

Simplifying Writing Assessment:

What Happens When I Change the Way That I Grade and Respond to Student Writing?

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## I. CONTEXT

As a teacher of English at the ninth and tenth grade level, I spend a great deal of time teaching, evaluating, grading, and responding to writing. The English curriculum at my school puts a strong emphasis on writing skills, particularly crafting argumentative and expository essays. Although writing is only part of the curriculum that I am responsible for teaching my students, it is perhaps the most important. Writing is an essential skill that extends across content areas and beyond students' high school graduation. The writing abilities that students hone in my classes are vital for their success in college and job performance in their careers.

Despite the importance of this skill and the time and effort that we spend working on it, students seem to demonstrate little growth from one assignment to the next. Even with many opportunities to write throughout the marking period, my colleagues and I face the frustration of seeing our students make the same mistakes over and over, even as they move from one grade to the next. We are constantly asking ourselves, "How can we do this better? How do we stop seeing the same errors time and time again? How can we give our students immediate and meaningful feedback on their writing if it takes over two weeks to grade 100 papers?"

### *Current Approaches to Student Writing*

Presently my colleagues and I use a writing rubric to grade students' essays that is based on the Common Core Writing Standards. These rubrics, whether holistic or analytic, address multiple features of writing such as the introduction, thesis, supporting evidence, organization, grammar, usage, diction, audience, and style. We are often even required to use a standard holistic rubric modified from the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) exam rubric on shared writing assessments. Based on this rubric, we grade a student's essay line by line, and paragraph by paragraph, mining the text for every error on the

rubric and commenting in the margins as we go. This process can take anywhere between ten and twenty minutes to respond to each piece of writing. Once I get through all of my students' essays, I have completed almost two thousand hours of grading. And that's just for one writing assignment—as per district policy we are required to assign at least four a marking period.

Imagine my dismay when a student gets his essay back, and he skips past my thoughtful corrections and marginal commentary right to the grade. It seems the grade is all that students care about. Very few even look twice at the feedback let alone take those suggestions into consideration and try to improve in those areas on the next assignment.

And yet I find myself continuing to assess and respond to student writing in this same time-consuming way again and again. And again and again the same students skip right to the grade, and the same students improve little if at all and may not even progress going to the next grade level. It's a nauseating cycle of defeat that is all too familiar to the English teachers in my department, and I suspect my school is not the only place it is happening.

However, I believe that the problem behind this stunted growth is two-fold. In addition to the reasons I've described above, the second part of this problem is district policy. The English department policy in place requires ninth grade students to complete four formal, thesis-driven essays per marking period and students in grades ten through twelve to complete three. As per district policy, these writing assignments account for 40-60% of a student's overall marking period average depending on grade and level. The theory behind this policy is that increasing the quantity of student writing yields an increase in their writing ability. However, quantity does not necessarily equal quality. This policy has always presented an incredible challenge to both my colleagues and myself because, with only eight weeks in a marking period, students have to write an essay every other week. That only gives two weeks to grade each paper and provide feedback.

By the time students get back their essays with the teacher's feedback, the assignment has left their minds and they already have to start working on the next. While we acknowledge that students must write regularly and at length in order to improve, the feedback for these assignments must be timely and applicable. I think that immediate feedback on student writing would help students correct common errors and avoid making them again in the future. In addition, this grueling writing schedule means that students have no time to do meaningful revisions of their work. Although I have students engage in reflective exercises on their writing, without the critical piece of revision in the writing process, students are not learning from their mistakes and continue to make them time and time again.

Overall, these practices, both my own and those enforced by the district, are clearly not working. A possible solution, however, may be found in the answer to my research question: What happens when I change the way that I grade and respond to student writing? How might student writing improve by changing the focus from the essays as a whole to just one or two standards at a time?

### ***Future Approaches to Student Writing***

My plan is to have students continue to write on a bi-weekly basis but rather than evaluating their essays as a whole, focus on one or two specific areas of much-needed practice and revision. I will determine the criteria based on the needs of my students focusing on the aspects with which the majority seems to struggle the most. After delivering direct instruction on these aspects and dedicating class time for students to practice, I would develop a rubric that evaluates only the one or two areas of focus. I would still require students to write full length, formal pieces to remain in compliance with department policy. However, I would explain to students in advance as they are drafting their essays that I will be grading their essays for just one

or two specific criteria, so that they put extra thought into those aspects of their writing that need the most improvement. By grading and providing feedback for only one or two of these focus correction areas, I anticipate being able to respond to them within only a week rather than two or more. This means that students would receive more immediate feedback while their writing is still fresh in their minds. It also follows that there would be enough time to revise and make corrections before assigning the next essay. If I require students to make those corrections, I can ensure that more students will actually be reading and thinking about how to implement changes in their writing based on my commentary. Additionally, without being overwhelmed by a paper full of corrections, students can focus on really perfecting just one or two aspects of their writing at a time and mastering those skills before advancing to the next assignment.

### ***My Writers***

My focus for this study will be my first period class of 9th grade honors students. The high school serves 9th-12th grade students from three different towns in Bergen County, who come from three different middle schools. What this means for my classroom of 9th graders is that while most of my students share a similar socio-economic background, their educational experiences are quite diverse. Depending on which middle school they attended, some have already written six page research papers while others focused exclusively on creative writing while still others claim to have no memory of writing essays at all! Although these honors freshmen are very bright and motivated, they seem to struggle with articulating their ideas in thesis-driven essay assignments. They know that they are supposed to have an introduction, organized body paragraphs with supporting evidence, and a conclusion. However, exactly how to make those body paragraphs organized seems to elude many of them; how to select appropriate supporting evidence and not just any quotation from the text is a struggle. While they are

comfortable with my current grading system and familiar holistic rubrics, I think that in their eagerness to do well they will be open and adaptable to new methods midway through the year.

My hope is that by changing the way that I grade and respond to their writing, students too will change the way that they approach their writing assignments. Rather than stressing about each and every detail being perfect, or, worse yet, resigning themselves to mediocrity, they will concentrate their efforts on the focus correction areas that need the most attention and hone those skills. I hope that knowing it is possible to get a 100% on an essay assignment *even if it's not perfect* can be liberating and encourage students to take creative risks in other aspects of their writing. Additionally, I hope that this new approach will spare precious minutes when I am reading, commenting on, and grading my students' work. Maybe this could free up time for much-needed revision in an already demanding curriculum. The time I might spare would also be a great benefit to my own sanity and thwart the risk of "English Teacher Burn Out." Going into this study, clearly I have high hopes. Ultimately, however, I am looking forward to just trying something new. The current system is broken as evidenced in my students' lack of progress and my lack of sleep. Hopefully, this will be a win-win for us all.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Grading and Responding to Student Writing*

Instructors of writing spend countless hours grading and commenting on student papers. In addition to reading and assessing quite literally thousands upon thousands of pages, writing instructors also share a favorite pastime: complaining about the paper load. Seemingly endless,

the paper load of English teachers is a common source of frustration. So what is to be done? Much has been published on different approaches to grading and responding to student writing. Some address ways to do it better and more effectively; others explore efficiency and saving time. Across the board, the literature that is focused on responding to student writing acknowledges the fact that there is no panacea to stem the never-ending flow of papers. However, there are techniques to make the instructor's efforts practical and valuable for students so his or her labor is not in vain.

### ***What Needs to be Assessed?***

One theme that much of the literature has in common is that not all student writing has to be assessed or even read by the teacher in the first place. Many teachers, like Jago (2005), fear that if they do not grade every piece of student writing, poor writing habits will be reinforced and if they do not mark every error, students will “fall between the cracks” (Jago, 2005, p. 3). Like Jago, many teachers “wield [their] red pens with love” (p. 4) in hopes of improving student writing. However, this conception that every piece of writing students produce must be evaluated and checked for errors is not necessarily true. Many researchers suggest that grading student work only intermittently has many benefits. As Lucas (2012) notes, “Writing frequently is undisputedly the best way to help students gain fluency” (p. 137); therefore, students should write often without the intention of the teacher ever collecting and grading their work but simply checking for completion (Lucas, 2012). By not collecting and grading each piece of writing students produce, it allows them to write more often. Similarly, Elbow (2003) suggests that students should write frequently for a minimal completion grade without having to worry about “getting an A” or an authority figure evaluating their work. Even though this takes away the incentive of earning high marks, this would give students the opportunity to practice more often

than if their work had to be checked and evaluated by the teacher.

Additionally, many experts agree that there are many problems that emerge when a teacher assigns a grade to every piece of a student's writing. Avraham Kluger & Angelo DiNisi (1996, 1998) claim that although assigning grades to writing can motivate some students, evaluating students with grades can create anxiety and actually have a negative effect on performance (as cited in Kellog & Whiteford, 2009). Holaday (1997) maintains that assigning grades to student writing essentially puts the teacher in the position of "judge" rather than "coach" which is what developing writers need. Additionally, Tchudi (1997) points out that when students' writing is evaluated it means that their work is compared "with some sort of marker, benchmark, or standard. Unfortunately, many students see evaluation as essentially punitive" (p. xv). Even "good" grades of B+ or A-, anything less than a perfect score, imply "a degree of failure" which can be detrimental to developing writers (O'Hagan, 1997). O'Hagan (1997) believes that the "process of labeling a child as a failure begins and ends with grades" (p. 5). Unfortunately, as Bauman (1997) points out, "Once a student is identified as a 'failure' the continuing experience with failure lowers motivation" (p. 173). Thus a vicious cycle is born which inhibits students' growth.

Another reason that assigning grades "can reduce performance [is] because they may direct an individual's attention away from the task and toward the self" (Kellog & Whiteford, 2009, p. 260). The student turns his focus away from improving the task and instead compares how well he is doing in relation to his peers. Additionally, if students are writing simply for the approval of their teachers, they conform to the standards of the teacher rather than developing the necessary skill of evaluating their own writing. They focus solely on what they need to do to get the "A" rather than doing "the cognitive work involved in figuring out what constitutes

appropriate writing... As long as the teacher is passing judgment, the teacher's judgment will matter more than the student's" (Bauman, 1997, p. 173). As Elbow explains, there are advantages to having students write for themselves and not the grade for it allows students to write to find their own voices rather than putting so much concentration on what the teacher "wants" (Elbow, 2003).

Another problem with grading all student writing is that even with the best of intentions, it is an inherently arbitrary and subjective process that is irrelevant to the types of authentic writing experiences students will face in life beyond the classroom (Tchudi, 1997). Grades are unscientific calculations and, as such, seldom provide students with any beneficial or valuable information (O'Hagan, 1997). In fact the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) committee on Alternatives to Grading Student Writing asserts that "grading student writing doesn't contribute much to learning to write and is in conflict with the new paradigms of writing instruction" (Tchudi, 1997, p. xii). Lucas makes an apt analogy by comparing grading to the score of a basketball game: "Winning points may be the final goal of classroom work as it is in the sports endeavor, but the grade, like the final score of the game, never taught anyone how to win again, or why they lost" (as cited in O'Hagan, 1997, p. 3). Ultimately, the case for not assigning grades to all student work is supported by the research when it is used with effective feedback on select writing assignments.

### ***What is Effective Feedback?***

Supplementing this approach with effective feedback from the teacher on certain writing assignments raises the question: "What exactly makes feedback 'effective'?" Several sources underscore the value of providing feedback that is prompt and timely. Grant Wiggins (2012)

explains that untimely feedback is a significant issue in American education. He argues that if feedback is delayed by weeks or even months after a performance, it is no longer an effective tool to promote growth. He states that educators should ensure that students receive feedback and have the opportunity to use it “while the attempt and effects are still fresh in their minds” (Wiggins, 2012, p. 14). Shelley Stagg Peterson (2010) suggests timing the feedback in the beginning and middle stages of the writing process so that students can utilize the teacher’s comments in later drafts. She even advocates that teachers give a grade for simply completing and submitting a draft on time and calculating it as a small percentage of the final paper’s grade. Wiggins (2012) also proposes that peer review is another way to provide students with more immediate feedback. If students are trained to conduct peer reviews at a high standard without negative criticisms and vague recommendations, students can get the feedback they need much more quickly than it would take the teacher to comment on each student’s writing or take class time to conference with each student individually. Overall, immediacy is key to providing helpful and effective feedback for student writing.

Another reason why timely feedback is fundamental to improving student writing is that students need to be able to then implement the comments they’ve received and revise. Much of the literature underscores the necessity of applicable feedback and the value of the revision process. As Lucas (2012) explains, the feedback students need must be specific and immediate so that they can correct their errors and use the feedback to revise, thus strengthening their skills. Peterson (2010) agrees and asserts that when students are provided with applicable feedback during the writing process, they are more likely to use it to revise their drafts than they would if they received the comments on a final graded product. She emphasizes that students “also have an immediate opportunity to try out the suggestions in their writing, allowing for meaningful

application of what they have learned from the feedback” (Peterson, 2010, p. 1). Schmoker (2006) asserts that the most effective feedback occurs when “students complete their writing in stages; with brief conferences with the teacher at critical junctures on in-school writing workshop days” (p. 169). The timeliness of specific feedback ensures that students have the opportunity to revise, improving not only the piece at hand but also their writing in the future.

Effective feedback must also be positive in nature. The research of Hillocks (1986) “indicates that writers grow more by praise than criticism” (as cited in Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 2005, p. 92-93). Holaday explains that rather than motivating students to correct their mistakes in future assignments, excessive negative feedback can actually be counterproductive as it discourages developing writers. Holaday suggests that “A better alternative...is to let students know when they do well and to tell them specifically what it is they do well. We do not need a hierarchy of excellence. Teachers can praise good work wherever it is found” (Holaday, 1997, p. 39). Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) also suggests focusing on the positives of students’ writing as “Masses of red marks on a page” can cause students to lose confidence in their writing abilities and do not teach the students how to become better revisers or proofreaders (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 2005, p. 92-93).

However, timely and positive feedback is still not effective without it also being specific and focused. This runs contrary to the way many teachers are accustomed to grading and responding to student writing. Too often “the teacher throws out a big net to see what he or she can catch, reading for content, focus, style, and mechanics simultaneously. By trying to read at a number of levels, the teacher does not read effectively at any” (Newkirk, 1979, p. 36-37). The research suggests that this traditional method of grading in which teachers correct compositions

line by line and comment on each error is in fact the least effective way to provide students with feedback because it is neither focused nor specific (Collins, 1994).

This concept is not new. In “The Overgraded Paper: Another Case of More is Less,” Muriel Harris argues that despite extensive commentary on their papers, “many students get nothing of lasting value from all this effort...in noting many things, the instructor emphasizes nothing, and many students lost in the welter of messages, retreat.” (Harris, 1979, p. 92). She maintains practice-what-you-preach approach: if instructors are trying to teach students to use concepts like “focus” and “control” in their writing, the teachers too should hold themselves to the same standards of focus and control in their responses to student writing (Harris, 1979). Furthermore, in an interview with George Hillocks in the September 5, 1984, edition of *Education Week*, Hillocks expresses his belief that marginal and summative comments on student writing is ineffective in improving its quality. He calls teacher comments “diffuse” which are spread across many aspects of the written product. He suggests that student writers cannot process all of that commentary. He goes on to describe a study in which teachers corrected every single error in their students’ papers and then asked students to rewrite them. The revisions in turn actually scored lower than the original works. Hillocks believes this “lost ground” was probably due to the overwhelming negativity of the teachers’ comments (as cited in Collins, 1999, p. 2).

In *Results Now* Schmoker (2006) also claims that making student essays bleed with red ink is not only a waste of teacher time, but it is also to the disadvantage of the students. If each essay “portends untold hours or burdensome paper grading,” teachers will assign fewer writing assignments resulting in fewer opportunities for students to practice (Schmoker, 2006, p. 168). Instead he calls for a drastic shift and a new awareness:

The research is strong that students are far better off when we score their work for only one or two criteria that we have just finished teaching carefully and explicitly—and with the help of exemplars that add immensely to our attempts to define voice or effective transitions, or thoughtfully placed details in a paragraph. Students need limited amounts of specific feedback—and they need it quickly with the opportunity to correct or revise. (p. 168-169)

His philosophy is that by grading and responding to student writing based on just one or two specific criteria at a time, it saves teachers hours of unnecessary marking, makes the teachers' efforts more efficient and allows students to actually do *more* writing which will ultimately be more beneficial (2006). These claims are echoed by Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde's *Best Practice Third Edition: New Standards for Teaching and Learning* (2011) which also recommends "focusing on one or two kinds of errors at a time" (p. 92). Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde reiterate the importance of more student writing, more than a single teacher could possibly read let alone correct every error. They suggest that marking one "sample paragraph for just one type of problem, results in more real learning" (p. 93).

### ***Focus Correction Areas of the Collins Writing Program***

The necessity for specific feedback is emphasized by John Collins (1994) who pioneered the Collins Writing Program which is designed around this central principle. The cornerstone of the Collins Writing Program is what Collins calls "Focus Correction Areas." Collins challenges teachers to reconsider the practicality of commenting on all errors and instead focus on just a select few:

Think about the reality of your classroom. How often do teachers see students carefully examining a corrected paper, carefully looking for each error? Most

students want to know the grade and be done with it. Focus correcting changes this attitude by helping the students consider the quality of the paper with respect to a few clearly specified criteria, rather than to an infinite number of highly subjective criteria. (Collins, 1994, p.8)

Collins maintains that intensive marking of student papers does not actually improve them or help students refine their skills as writers. He believes it would be better for students to write frequently, so much so that teachers could not possibly mark every error. He also asserts “it is much better to have a student leave your classroom in June with four or five writing skills that are consistently applied than to have been exposed to twenty writing skills that are never, or, at best, randomly applied” (Collins, 1994, p. 45). Ultimately, focusing teacher feedback on specific areas of necessary improvement yields results in student learning.

Lisa Lucas (2012), a supporter of using Focus Correction Areas to assess student writing, comments on the success of Collins’s approach because it allows for frequent and specific feedback which helps students to understand not only the areas of writing in which they need to improve, but also their strengths (p. 138). Lucas describes her own experience with the Collins Writing Program as beneficial in that it addresses the need for teachers “to teach fewer skills and do a better job of teaching, assessing, and providing formative feedback. We need to balance effectiveness with efficiency.” In order to satisfy the need for specific and focused feedback and grading of student writing, she uses FCAs (Focus Correction Areas) because they offer transparency and provide concentrated “specific areas of focus for the students and parents” (Lucas, 2012, p. 139).

The Collins Writing program seems to bridge the gap between the need for specific feedback and the need for more opportunities for students to write. While the teacher is both

responding to student writing *and* grading it simultaneously, the methods of the Collins Writing Program are not totally at odds with those who make the case against grading student writing like Lucas (2012) and Elbow (1997). Collins acknowledges the same argument that Lucas and Elbow make for minimal grading of student writing as complete or incomplete. Collins agrees that the need for students to do more writing is more than one teacher could possibly grade. However, part of his program is based on the philosophy that if students' writing is never evaluated at all, students "being only human would stop doing the assignments or would do them in a perfunctory way" (Collins, 1992, p.1) Therefore, by just grading for one or two criteria at a time, the teacher will spend less time on each piece and will still be able to meet the demands of a highly rigorous writing curriculum. Although this still puts the teacher in the role of "judge," as Holaday (1997) advises against in her essay "Writing Students Need Coaches, Not Judges," it minimizes the amount of time the teacher spends in that role allowing the teacher to focus more on being "the coach." In some ways, the Collins Writing Program is a compromise between teachers like Holaday, Collins, and Lucas who expound the benefits of not grading with the more traditional approach of teachers like Jago (2005) who believe that a paper rife with errors "should bleed" with red ink (p. 4). In essence, the Collins approach permits the teacher to mark, to correct, to grade, but in a highly selective way.

### ***Focused Feedback Helps the Teacher, Too***

Another commonality emphasized by the literature is that using specific feedback methods also makes grading and responding to student writing more efficient and can ultimately save time. As Lucas (2012) explains, "Selecting a few criteria to grade rather than grading for

everything [...] make[s] grading papers less time consuming, which, ironically, can produce anxiety in teachers, especially English teachers who have a compulsive need to edit every aspect of the paper” (p. 138). Schmoker (2014) agrees stating that this tendency in conventional grading practices to compulsively edit is “overload” for both teacher and student alike. He asserts that commenting on each error in a paper is “not only unnecessarily time-consuming for teachers, but also [has] a negative impact on student writing performance.” Because detailed comments result in hours of onerous grading, the result is that teachers assign less writing therefore providing students with fewer opportunities to practice and perfect their craft. Schmoker suggests as an alternative teaching a single trait or feature of writing and then have students put their learning into practice through their writing. By using rubrics and samples of student writing that focus on just that one aspect, the teacher can guide and assess their understanding of the concept. This in turn saves the instructor time and ensures that students get immediate feedback and more opportunities to write (2014).

The ideas related in these articles are of personal interest to me because I constantly feel a sense of desperation for more time to grade and respond to my students’ writing. As the never-ending tide of papers streams into my inbox, I always think to myself that there must be a better way and yet some of the solutions explored in these sources I have dismissed in the past. For example, while I do have students consistently write what Collins (1992) would describe as “Type One” writing and Elbow (1997) would call “low stakes” writing without collecting and assigning it a grade, I would have never considered giving simple pass/fail grades for more complex “high stakes” types of writing as Elbow suggests. Additionally, I am unsure that I will be able to easily disregard the way that I have been assessing student writing for years in favor of the more focused and targeted approach prescribed by Collins, Schmoker, and Lucas. To do so

would be a complete paradigm shift for me. It would also be at odds with the grading and feedback practices of my colleagues and the approaches endorsed by my school district.

Overall, while many of these articles challenge the practicality of commenting on or correcting every error in students' writing, I challenge the realistic applicability of some of these more theoretical concepts. Of course timely feedback is beneficial for the students, but is it always realistic with over 100 essays to grade? Even if I were to focus solely on the Focus Correction Areas, would I still have enough time to conference and grade revisions? Yes, peer review is a possible solution, but how do I ensure the type of "high standard" constructive peer feedback that Wiggin's describes when my students don't even turn in a rough draft? In short, although the sources I've consulted have given me a wealth of interesting strategies that I am eager to try in my classroom, they have also given me more questions and uncertainties about the practical implications. I am looking forward to seeking the answers to these questions in my own classroom research.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

Throughout this study I collected several types of data including student writing, student reflections, and journals of my observations. For the purposes of this study I decided to focus on my first period freshman honors English class composed of twenty-six ninth grade students. I chose this class as my sample because the required writing quota for my district is higher for

freshman than it is for upper classmen (4 and 3 essays per marking period respectively).

Struggling to meet this required number of formal writing assignments each marking period is one of the greatest challenges I have in teaching and assessing writing; therefore I focused this study on the class where I have the most difficulty. Additionally, although I have two sections of freshmen honors, I chose first period because during the weeks of my study I saw my first period class more frequently than I did my seventh period class due to multiple interruptions to the school schedule. Because of so much lost instructional time in all of my classes due to snow days, quarterly exams, required prep for the state standardized test, and PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers), these extra class meetings were especially vital to my study.

### *Student Writing as Data*

For this study I collected a variety of different sources of data. The most information came from four different samples of my students' writing: one set of essays collected before beginning my study and three sets of essays collected during the study (See Figure 1). These essays are the primary focus of my data collection because they are the "real-life" products of my efforts in the classroom. They also help to document the progress students made in their writing over the course of the study (Falk and Blumenreich, 2005).

Date	Type of Writing	Grading Method
September 2014	Synthesis Essay (Literary texts) "Rocket Boys and The Glass Castle"	Holistic Rubric *Re-graded with FCA Rubric for comparison: 1. Topic Sentences 2. Using appropriate evidence
December 2014	Synthesis Essay (Informational texts) "Wealth and Happiness"	Focus Correction Areas Rubric: 1. Using appropriate evidence 2. Quotation integration
January 2015	Synthesis Essay (Literary texts)	Focus Correction Areas Rubric:

	“Great Expectations Soundtrack”	1. Using appropriate evidence 2. Quotation integration 3. Topic sentences
January 2015	Synthesis Essay (Literary texts) “Marking Period Two Quarterly Exam”	Holistic Rubric

**Figure 1. Student Writing Data Sources**

When I began my study in December 2014, the first place I went for information was to my students’ writing from the beginning of the year. I was looking for areas of my students’ writing where the greatest majority of the class seemed to be struggling. After reviewing their work, I noticed that the type of writing assignment with which most students had the greatest difficulty were synthesis essays. I looked specifically at the first synthesis essay they wrote in September 2014. These essays required students to take two or more texts and create a thesis-driven essay synthesizing the ideas in those texts. The synthesis essay assignments accounted for many of my students’ lowest grades which were determined by a holistic rubric based on the Common Core ELA Writing Standards (see Appendix). As I looked more closely at these assignments, I searched for patterns in my comments and corrections on my students’ work. Although at this point I was not yet in the formal stages of data analysis, my findings informed the methodology of the remainder of my study. What I found was that many of my students were struggling in the same three writing skills: developing clear topic sentences, supporting their claims with appropriate evidence, and incorporating quotations in their writing.

Even though I had been teaching and reinforcing these skills in my lessons since the beginning of the year, it was clear from the number of times I had to correct or comment on similar mistakes that not all of my students were really “getting it” and this was affecting the quality of their essays. Additionally, it was clear that my comments on their writing or poor grades on the holistic rubrics weren’t enough to make some of my students recognize and correct

those errors either. After noticing this trend, I decided that for the next synthesis essay, rather than grade them on the same holistic rubric, I would create a rubric specific to these focus correction areas.

For the next essay in December, students wrote a synthesis essay based on three nonfiction texts about the connection between wealth and happiness. For the “Wealth and Happiness Synthesis Essay,” as I titled it, I created a very specific rubric based on two of the focus correction areas: using appropriate evidence and incorporating cited material (see Appendix). As stated in the assignment directions, I explained to the class that they were still required to write a well-developed essay complete with introduction and conclusion paragraphs; however, I would only be grading the assignment for the mastery of two very specific skills. Because I had never graded their work on a rubric like this before, I told them that that they should spend extra time revising their essays focused on these two areas that needed the most attention. To ensure that students still took the assignment seriously, and that it would “count” as one of their required formal writing pieces for the marking period, the point value would remain the same as pieces graded holistically in the past (100 points). To hold students accountable for completing the whole essay despite the fact that I would only be grading it in part, I also added a clause to the rubric stating that missing requirements would result in a deduction of 10 points off the top of their grade.

After writing a rough draft of this essay, we spent a class period going over what skillful quote integration and appropriate evidence looks like in a synthesis essay. Students took additional time in class to work with a partner to peer edit and revise their work.

When I collected this assignment, rather than providing extensive commentary throughout their essays, I tried to limit my comments to the two Focus Correction Areas.

Sometimes if I noticed a particularly troublesome part that was hard to read or understand or a grammatical error that I simply could not ignore (such as not using final punctuation at the end of a sentence or not capitalizing a proper noun), I would mark it. However, for the most part I tried to stick to just the body paragraphs and focus only on the aspects for which I would be assigning a grade.

Later that week, while this essay was still fresh in their minds, I explained the directions for their next synthesis essay for the month of January. For this particular assignment, students would have to choose a song with lyrics that connected thematically to the novel we had just finished, *Great Expectations*. We spent time in class outlining what we called the “*Great Expectations* Soundtrack” essay and writing a rough draft, and then together we went over the rubric that I designed for this assignment. For this essay’s rubric, I included the Focus Correction Areas from the previous assignment: quotation integration and use of appropriate evidence. However, I also added a third Focus Correction Area for using effective topic sentences.

Similar to the previous assignment, we reviewed these skills in class and then students worked with a partner to peer edit and revise their work based on the three Focus Correction Areas. When I graded their completed essays, I again tried to limit my commentary and corrections to just those three areas.

Unlike previous assignments, after this essay I asked students who did not do well in the Focus Correction Areas, who scored an overall grade of C or lower, to revise and resubmit their essays. I encouraged them to come see me for extra help to review what they could improve in their work and explained that if they did a thorough revision and included a brief rationale explaining exactly what they revised, I would average their original score with the score they earned on the revision. Out of the eight students eligible to revise, six did in fact revise and

resubmit their essays. However, only one student made an appointment with me for extra help to go over her essay.

Finally, the last piece of student writing that I used as data was the quarter two exam essay. For this assignment, all freshmen students in the district had to write a synthesis essay in class (43 minutes) based on the work of literature that they studied that marking period and a poem thematically related that they had never seen before. It should be noted that I had limited input on this particular assignment as it was determined by the supervisor of the English department for all freshman English classes. The only aspect of the assignment that I had a say in was the poem students would be writing about: “When I Was One-and-Twenty” by A. E. Houseman. Obviously there are some major differences between these two assignments beyond the different rubrics: the quarter two exam essay was a timed, one-draft essay with no revision or peer review. Additionally, students had to read, analyze, and then write about the Houseman poem on the spot. However, as a synthesis essay which I was required to grade using a standard holistic rubric (see Appendix), it proved to be a valuable source of data. As I graded their essays on this rubric, I compared them to their previous essays to see if students’ performance would be different.

### *Student Reflection as Data*

In addition to collecting samples of student writing, I also collected reflections on their own work based on their responses to two questionnaires. Rather than use a survey of closed-ended questions, I was able to periodically check in on my students’ attitudes, opinions, and ideas about their writing and the way their writing is assessed by using open-ended questions. I

opted to avoid short answer questions because, although they are more difficult to analyze, they provided more detailed and in-depth information (Falk and Blumenreich, 2005).

In December after passing back their graded “Wealth and Happiness” essays, I gave students time in class to read my comments and review the rubric. I also chose three essays from the class that executed the Focus Correction Areas skillfully to share on the overhead projector. As a class, we read these examples together and discussed what made them effective. Finally students reflected on their writing in their journals by responding to the following prompt:

*Please look at your essay rubric and my comments on Turnitin. Then write a detailed reflection about your writing. What were your strengths in this essay? What do you need to improve for the next one?*

The following month, when students received their “Great Expectations Synthesis” essays back with my comments and their grades, I repeated the same process as before: I shared exemplars of the strongest essays in the class and then asked students to reflect on their writing. However, I asked them to not only think about the strengths and weakness of their work, but also what they would change if they were to revise their essays. Additionally, I took this time to review with them the holistic rubric that I was required by my district to use to grade their upcoming quarter two assessments. In this questionnaire, I asked them to also reflect on the way that their work has been graded and whether they prefer a holistic rubric like the one for the quarterly exam or a Focus Correction Area specific rubric like I used on the “Great Expectations Soundtrack Synthesis” essay:

*1. Please review my comments on your GE synthesis essays on Turnitin and review the rubric. Then write a detailed reflection about your writing. What were your strengths in this essay? What do you need to improve for the next one?*

- 2. If you were to revise this essay, what would you do differently? Explain in detail. (The answer cannot be "Nothing.")*
- 3. Reflect on the rubric. Do you prefer being graded on just a few criteria (in this case, 1. evidence/support, 2. integration of cited material, and 3. topic sentences)? Or do you prefer holistic rubrics that account for many/all aspects of your writing (like the quarter exam rubric)?*

I looked to my students' reflections on their writing and their descriptions of their preference for the holistic rubrics or FCA specific rubrics as another source of data.

### ***Teacher Journals as Data***

Another data source I used were entries from my professional journal. Falch and Blumenreich (2005) suggest recording "thoughts, ideas, questions, or frustrations" in a professional journal to document key moments in the research study (p. 91). These journal entries included observations of my students' progress with writing and my own reflections on the process of teaching, conferencing with students, grading and providing feedback on their writing. While I set a goal to journal each day for 20 minutes, I ended up journaling 3 times a week for about 20 minutes throughout the duration of my study. I then went back to these journal entries after my data collection and analyzed them by coding for emerging themes and the a priori themes that came from my research (Falk and Blumenreich, 2005).

## **IV. FINDINGS**

### ***Analyzing Student Work***

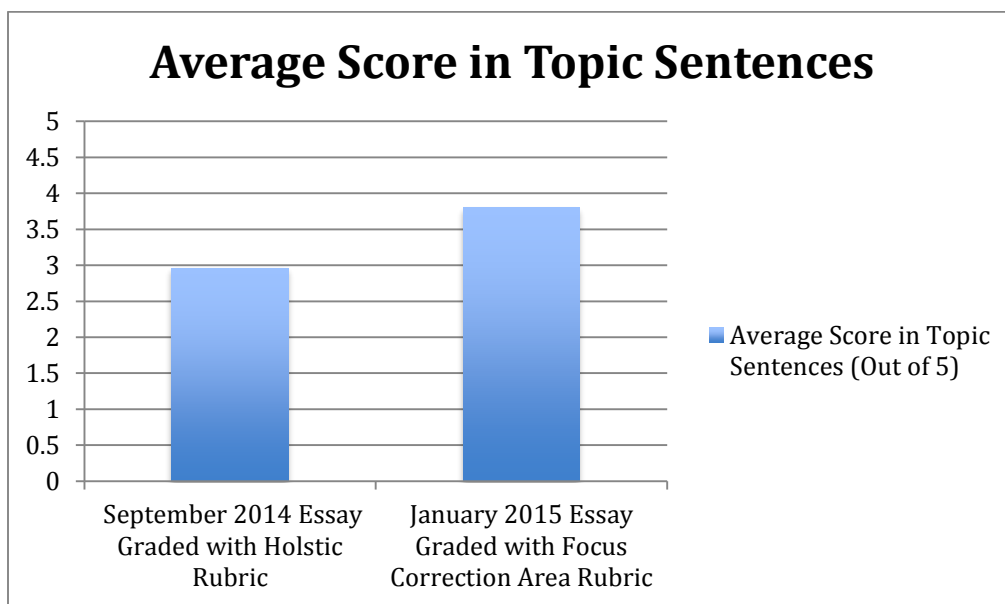
As I mentioned in my methodology section, the first source of data that I analyzed earlier in the research process were samples of students' past work, specifically their essays from the beginning of the school year. I looked also at my comments on these assignments to see if there

were errors or problems that applied to a majority of my students. In fact, it seemed that much of my feedback revolved around creating stronger topic sentences, using strong supporting evidence, and integrating direct quotations in their essays: throughout the 26 revised drafts of one of the first essays of the year, I counted a total of 41 comments focused on integrating quotations, 25 comments about selecting strong, appropriate evidence, and 9 comments on clarifying topic sentences.

After implementing new strategies of grading and responding to student work by focusing on two or three specific focus areas rather than grading holistically and commenting on the entirety of each student's essay, I continued to collect more samples of student work and analyzed student progress specifically in these focus correction areas—referred to as FCA's throughout this paper.

For example, I looked at the first synthesis essays students wrote early in the school year (September 2014) based on two works of literature, *Rocket Boys* and *The Glass Castle*, and compared it to a recent synthesis essay (January 2015) which students wrote also based on two works of literature, *Great Expectations* and a poem or song lyrics. The latter was graded on a holistic rubric. The former, however, was graded on a FCA-specific rubric which included only three specific criteria: topic sentences, supporting evidence, and quotation integration—the three areas in which the majority of students struggled the most on the first synthesis essay. For both of these assignments, students were given the rubrics ahead of time. I went back to the first synthesis essay and assigned a score to only the topic sentences using the more recent FCA-specific rubric. What I found was that when students were graded using the FCA-specific rubric, many scored higher in this troublesome area. 16 out of 26 students performed better on their topics sentences in the essay that was graded with the FCA-specific rubric as opposed to the

essay that was graded holistically. For topic sentences, students demonstrated significant improvement averaging a score of 2.96/5 on the first essay, graded holistically, and 3.8/5 on the second essay, graded with FCA-specific rubric (see Figure 2).

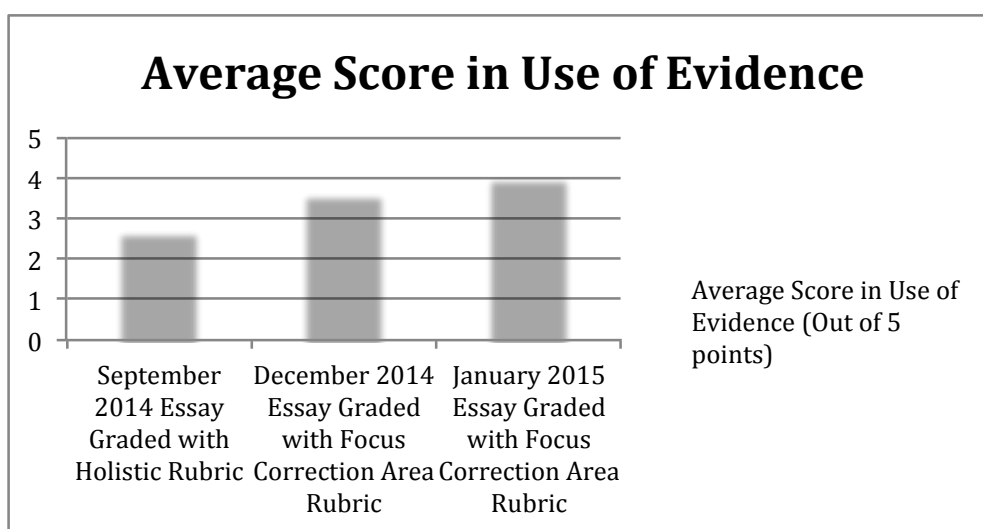


**Figure 2. Chart comparing the class average in students' use of topic sentences when it is graded holistically and when it is graded as a Focus Correction Area.**

I also compared the students' use of evidence in their writing—another skill with which many students had difficulty in their first synthesis essays—across three different essay assignments. I used the same two synthesis essays described above, one from September and one from January, along with a third synthesis essay students wrote in December 2015 shortly after I began my research. The first was graded holistically, the second and third were graded on an FCA-specific rubric that included “use of evidence” as one of three FCA’s.

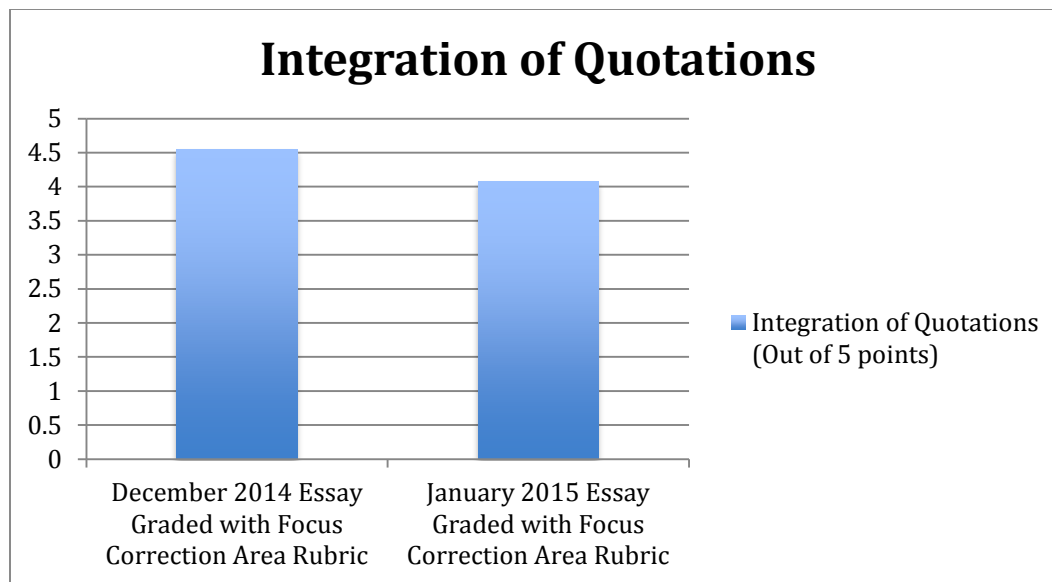
Again, I went back and assigned a score to the use of evidence in the September essays using the same FCA-specific rubric, and again, many students improved in their use of evidence in the December essay compared to the September essay. 15 students scored higher on their use of evidence between the September essay and the December essay. Additionally, using the same

FCA-specific rubric, I compared the students' use of evidence in the December essays and the January essays written just a few week weeks later. Here I noticed more improvement in the students' use of evidence. 14 out of 26 students scored higher on their use of evidence the January essay compared to the December essay and overall 21 out of 26 students improved in their use of evidence in the January essay compared to the one written in September. For use of evidence, students averaged a score of 2.67/5 on the first essay, graded holistically, 3.6/5 on the second essay, graded with FCA-specific rubric, and 4/5 on the third essay, also graded with FCA-specific rubric (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Chart comparing the class average in students' use of evidence when being graded holistically and when it is graded as a Focus Correction Area.**

It is important to note, however, that when I compared the students' success in integrating quotations between the December essay and the January essay, many students actually scored lower the second time around. In this class of 26, 10 students scored the same and only 2 saw improvement. The average score for quotation integration in December was 4.54/5 while the average score for quotation integration in January was slightly less at 4.08/5 (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Chart comparing the class average in integrating quotations when it is graded as a Focus Correction Area.**

I should also add that in between each of these essays, in addition to creating new FCA-specific rubrics, I also delivered direct instruction based on the Focus Correction Areas and provided the class with exemplars of each.

### *Analyzing Student Reflection and Feedback*

As I mentioned in the Methodology section, another source of data that I consulted was my students' reflections on their own writing and their preferences for the way teachers grade and respond to their writing. I also queried them specifically about their preference for either holistic rubrics or FCA-specific rubrics after they completed the January essay and got back their grades in the Focus Correction Areas. I started coding their responses by simply sorting them into piles: those who preferred the more familiar holistic rubric, those who preferred the newer FCA-specific rubric, and those who were somewhere in between. Out of 26 students, I received 25 responses: 12 explained that they preferred being graded with holistic rubrics, 10 preferred being graded according to FCA-specific rubrics. 3 students responses fell somewhere in the

middle recognizing either the merits or disadvantages of each. One student summed up the long term benefits of using the FCA-specific rubrics more eloquently than I can:

I like the rubric that focuses on fewer elements because I can focus on a smaller amount and make sure those aspects are perfect. Once I master those pieces I could carry them over to future essays. I would become good at these aspects and able to focus on a few newer elements for the next essay. By combining all of the smaller elements, I could create a great essay that demonstrates my knowledge of all the skills I have focused on previously.

Other students addressed the level of mastery required by the FCA-specific rubrics. For example one student said that she liked working with a smaller more specific and focused rubric better than the holistic rubric because “it hones in on the major topics, rather than the not so important ones. It also helps us, the students, because [...] it allows us to focus on certain areas of our writing and be a little more relaxed on others. Moreover, after getting a chance to look at my now graded essay, I can identify the areas I need to focus on and the areas I am proficient in.”

On the other hand, some students pointed out that there are limitations to using such a specific rubric. Some students feared that if they were not graded on all aspects of their writing, errors not accounted for in the FCA-specific rubric would “slip by” uncorrected and cause problems later on essentially reinforcing poor writing habits. As Paul so aptly noted: “If the basics such as grammar and punctuation are not graded, then the writers might make the same mistake for the rest of their essays.” Others were upset that they didn’t get feedback on their introductions and conclusions, which they worked hard on but felt they still have not mastered. Some of my students also noted that another disadvantage to using an FCA-specific rubric is that

an essay is more than just the sum of its parts. As Kara explained, “we are submitting and writing the complete essay, not just the little parts that were graded.”

I then reviewed their responses again, coding them for emerging themes such as *understanding assessment of content*, and *feelings about writing* and a priori themes that developed from my literature review like *improvement in writing skills and future writing assignments*. For example, I found when coding for the theme of *improvement in writing skills and future writing assignments* that many students acknowledged that the rubrics, both holistic and FCA-specific, help them to know where their strengths and weaknesses lie. In fact, it seemed from several of their responses that many students depended more on the rubric to tell them where they need to improve rather than on my marginal comments. Almost every student reflection included language about “improving” and “strengthening” their writing based on the feedback provided by the rubric. In fact, one student pointed out in his reflection that he did not do very well on this essay because he failed to master the FCA’s but at least now had a better idea of what he needs to work on: “This essay I did not focus on the required concepts, so my grade was not overall very good. However, now I know exactly what to do for the next essay we write!”

Related to improvement, part of my original research question stemmed from whether or not students would become better writers if they had to master one or two skills at a time rather than dividing their attention between multiple writing skills in each piece. Therefore, I also coded their responses based on the theme of *understanding assessment of content*. I looked to their reflections to see whether or not students fully grasp what they are being graded on and understand how to be as successful as possible. Among their responses, many students who liked the FCA-specific rubrics noted that they were “simple,” “very straight-forward,” and “easy to

understand.” One student also noted that he was able to “understand the problems with [his] essay better.” Another described the FCA-specific rubric as “easier to work with. Because there were only a few criteria, I just had to make sure I hit those aspects successfully and I would in turn receive a good grade.” In total, at least ten different students, even some who stated that they preferred a holistic rubric, did note that their writing process felt more “focused” and used that exact word or variations of it (“focusing,” “focus,” etc.). This is significant because in the language of the prompt I did not include the word “focus” or the term “Focus Correction Area”; I asked students whether they “prefer being graded on just a few criteria” or “prefer holistic rubrics that account for many/all aspects of your writing.”

There were in fact many students who felt more comfortable with holistic rubrics and with good reason. Several students pointed out that the FCA-specific rubric is not fool-proof as there is still room for misunderstanding or different interpretations. For example, Mark said:

Upon reading the comments on the essay and reviewing the rubric, I think I found an area of confusion [in] the definition of topic sentence [...] In my opinion, I think that I did have evidence of topic sentences, and I am not sure that I deserved a zero out of twenty on that part of my essay [...] Please let me know if I’m not understanding what a topic sentence is.

As I continued to read through my students’ responses, I noticed an emerging theme: many students explored their feelings about writing. For example, the ideas of “confidence” and “pressure” appeared often. One student who preferred being graded on an FCA-specific rubric noted that she “felt more confident writing this essay because [she] did not have to worry about every little detail.” Narrowing down the focus helped her to not “sweat the small stuff” and devote her attention to the more challenging aspects of the essay. However, some students felt

that a holistic rubric does not create as much pressure to be “perfect” (which can be a good thing or a bad thing in this teacher’s opinion!). As some students noted, the strengths and the weaknesses of an essay tend to “balance” each other out so ultimately you can still get a good grade on an essay that has mistakes if it is graded holistically. This alleviates some of the anxiety that a few students said the FCA-specific rubric creates. In the words of one of my students: “When the grading is based on the whole overall writing of the essay, there is more lenience if one makes a mistake or error. However, when the grading is only based on specific parts of his/her writing, there is more pressure to have everything be absolutely perfect because the smallest error can heavily impact the final grade” if it is in one of the Focus Correction Areas. To illustrate, another student explained that the FCA-specific rubric reflected her weakest skills as a writer such as developing topic sentences. If that had not counted for a significant portion of the rubric, she felt she might have gotten a better grade.

### *Analyzing My Observations and Journal*

Finally after coding the data from my students, I set out to code my own journal entries based on my observations throughout my study. One of the original sub-questions I started with in the beginning of the study was how changing my grading and commenting practices might affect other necessary learning opportunities such as immediate feedback, revision, and one-on-one conferencing. Originally I had thought that by grading only the FCA’s, I would be able to turn essays around much more quickly therefore providing students with more immediate feedback and time to actually revise their errors. Initially, this target seemed promising. In a journal entry from 1/20/15, I mentioned that “my grading IS going A LOT faster. I am leaving far fewer comments which definitely is saving time. I am only spending about four or five minutes on each essay if all the FCA’s are fairly accurate, more if there are problems.” However,

just a few days later when I was grading the quarterly two exams using the holistic PARCC rubric that all English teachers in the district were required to use, I mentioned that I was only spending about 7-8 minutes per essay by limiting my comments. The time it took me to grade each essay based on the FCA-specific rubric was only slightly less than grading holistically. Unfortunately, as I read through my journal entries, it was apparent that there is never enough time even if I am not leaving detailed commentary. Ultimately, in both of my test runs using the FCA-specific rubric I still took the standard a week and a half to two weeks to grade everything and return to the students their graded work—long after the essays have left their minds and the feedback still has relevancy.

I had also hoped that if I were able to grade the essays more quickly and get them back to students sooner, we would have more time to spend on the revision process which unfortunately is a much-neglected skill in our district's curriculum. While I never did get to a point where I had enough time to guide every student through a revision, I did experiment with the revision process on a smaller scale with the students who struggled the most in the focus correction areas. From a journal entry on 1/30/15, I observe one of the benefits of using a FCA-specific rubric when it comes to revising:

What is nice about using the FCAs to grade student work is it makes the revision process very easy. They know exactly what they have to correct and can focus on just those areas rather than being overwhelmed by it all. Revision is a key part of learning to write well and unfortunately the writing requirements have not allowed for much revision in the past.

For the last assignment in my study that I graded using the FCA-specific rubric, I asked students who received a 79% or lower on their essays to do a thorough revision to earn back

some of the points that they lost. I offered to average the grade they earn on the revision with their original score, up to an 80%. Out of nine students who I asked to complete a revision, seven of them actually did it while two did not. In my journal entries, this generated more observations and frustrations with grading student writing—this time in the form grading their revisions. In a journal entry dated 2/1/15, I explore my dissatisfaction with the fact that the two students whose essays really needed the most revision chose not to do the assignment:

This is frustrating and disappointing to me because I was hoping they would be able to boost up their grades at the end of the marking period. I am also disappointed because I wanted to see if they actually knew how to correct the errors they made. It is frustrating because I made it a choice and they chose not to do it. But how can I make revision a *requirement*? To require the revision would tie it to a grade, no? And then what if they STILL choose not to do it? Aren't I then penalizing the student twice?

Another frustration that I explore in my journal is not having adequate conference time with my students to review the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. This is especially frustrating in the revision process because unless a student makes an appointment with me after school to meet one-on-one to go over his essay, it is up to the student to revise on his own. In my journal observations it seems like this “self-guided” revision is bit of a toss-up. Out of the seven students who completed a revision, six did not meet with me outside of class to see me about their mistakes. Half of them “nailed” the revision and showed me that they had learned from their errors and fully understood the Focus Correction Areas the second time around. The other half showed “minimal improvement.” For example, in a journal entry from 2/23/15, I observed that one student who revised her essay “seemed upset that she only improved 4 points after doing

the revision. (And by upset I mean annoyed.) So we finally sat down and went over her essays and she actually said ‘Ohhh... I don’t know what I was doing before, I get it now.’ We would never have had this break through if she didn’t come in for extra help.” This after school meeting was the first time all year that this student met with me one-on-one and it had a really positive outcome. Unfortunately, it took several bad grades on her writing assignments, a failed revision, and half a school year to get her to come see me. I fear that other students are “slipping through the cracks who I could easily help if only we had time to conference in class” (from a 2/23/15 journal entry).

Another theme that emerged from coding my observations is my own feeling and attitudes towards grading student writing. A pattern I suspected I would find is that I absolutely hate grading! While this may seem like an obvious statement to teachers everywhere, I was actually surprised by the pattern I found. I expected to find several observations about how time consuming the process of responding to student writing can be. Those references are there but only appear twice. Alternatively, in multiple entries I talk about “looking forward to reading [student] essay[s]” (1/19/15) and actually being “excited” to see if students were improving in the Focus Correction Areas. My journal entries are more focused on how infuriating it is to assign *grades* to student work. In an entry from 2/5/15, I listed some of the issues I was encountering with my students’ revisions and then went on to note that “all of these concerns come down to the problem of assigning GRADES for writing, instead of just letting students write and giving them feedback independent of evaluation or judgment that will affect their GPAs. Unfortunately, this is an institutional problem that I really have no control over.”

Finally, this brings me to one last theme that emerged from coding my own observations and reflections on my study: feeling a lack of control in the way that I want to assign, teach,

grade, and respond to student writing. In many of my journal entries, like the one above, I go off on tangents about how “restricted” I feel by district writing requirements—not just the number of required formal essays per marking period, but even the specific percentage it must account for in a student’s overall average.

## **V. IMPLICATIONS**

### *Obstacles*

Before analyzing the implications of this study, I would like to first address some of the obstacles. One of the common themes throughout this experiment is the need for more time.

Among the greatest challenges in this study is the fact that I'm looking to see progress in my students' writing in what is an extremely limited time frame. Of course this study only took place over the course of December and January of this school year and it is therefore very difficult to see whether or not students are progressing in such a brief period of time. Additionally, a month and a half really doesn't provide very much time at all considering how long the entire process takes. The students need time to write, revise, and rework their pieces, and then it takes me just as long to grade and provide feedback on their writing. Two weeks are needed at minimum and therefore in this study only three essays were possible in that month and a half. Another complication in terms of timing is that during this month and a half my students and I also had to participate in mandated district-wide PARCC testing preparation and quarterly assessments that interrupted the regular schedule. We also had three snow days and multiple delayed openings. With the loss of so much instructional time, I did not get to spend nearly as much time working on these pieces with my students in class as I had hoped.

Another limitation that I must acknowledge before drawing any conclusions is the fact that in this study I am working without a control group as it would be unethical to implement a strategy in one class that might be beneficial and not implement it in my other classes. Although this study focuses on just my first period class of freshmen, I actually tried using different Focus Correction Areas when grading and responding to my students' writing in all of my classes.

### ***Outcomes on Student Writing***

Now the question remains: Does any of this make my students better writers? Did student writing improve by changing the focus from the essays as a whole to just one or two standards at

a time? The results are inconclusive. As I mentioned in my Findings section, I did see major improvements in the way my students used topic sentences and textual evidence after using these two skills as Focus Correction Areas. At the same time, however, I also used quotation integration as an FCA during my study and saw very little improvement in this skill. Although this is a more complex concept, the fact that students saw little improvement in this particular area indicates that grading and responding to student work based on an designated FCA may not automatically make students master that skill by simply narrowing their focus and attention to it. Additionally, in terms of the growth I did document in this study, it is difficult to determine whether it is the direct result of grading and commenting on their writing using these Focus Correction Areas. It is possible that because my students knew they would be graded specifically on their topic sentences or textual support, they spent more time refining these aspects of their writing when in the past they may not have given them much thought. But it is just as likely that because they knew they would be graded on these areas specifically, they paid more attention to my lessons about them in class or in the revision process. It is also possible of course that the improvement is the result of more instructional time spent on these areas in class. Or perhaps the improvement would have come anyway had I not changed a thing simply by students doing more writing and thus improving their skills through continued practice. However, I am comfortable admitting that it's ok that this change in grading practices did not have an immediate impact on my students' abilities as writers. While it would be convenient to find a "magic bullet" approach that miraculously turns my freshmen into little Orwells and Hemingways, it is far more realistic to accept the fact that writing is a skill that is not mastered overnight.

When I changed the way that I graded and responded to student writing to center on FCAs rather than taking a holistic approach, I had expected to spend less time grading as was

suggested by the literature advocating the use of Focus Correction Areas (Lucas 2012, Collins 1999). I had hoped that with this extra time, I could spend more time on the revision process and alleviate the stress of being buried under hours and hours of grading. Although I found throughout my study that grading and responding to student work based on just a few criteria did save me a little time, ultimately it did not have a dramatic impact on the amount of time it takes to assess writing outside of the classroom. My plans to work with every student through multiple drafts and revisions were not compatible with the reality of how long it takes to provide adequate feedback for 26 students even when focusing my efforts very specifically. The piles are still there and I still had to make time to work through them.

However, I did find that tackling those piles was at least a little easier having a specific purpose in mind. Rather than being another chore, a necessary evil of being an English teacher, grading student work based on specific criteria gave me a personal goal and purpose for grading. The question “Are my students becoming better writers?” is a very broad and therefore difficult question to answer while working through an entire class set of essays. Even if I am more specific in asking, “What are my students doing well and where can my students improve?” it is still a daunting question and it can be incredibly frustrating when the list of necessary areas for improvement seems to be double the length of the list of my students’ successes. And this long list of improvements is not without good reason—these students are developing writers. There is inevitably going to be much that they must improve; if there weren’t, they wouldn’t need me as their teacher! Writing is an ability that continues to develop over the course of many years and continues long after high school ends. The list simply cannot be conquered in one school year; nevertheless, it can still be overwhelming and demoralizing. Therefore, asking a very specific question, establishing a very specific goal in mind whilst grading a set of papers such as, “Are

my students crafting strong topic sentences?” or “Are my students properly integrating textual support?” is much more manageable. The answer is really a simple yes or no. In the best-case scenario, I can walk away from that stack of essays knowing that the majority of my students mastered a very specific writing skill and I can move on to the next. Worst-case scenario, I have to go back and re-teach and continue to practice and until students show improvement. In this sense, evaluating and commenting on specific Focus Correction Areas made the process of grading not necessarily faster but far less intimidating and discouraging.

Therefore, my outlook on grading is changed with this new approach. I realized that in the past without a specific goal in mind, grading student writing was a relatively futile exercise. It is difficult to see growth when looking at the bigger picture; however, when I narrowed my focus, it was easier to see the baby steps that my students were—or in some cases, were not—taking. This paradigm shift means that the grading process is no longer a means of simply ranking students into piles of As, Bs, and Cs, but transforms it into an instructional tool that can inform my teaching.

### ***The Future***

The most important understanding I take from this study is that there is really no one way or right way to evaluate and respond to student writing. I was somewhat aware of this going into the study, yet time and time again I found myself grading and commenting on each essay the same way with the same holistic rubric, and the same red pen in hand mining each text for the same errors. I thought that as long as I had to grade a piece of writing, I should be analyzing the writing as a whole. I saw assigning grades as a frustration with little practical application beyond the necessity of averaging a marking period grade. I had not fully realized the potential of other grading strategies such as assigning FCAs, using minimal grades (Complete/Incomplete), or not

grading at all. As mentioned in the literature review, I rejected the idea that students would put any sort of serious time and effort into their work if they knew that it would be graded on only one or two Focus Correction Areas. By using FCAs, a majority of a student's work is *not* being evaluated. For example, when I was focusing on the essays' use of evidence, I wasn't considering other important aspects like the introduction, body paragraph structure, or transitions. I wasn't paying attention at all to grammar and mechanics and yet I found that most of my students were continuing to do their best in all aspects of the paper. Of course there were one or two students that saw this as "shortcut" and put minimal effort into the rest of the essay beyond the FCA's. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the majority of my students did put their best effort into all aspects of their writing despite the fact that not everything was being graded.

Going forward into next school year I am going to continue to experiment with different strategies for grading and responding to student writing. I would like to use a combination of assignments that are graded just for completion, assignments that are graded holistically as a work as a whole, and then of course, assignments that are graded on one or two Focus Correction Areas. I hope to implement the FCA-specific rubric as a diagnostic tool to more specifically gauge how my student's are progressing. Ideally I'd like to use them throughout the year starting in September starting simply and then build in complexity, swapping out easier FCAs for more difficult ones as students master each one and progress throughout the year. However, unlike the Collins Writing Model that uses Focus Correction Areas exclusively to assess students' growth as writers (1999), I think that this strategy will work best in my classroom as a formative assessment used in conjunction with other strategies of grading and responding to student writing.

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### **Appendix A: Subjectivity**

Throughout this project, there are obvious biases and preconceived notions that I bring with me from my prior experience with teaching, grading and responding to student writing. While I have made every effort to try to prevent these biases from influencing my research, they

inevitably have an impact on me and therefore they may influence my teacher research, as my teaching is very much a part of me. To begin, the most obvious way that my assumptions have influenced my study is my choice in focus and subject. I arrived at my research question somewhat desperate for a change. My frustration with grading student writing is evident in my context paper. Like any teacher with the best of intentions, I went into this study hoping for improvement not just in my students' abilities as writers, but also in the process of grading and responding to their essays. Among my sub-questions were: "How can I provide better feedback?" and "Will student writing improve if I shift the focus from the entire piece as a whole to a specific skill?" Therefore, throughout my study I was actively looking for improvement. Although not everything I tried necessarily worked, the way in which I coded my journal entries and student responses is certainly framed by my search for improvement.

However, if there is anything I learned about myself as a teacher throughout this process it is that I need to maintain this positive approach to student work by looking for the improvement even if it does mean that I am somewhat biased. I learned that as a teacher of writing, my place really is as a "coach" and not a "judge" (Holladay, 1997). Therefore, my approach to responding to student writing is totally changed. I cannot focus on what is "wrong" with a paper—I need to instead focus on what is improving even if those improvements are subtle.

Another element of subjectivity that I noticed after reading my study is that this whole experience is colored by my aversion to grading student writing. Going into this study, I knew that grading frustrated me but assumed it was an "occupational hazard" of just being an English teacher. However, I realized through this study that I actually really enjoy reading my students' writing. Although many of my students struggle to articulate themselves, they come up with

some really interesting ideas; they just need some help in expressing those ideas in a logical and cohesive way. Helping them to do so is not just an important part of my job, but it is also something that I find pride and enjoyment in doing. So why the frustration? I realized that my biggest obstacle is the part when I actually have to give students a grade, when I have to not just respond to their work and “coach” them through the areas where they are having difficulty, but I then have to “judge” what they’ve done. I know it can be demoralizing for my students but I didn’t realize until reflecting back on my journal entries just how draining and disheartening it can be for me as their teacher.

Thankfully, I think this study has lead me to several alternatives to grading student writing. Although I am still required to give students grades, not every writing assignment needs to be assessed in its entirety. In fact, not every piece of writing may need to be graded or judged at all. There is a place for ungraded work in writing instruction. Before this investigation, I operated under the belief that if something were not graded, students would not give it their best effort. Although there may have been one or two students who took advantage of the flexibility of Focus Correction Areas to put in minimal work, overall most of my students continued to apply themselves to the entire task at hand, not just the parts that were being graded. Although the correlation between student effort and performance was not a formal part of my study, I can say anecdotally that the few students who put minimal effort into their writing pieces when I graded them for just Focus Correction Areas were the same students who put very little time and effort into their essays when they were being graded holistically. If giving them the focus to concentrate their (nominal) efforts on just one or two Focus Correction Areas yields some improvement in their skills, at least I know they are learning something despite their lack of application.

Another assumption that I made when first developing this research question was that my school's writing requirements were unrealistic and unnecessary. As mentioned in my context paper, my district's required minimum number of essays per student per marking period was really a source of anxiety and stress. If each essay takes a minimum of eight minutes to grade, that means I am spending over 13 hours grading just one essay from each of my 100 students in total. Over the course of an entire school year, that adds up to over 150 hours of grading. It's simply not possible. However, after this study, I realized that the writing requirement is not necessarily the problem. In fact, much of the literature advocates that students write as frequently as possible (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 2006). The problem is me. I simply cannot spend that much time outside of school grading and responding to my students' writing. However, the answer is not in *assigning* less writing, the answer lies in grading and commenting less. My students' writing did not regress because I was not commenting on every error on every page. In fact, many students' writing improved with more focused and specific feedback and concentration. While I still think thorough feedback and holistic grading has its place, I've come to recognize that it is not needed on each writing assignment. I have to become more comfortable with grading some writing assignments just for completion and others for Focus Correction Areas, while limiting my written commentary significantly. This is a completely new perspective for me—students don't necessarily need more of my comments but they definitely do need more practice writing.

I went into this study desperate for a change and that it is exactly what I got. While it remains to be seen whether the long-term application of Focus Correction Areas impact changes students' writing for the better, the most significant change this study made was on my mindset. Ultimately, this study has completely transformed my attitude and approach to grading and

responding to student writing.

### **Appendix B: Implementation Plan**

After tracking students' progress in the Focus Correction Areas, recording their attitudes towards writing and grades, and coding my own journals based on my experiences responding to the student writing, what will I do with all this information? Keep collecting it! As noted in my

paper, one of the major limitations of this study was the time frame to collect data—just a month and a half. Even in that short time period I did see some promising results but not enough to conclusively say that this is the most effective strategy to grade and respond to students' work. Therefore, starting in September, I plan to continue to experiment with alternatives to grading student writing and to implement the use of Focus Correction Areas early in the school year. I hope to assign even more writing (something I NEVER thought I'd say) but grade these writing pieces as formative assessments based on just one Focus Correction Area. I'd like to start simple and then build with more complex or difficult FCAs as the year progresses and keep an on-going list posted in the classroom of Focus Correction Areas we have already mastered. This list would serve as a reminder to students of what skills they have learned so they can track and monitor their own progress. Also, if I notice problems after we have already advanced to the next skill, I can refer back to this list for a review lesson. There is a greater transparency when you can say to a student "Ok we are going to review FCA #4 from October because I'm noticing we are still having difficulty with topic sentences." Periodically, I plan to grade one or two pieces a marking period such as students' term papers or quarterly assessment essays holistically. This obviously helps me to meet district grading requirements but it also serves as a practical summative assessment to let me and my students know how they are progressing as writers overall.

Additionally, I hope to share my findings from this study and my future research with my colleagues in the English department and my department supervisor. My colleagues are a big part of my context paper largely because we all experience the same frustrations when it comes to student writing. They are among the hardest working teachers I know and spend countless hours outside the classroom trying to manage the paper load and help their students become better writers. I think using some of the strategies outlined in this paper may help some of them.

Additionally, advocates of using Focus Correction Areas such as Collins (1992) believe that this strategy of grading and responding to student writing is most effective when used school wide because it not only allows students to track the skills they've mastered within a single school year, but they can then also track their progress as they build onto these skills from one school year to the next. While I have no desire to force anyone to change a system that is already working for him or her, it would be interesting to see if there is greater improvement from year to year if some of my co-workers were on board with trying something new.

In addition, this past school year we created an English department Professional Learning Community in which we focused on strategies to adapt our lessons to better prepare students for the PARCC exams. Perhaps going into next school year, I can present my findings at one of our PLC meetings. I think it would also be really useful if everyone presented some strategies that they have found work for them in grading student writing and providing students with useful feedback. I think this would be a positive step forward for everyone involved—while I was able to learn a lot about my students and myself through my independent classroom research, I believe that collaboration with my colleagues is invaluable. Perhaps the next step for me is to take what I have learned and work together with my co-workers to solve the problems we all confront in the teaching and assessment of writing.

### **Appendix C: Holistic Essay Rubric #1**

This rubric is based on the 9-10 grade Common Core Curriculum Standards. I modified it from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test rubric.

This rubric was used to grade essays prior to introduction of Focus Correction Areas including the September 2014 synthesis essay.

Essay Writing Task Rubric

Construct	A	B	C	D	F
Requirements	The student response satisfies all requirements of the assignment skillfully.	The student response satisfies all requirements of the assignment.	The student response satisfies all requirements of the assignment.	The student response satisfies most of the requirements of the assignment.	The student response does not satisfy the requirements of the assignment.
Content: Reading Comprehension	The student response demonstrates full comprehension of ideas stated explicitly and inferentially by providing an accurate analysis and supporting the analysis with effective and convincing textual evidence.	The student response demonstrates comprehension of ideas stated explicitly and/or inferentially by providing a mostly accurate analysis, and supporting the analysis with adequate textual evidence.	The student response demonstrates basic comprehension of ideas stated explicitly and/or inferentially by providing a generally accurate analysis and supporting the analysis with basic textual evidence.	The student response demonstrates limited comprehension of ideas stated explicitly and/or inferentially by providing a minimally accurate analysis and supporting the analysis with limited textual evidence.	The student response demonstrates no comprehension of ideas by providing inaccurate or no analysis and little to no textual evidence.
Writing: Written Expression	<p>The student response <del>addresses</del> the prompt and provides effective and comprehensive development of the claim or topic that is consistently appropriate to the task by using clear and convincing reasoning supported by relevant textual evidence;</p> <p><del>demonstrates</del> purposeful coherence, clarity, and cohesion, making it easy to follow the writer's progression of ideas;</p> <p><del>establishes</del> and maintains an effective style, attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline.</p>	<p>The student response <del>addresses</del> the prompt and provides mostly effective development of the claim or topic that is mostly appropriate to the task, by using clear reasoning supported by relevant textual evidence;</p> <p><del>demonstrates</del> coherence, clarity, and cohesion, making it fairly easy to follow the writer's progression of ideas;</p> <p><del>establishes</del> and maintains a mostly effective style, while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline.</p>	<p>The student response <del>addresses</del> the prompt and provides some development of the claim or topic that is somewhat appropriate to the task, by using some reasoning and text-based evidence;</p> <p><del>demonstrates</del> some coherence, clarity, and/or cohesion, making the writer's progression of ideas usually discernible but not obvious;</p> <p><del>has</del> a style that is somewhat effective, generally attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline.</p>	<p>The student response <del>addresses</del> the prompt and develops the claim or topic and provides minimal development that is limited in its appropriateness to the task by using limited reasoning and text-based evidence; or <del>is</del> a developed, text-based response with little or no awareness of the prompt;</p> <p><del>demonstrates</del> limited coherence, clarity, and/or cohesion, making the writer's progression of ideas somewhat unclear;</p> <p><del>has</del> a style that has limited effectiveness, with limited awareness of the norms of the discipline.</p>	<p>The student response <del>is</del> undeveloped and/or inappropriate to the task;</p> <p><del>lacks</del> coherence, clarity, and cohesion;</p> <p><del>has</del> an inappropriate style, with little to no awareness of the norms of the discipline.</p>
Writing: Knowledge of Language and Conventions	The student response to the prompt demonstrates full command of the conventions of standard English at an appropriate level of complexity. There may be a few minor errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage, but meaning is clear.	The student response to the prompt demonstrates full command of the conventions of standard English at an appropriate level of complexity. There may be a few minor errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage, but meaning is clear.	The student response to the prompt demonstrates some command of the conventions of standard English at an appropriate level of complexity. There may be errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage that occasionally impede understanding but the meaning is generally clear.	The student response to the prompt demonstrates limited command of the conventions of standard English at an appropriate level of complexity. There may be errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage that often impede understanding.	The student response to the prompt demonstrates no command of the conventions of standard English. Frequent and varied errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage impede understanding.

### Appendix D: Holistic Essay Rubric #2

This rubric is based on the 9-10 grade Common Core Curriculum Standards and modified from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test rubric.

The rubric was produced by the district and required to grade the January 2015 Quarterly Essay.

**RIH ENGLISH DEPARTMENT  
MP2 – 2104-2015  
Literary Analysis Task Rubric**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Construct Measured	Excellent	Commendable	Adequate	Marginal	Inadequate
<b>Reading Comprehension of Key Ideas and Details</b>	The student response demonstrates <b>full comprehension</b> of ideas stated explicitly and inferentially by providing an <b>accurate</b> analysis and supporting the analysis with <b>effective and convincing</b> textual evidence.	The student response demonstrates <b>comprehension</b> of ideas stated explicitly and/or inferentially by providing a <b>mostly accurate</b> analysis, and supporting the analysis with <b>adequate</b> textual evidence.	The student response demonstrates <b>basic comprehension</b> of ideas stated explicitly and/or inferentially by providing a <b>generally accurate</b> analysis and supporting the analysis with <b>basic</b> textual evidence.	The student response demonstrates <b>limited comprehension</b> of ideas stated explicitly and/or inferentially by providing a <b>minimally accurate</b> analysis and supporting the analysis with <b>limited</b> textual evidence.	The student response demonstrates <b>no comprehension</b> of ideas by providing inaccurate or no analysis and <b>little to no</b> textual evidence.
<b>Writing Written Expression</b>	<p>The student response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>addresses the prompt and provides <b>effective and comprehensive</b> development of the claim or topic that is <b>consistently appropriate</b> to the task by using <b>clear and convincing</b> reasoning supported by <b>relevant textual</b> evidence;</li> <li>demonstrates <b>purposeful</b> coherence, clarity, and cohesion, making it <b>easy to follow</b> the writer's progression of ideas;</li> <li>establishes and maintains an <b>effective</b> style, attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline.</li> </ul>	<p>The student response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>addresses the prompt and provides <b>mostly effective</b> development of the claim or topic that is <b>mostly appropriate</b> to the task, by using <b>clear</b> reasoning supported by <b>relevant textual</b> evidence;</li> <li>demonstrates coherence, clarity, and cohesion, making it <b>fairly easy to follow</b> the writer's progression of ideas;</li> <li>establishes and maintains a <b>mostly effective</b> style, while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline.</li> </ul>	<p>The student response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>addresses the prompt and provides <b>some</b> development of the claim or topic that is <b>somewhat appropriate</b> to the task, by using <b>some</b> reasoning and <b>text-based</b> evidence</li> <li>demonstrates <b>some</b> coherence, clarity, and/or cohesion, making the writer's progression of ideas <b>usually discernible but not obvious</b>;</li> <li>has a style that is <b>somewhat</b> effective, <b>generally</b> attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline.</li> </ul>	<p>The student response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>addresses the prompt and develops the claim or topic and provides <b>minimal</b> development that is <b>limited in its appropriateness</b> to the task by using <b>limited</b> reasoning and <b>text-based</b> evidence; or</li> <li>is a developed, text-based response with <b>little or no awareness</b> of the prompt;</li> <li>demonstrates <b>limited</b> coherence, clarity, and/or cohesion, making the writer's progression of ideas <b>somewhat unclear</b>;</li> <li>has a style that has <b>limited</b> effectiveness, with <b>limited</b> awareness of the norms of the discipline.</li> </ul>	<p>The student response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is <b>undeveloped</b> and/or <b>inappropriate</b> to the task;</li> <li><b>lacks</b> coherence, clarity, and cohesion,</li> <li>has an inappropriate style, with <b>little to no</b> awareness of the norms of the discipline.</li> </ul>
<b>Writing Knowledge of Language and Conventions</b>	The student response to the prompt demonstrates <b>superior command</b> of the conventions of standard English at an advanced level of complexity. There may be a <b>few minor errors</b> in mechanics, grammar, and usage, but <b>meaning is clear</b> .	The student response to the prompt demonstrates <b>full command</b> of the conventions of standard English at an appropriate level of complexity. There may be a <b>few minor errors</b> in mechanics, grammar, and usage, but <b>meaning is clear</b> .	The student response to the prompt demonstrates <b>some command</b> of the conventions of standard English at an appropriate level of complexity. There may be errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage that <b>occasionally impede understanding</b> , but the <b>meaning is generally clear</b> .	The student response to the prompt demonstrates <b>limited command</b> of the conventions of standard English at an appropriate level of complexity. There may be errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage that <b>often impede understanding</b> .	The student response to the prompt demonstrates <b>no command</b> of the conventions of standard English. <b>Frequent and varied errors</b> in mechanics, grammar, and usage <b>impede understanding</b> .

SCORE: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix E: Focus Correction Area Rubric #1**

This rubric was created to assess student mastery of the Focus Correction Areas for the December 2014 “Wealth and Happiness” Synthesis Essay. Adapted from Collins, J. J. (1999).

*Selecting and teaching focus correction areas: A planning guide.*

<b>Wealth and Happiness Synthesis Essay Rubric</b>	Points Possible	Points Earned
<b>FCA 1: Use of evidence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All claims are fully supported by examples from the sources</li> <li>• Cites at least three different sources</li> <li>• All cited sources are reliable</li> </ul>	5 (x5)	
<b>FCA 2: Quotation integration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All quotations are integrated into the paragraph, not floating independently; quotation is introduced by fitting it grammatically and logically into the language of the essay</li> <li>• All quotations are I.C.E.d (Introduced, Cited, Explained)</li> </ul>	5 (x5)	
<b><u>Deductions to Avoid:</u></b> Incomplete/missing requirements (-5) Late (-5)		
<b>TOTAL</b>	50	

**Appendix F: Focus Correction Area Rubric #2**

This rubric was created to assess student mastery of the Focus Correction Areas for the January 2015 “Great Expectations Soundtrack” Synthesis Essay. Adapted from Collins, J. J. (1999).

*Selecting and teaching focus correction areas: A planning guide.*

<b>Great Expectations Soundtrack Synthesis Essay</b>	<b>Points Possible</b>	<b>Points Earned</b>
<b>FCA 1: Use of evidence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All claims are fully supported by appropriate examples from the sources</li> <li>• Cites at least one direct quotation from each text in each body paragraph</li> </ul>	5 (x5)	
<b>FCA 2: Quotation Integration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All quotations are integrated into the paragraph, not floating independently; quotation is introduced by fitting it grammatically and logically into the language of the essay</li> <li>• All quotations are I.C.E.d (Introduced, Cited, Explained)</li> </ul>	5 (x5)	
<b>FCA 3: Topic sentences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synthesizes the two sources</li> <li>• Accurately reflects the main idea of the paragraph</li> </ul>	5 (x5)	
<b><u>Deductions to Avoid:</u></b> Incomplete/missing requirements (-5) Late (-5)		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>75</b>	