

Learning Writing by Rewriting: Providing Multiple Deadlines for a Final Paper

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Abstract:

“I have read through all my students’ final paper, indicated mistakes, and offered suggestions for improvement. Am I wasting my time and energy?”

Does this voice sound familiar? Instructors who use writing as an assessment-- including me-- find that many students do not have good academic writing skills. When we design helpful writing assignments, such as research papers, they often fail to deliver on their promise. Some typical problems of final papers include:

- An inability to follow important details of the instructions
- Difficulty expressing ideas clearly in writing
- Trouble following citation styles.

Another core problem is that many students do not actually learn from writing a final paper. Many students procrastinate until the end of the semester (even if you warn them the very first day of the semester!), and barely have time to organize their thoughts. Additionally, based on research evidence and my experience, helpful feedback is almost impossible due to instructors being busy entering all of the grades and students not reading feedback after the semester is over.

So, what can we do? If we use final paper as a summative assessment of course objectives, we should provide students with multiple assessments throughout the semester to prepare them for writing the final paper.

Keywords: college writing | writing strategies | final papers

Article:

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Setting up Multiple Deadlines

Setting up multiple deadlines for various parts of a final paper is one effective way to implement formative assessments that lead to the summative assessment in writing. I teach a Research Methods in Psychology course in which students have to conduct a group research project and submit a final individual research paper (about 10–12 pages).

Most of my students have never written a research paper before and thus struggle with writing their first one. Instead of writing a whole paper at once, I help students to write their final research paper in parts and submit corresponding drafts in the order of Introduction, Methods, Results, and the whole paper with Discussions. I clearly lay out specific instructions for students to focus their time and energy for quality writing of each part. If any part does not pass the proficiency standard listed in the rubric, students have to rewrite that part and resubmit it. Based on the detailed constructive feedback given on each draft, students submit their final paper at the end of the semester by rewriting each part and put them together in one piece. In this way, students have sufficient time throughout the semester to learn how to write adequately the first time and rewrite a better product to fulfill course objectives.

Providing Feedback

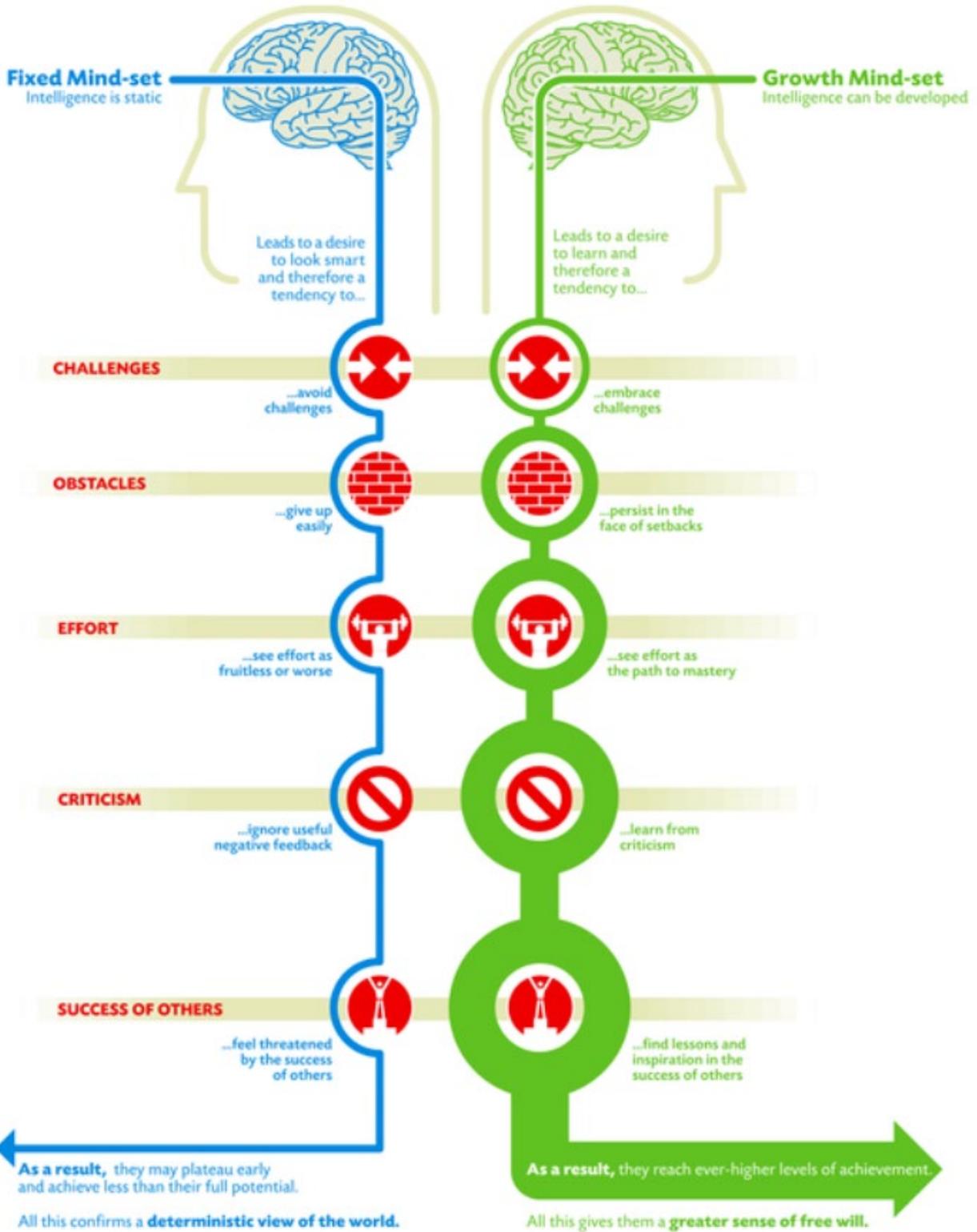
Having multiple deadlines may help students understand and execute the final paper with a better quality, but this approach alone may not maximize learning without adequate feedback. One of the key challenges faced by instructors is providing feedback that students want to and actually use. Research indicates that instructor comments are often useless because students frequently do not attend to or understand the feedback. Furthermore, the feedback students appreciate (i.e., general positive comments) is not necessarily the feedback (i.e., constructive criticism) that could best support their learning. Thus, it is “not inevitable that students will read and pay attention to

Title Page, Introduction Section, & References 1st Draft Rubric

INDIVIDUAL assignment (20 points): 3-5 pages	Novice---Competent---Exemplary
1. Title page <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Running head (no more than 50 characters), Page Number, Title (no more than 12 words), Author’s Name & Institution name 	0-----1
2. Intro: Context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First paragraph begins broadly ▪ Clear explanation of the overarching problem being investigated 	0-----3
3. Intro: Literature review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Past studies described in enough detail so their relation to other studies and relevant theoretical and methodological issues can be understood by the reader ▪ It is clear whether statements are hypotheses, results of a study, or general conclusions ▪ Contrasting views are presented ▪ Sources are integrated & research is presented topically 	0-----4
4. Intro: Purpose (Start a subheading “Purpose and Hypotheses”) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clear description of limitations of past work and/or what is missing from past research and/or what researchers do not yet know ▪ Brief overview of current study provided ▪ Explanation of how the proposed study will answer the question or fill in a research gap (or why replication of past research is necessary/useful) ▪ Specific issues, variables, populations, or methods relevant to current research problem are discussed 	0-----2
5. Intro: Hypotheses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hypothesis are testable, clearly stated, and directional predictions are made based on the previous literature ▪ It is clear what the experimental groups will be and what will be measured ▪ Variables are appropriate to test hypotheses and operationally defined 	0-----2

feedback even when that feedback is lovingly crafted and provided promptly” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p. 20).

One way to encourage students to use the feedback is to convince them that doing so can improve their final grades. Similar to how researchers resubmit a manuscript to a journal for publication, I ask students to highlight each of the revisions that they make in their final paper and assure that making all of the suggested changes appropriately can result in a high or even perfect score on their paper. Instead of providing proofreading services that have been shown ineffective, the content of the feedback should surround some big ideas regarding structure and organization (e.g., theories and significance), support of arguments (e.g., literature review), and important technical details (e.g., citation style). In courses that instructors cannot possibly provide detailed feedback for separate parts of a final paper, instructors may give students credits for writing a brief outline with some arguments for support, followed by providing constructive feedback. In order to enhance student likelihood of using feedback, instructors can foster students’ growth mindset, rooted in Carol Dweck’s research, by providing encouraging feedback such as “I’m giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them.”



GRAPHIC BY NIGEL HOLMES

Image Credit: The Growth Mindset Andreas Pizsa <https://www.flickr.com/photos/butterseite/2658061277>
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Practical Perspectives

What is students' take on writing a final paper with multiple deadlines and feedback beforehand? In my anonymous course evaluation, over 80% of my students stated that having multiple deadlines and instructor feedback were the most helpful things for completing their final paper. Some students also mentioned having writing samples and meeting with the instructor were important for their writing. However, a small group of students, particularly the less engaged, may not like this approach due to the fact that revisions represent a greater amount of work. Additionally, having multiple drafts and providing helpful feedback to each of them increase instructors' workload. Therefore, in conclusion, I would like to offer some caveats for using this multiple-deadline approach:

- Make sure students understand why it is beneficial for them to write the final paper and how having multiple deadlines and drafts can help. For example, I show students some requirements for psychology graduate program applications, which emphasize good writing skills and research experience.
- Set up deadlines that are not too close, and yet not too far, from one another. My class meets twice a week, and I set deadlines that are one week apart for three different parts of the paper; students are able to receive my feedback (both written and verbal) prior to submitting the next part. I deliberately plan my calendar to ensure both students and myself are typically not very busy, such that the writing and grading can be completed in a timely fashion. The final paper submission are three weeks apart from the previous draft to allow students time to revise and ask questions deemed necessary.
- Consider the number of students in a course. I only have 25 students in my research methods course, so I can dedicate time and energy to provide helpful feedback to each part of the paper. For instructors who teach larger classes, they shall consider training graduate teaching assistants to provide intended feedback, or offering a framework for undergraduate students to complete peer review and provide feedback for classmates. Research shows that both reviewing classmates' work and having work reviewed by classmate can benefit and learn from the process.

Enjoy grading your final paper next time!

Bio

Dr. Tsz Lun (Alan) Chu's is an Assistant Professor of Sport Psychology at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. He teaches research methods in psychology and conducts research on motivation for sport and exercise. Alan is also a sport psychology consultant who works with athletes and coaches on mental skills training. To practice what he preaches, Alan is highly involved in sports, specializing in table tennis as a competitive player and an internationally certified coach.

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