assignments: a standard rubric which allows the teacher to enter scale values for each column and weight criteria rows using percentages, a custom rubric which allows the teacher to enter any value directly into each rubric cell, and a qualitative rubric which provides standard feedback with no scoring.

ETS e-rater: This tool provides grammar checking for each writing assignment. The five categories of grammar checking include: spelling, grammar, usage, mechanics, and style. Each category has several elements which may also be individually included in, or excluded from, the grammar check.

QuickMarks: This tool provides custom and preset marks, or comments, that can be attached to highlighted text within the writing assignment.

Additionally, there are other tools allowing peer review of writing assignments that are not used in my course.

Despite my hopes, I found that Turnitin did not completely grade each assignment: I still needed to review content. However, it does provide a quality first review of the grammar and mechanics of each student's writing assignment, a thorough comparison of the assignment's contents to selected sources, and a robust tool to provide feedback and scoring to each student.

The Originality Report worked well. It shows students, after they have submitted their writing assignment, any content matches found. Students may rework and resubmit their assignments, but the Originality Report response time on the second submission is really slow (about a day) becoming available to the students. The Originality Report shows the teacher the content matches in the writing assignment and the context of each match found. On most assignments, less than 10% of the writing assignments submitted have significant content matches.

If matches are found with content submitted from other universities, Turnitin does not show the context. Rather it lists the university at which the match was found and provides a link to contact the university to receive permission to review the content.

Students are provided a qualitative rubric for the writing assignments in my class. (I'm not comfortable leaving the grade entirely to a formula; I think it's important for me to have subjective input in the grade.) Using GradeMark, I created a rubric with seven criteria and four skill levels. After reviewing each writing assignment for content and grammar, I opened the rubric and, with the mouse, selected the skill level appropriate to each of the criteria. The implementation of this tool is well executed and easy to use.

Any errors in grammar are highlighted and annotated by the ETS e-rater tool when a writing assignment is opened for grading. This is the area where I need the most help grading, and the tool is good, but not perfect. The ETS e-rater consistently identifies cannot as being spelled incorrectly, it is overly aggressive in identifying missed commas (commas, I am learning, are often a matter of opinion), and it is sensitive to article errors. It's not perfect, but it is a great tool for identifying areas of concern and where to start looking.

Of all the tools provided by Turnitin, QuickMarks is most useful to me. Rather than having to write the same comments repetitively on students' writing assignments, the text in question can be selected and a custom or a preset mark, or comment, is selected and attached to the text. Additional remarks can be added to each comment, whether custom or preset. I created a set of custom and preset comments for each assignment. The comments in

each set are customized to indicate whether or not specific criteria from the writing assignment are met, to indicate common errors, and to indicate areas for attention. This tool saves me from a lot of writing and fatigue.

One of the difficulties I have with subjective grading is identifying the degree to which a submitted assignment earns an A, B, C, D, or F. The differences between an A and a B, and between a C and a D, etc., seem to be pretty clear. However, in absence of a rubric which assigns a strict score for every degree of every criteria, it seems difficult to identify, subjectively, whether an assignment has earned a 77% or a 76% or a 78%. If fact, I found that a lot of my grading time is taken with trying to "justify" the grade that I feel an assignment warrants.

My strategy to avoid "grade lock" is to remove the graduation between the grades. Each assignment is worth 30 points. When assigning a grade to an assignment, I limit myself to giving grades in multiples of three (i.e. 3, 6, 9, 12 … 27, 30). No exceptions. If a writing assignment is really good, at least 90%, but not quite 100%, I don't worry about the score: it's a 27 (90%). As much as anything else, this strategy has saved me a lot of time.

I learned some things about writing assignments. The average score on the first assignment was 47%, with one student scoring 100% and four students scoring 90%. When I asked the students about why they thought they had done so poorly they said that they were feeling me out to find out how carefully I would grade.

After the first three writing assignments, the students' grammar and overall writing didn't seem to be getting any better. I was becoming frustrated because it seemed to me that they weren't trying and I knew they were capable of writing better, but they just didn't seem to be giving any effort to the assignment. Finally, the realization hit me: the students don't understand what I want. They know they need to write well, but they don't know what "well" means.

With that realization, we began taking class time to discuss what it means to "write well." Soon, the level of writing on the writing assignments began to increase. Once students know what is expected they work to perform at that level.

I began to notice something else: while there began to be more high scores on the writing assignments, there also began to be more low scores, including a higher percentage of assignments that received no score because they contained too many grammar or mechanical errors. The average stayed about the same. The students told me that because I told them I agreed to drop the two assignments with the lowest scores, many of them stopped trying on the last few assignments. They said they figured they would have to do really well on the last two assignments to improve their grades and they felt it wasn't worth the effort.

This semester I repeated the assignments in my class, but with two fundamental changes: 1) while I continued to drop the students' lowest two scores, the last assignment was not eligible to be dropped; and 2) I changed the syllabus to include parts of several class days to review grammar and mechanics. The results have been dramatic: on five of the first six writing assignments the scores have been on average 10.2% higher this semester than they were last semester.

While not everything has gone as planned, I am happy with the past two semesters' writing assignments. I have found a way to help my students improve their writing that isn't pure misery for the students and for me. Turnitin has increased my grading accuracy and reliability, decreased the time it takes to evaluate writing assignments, and help provide consistent feedback to the students. ☼

Once students know what is expected they work to perform at that level.