

# Editor's Note

By Daniel Rozmiarek, T-C '06, [drozmiarek@towson.edu](mailto:drozmiarek@towson.edu)



I have stopped grading papers. And now I have a reason why.

I have been teaching writing in some form for over fifteen years, with the last four years teaching advanced writing courses at Towson University. Over that time I have become increasingly frustrated with the expectation that I would assign a number or letter grade to a student's piece of writing. Anytime I assigned a grade less than an A, most students complained and argued that my expectations were too high. But, whenever I assigned an A, most students assumed that they were done and stopped working to improve their writing abilities. The over-reliance on grades made my students extrinsically motivated in an unhealthy way. So, last fall, I stopped grading papers.

Of course, I still read their papers and I provide them with written and oral responses, but I no longer assign letter or point values to their work. My decision to change my approach to writing assessment was validated when I read *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment* by Maja Wilson (2006).

In her relatively short (98 pp.) examination of using rubrics in writing assessment, Wilson explains her own troubles with rubrics. She examines the historical development of rubrics from a screening tool for elite colleges in the 1800s, through their use by the military in the 1920s,

to their widespread application today in all levels of education. She accepts the inherent subjectivity of writing assessment and proposes a new paradigm for writing assessment that is unmediated by rubrics.

Wilson's new approach addresses the concerns that are frustratingly real for most teachers today: mandated testing, required report cards, and other time-consuming tasks. She still assigns grades, but they are based on a student's understanding of basic concepts, completion of daily work, class participation, and homework. She believes, "this emphasis on process leaves teachers free to encourage, praise, and support risks that turn out badly..." She presents the successes of other teachers who have abandoned rubrics and shows how Ted Nellen, an English teacher in New York City, encourages student response with a tool that any Summer Teacher Institute graduate would recognize as similar to the Praise, Question, Polish (PQP) sheet.

Now that I have stopped focusing on points for assessing students' writing development, I can more clearly appreciate the wonderful messages that my students have to share through writing.