



2015

## Revising by Numbers: Promoting Student Revision Through Accumulated Points

Mark McBeth

*John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, English Ph.D. Program, CUNY Graduate Center*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

McBeth, Mark (2015) "Revising by Numbers: Promoting Student Revision Through Accumulated Points," *Journal of Response to Writing*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw/vol1/iss2/3>

This Teaching Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Response to Writing* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

---

# RW

JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

## Revising by Numbers: Promoting Student Revision Through Accumulated Points

Mark McBeth

*John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY,  
English Ph.D. Program, CUNY Graduate Center*

---

In an effort to rethink the evaluation of student writing with the ultimate goal of convincing novice writers that rewriting predicates as well as pre-supposes the act of writing, I describe a point-accrual grading system where students accumulate points with redrafted submissions during a semester. This approach to evaluation offers students more autonomy in controlling their “earned” grade as well as incentivizes their investments in the revision process. In contrast to the normative percentages approach to grading, this point-accrual system not only gives students a less ambivalent form of grading but also moves them past surface-level revision and into rhetorical restructuring.

*Keywords:* Final product, Novice writers, Percentage grading, Point-accrual grading, Process, Revision

---

How to give revision even the tiniest scintilla of value compared to real life?  
How to encourage even a little self-motivation in revision? (Willis, 1993, p. 12)

And isn't our objective to encourage students to critique their own writing and manage their revisions to want to write successfully? (Zigmond, 2006, p. 304)

**A**fter hearing many students confess to being bad writers, I decided to find a convincing argument and corroborating evaluation method to disabuse them of their internalized misconceptions that someone can essentially be a bad writer and to teach them that, in fact, the effective composer must, above all, revise. Harris (2006) rationalizes why teaching revision poses such difficulties:

Revising is the sort of thing that is fairly simple to describe but very hard to do well. . . . As readers we usually come upon texts in their final form—with many of the hesitations, repetitions, digressions, false starts, alternative phrasings, inconsistencies, speculations, infelicities, and flat-out mistakes of earlier drafts smoothed over, corrected, or erased . . . finished texts tend to conceal much of the labor involved in writing them. (p. 99)

So, if much of the finished writing labor has been hidden from inexperienced writers' observations, how can we convince them that they can produce such seemingly effortless final products? By what pedagogical tactics can we affirm for students that authors who produce such ostensibly "seamless" pieces have gained their writing expertise by writing "into expertise" and, if they too invested in the work by "adopting an open attitude to instruction and feedback [and] a willingness to experiment" that could also achieve such eloquent and masterful prose (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, 134). In my course, I have developed a point-accrual system that appraises and validates students' efforts of revision through a succession of drafts with accumulating points.

Other classroom researchers/practitioners have proposed similar pedagogical approaches to grading through "numbers approaches" (Marchionda, 2010; Zigmond, 2006), "achievement grading" (Adkinson &

Tchudi, 1997), and “contract grading” (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Knapp, 1976; Reichert, 2003). While their slightly varying names of these grading systems indicate particular nuances in approach and intent, they all have an ultimate goal of giving students “control over their grades and, ultimately, their own learning process” (Marchionda, 2010, p. 408) and “foster[ing] a deep commitment to process” (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009, p. 261). Moreover, these methods all express a feeling of apprehension about the grading process and its relationship to students’ confidence about their own writing abilities. How can we boost students’ fragile morales about writing while also bearing witness to their often densely layered composing challenges? Acknowledging that students and I inhabit an institutional system that requires grades, I want a transparent system of evaluation that encourages revision through progressively (read: processually) accumulated points toward a final product. Rather than ignoring the institutional parameters of grading that have been set up for us a priori and that students inevitably face in other courses as well, I decided to work with—yet, more importantly, around—that preordained system.

In an attempt to destabilize the preconceptions and after-effects of an institutionalized grading system, I confronted a hurdle that has often undermined my attempts to persuade students to redraft: students have been reminded again and again that they are not “good writers” and that their advanced literacy abilities fall short of college expectations. Carroll (2002) remarks upon this college-level conundrum about writing, stating, “Apparently college writing is another of life’s catch-22’s: you have to be ready before you can do it, but you can’t get ready until you do it” (p. 98). In lieu of sanctioned essentialist thinking that labels “bad writing” and “bad writers,” I want students to see that effective writing occurs through socially constructed situations (e.g., educational opportunities for rehearsal and learning). Through logistically sound composing scenarios in which students internalize habits of the composing mind, I’ve aimed to convince my students that, in fact, they have underestimated their writing abilities. Furthermore, I have attempted to convince them that until they have invested in the rigors of a revision-based writing course, they could no more logically claim themselves as bad writers than they could announce themselves bad chefs if they had never practiced culinary techniques or

bad athletes had they never faithfully trained in sporting activities. Or, in other words, they know how to write but they are not yet effective revisers.

As ascertained by the pedagogical scholars above, if we want students to take this effort-intensive revision seriously, we need to devise evaluation/grading policies that incentivize their investment in this intellectual labor. Otherwise, why would a student invest in such a revision-heavy course when their “angst-written” fears incapacitate them? Or, if a course demands the hard work of multiple drafts but does not incorporate a system of assessment that underscores the importance of revision, why take revision seriously? While many composition theorists purport the nurturing of novice student writers and their performances (Carroll, 2002; Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye 2009; Sommers & Saltz, 2004), we must still establish alternative methods of evaluation that allow (even ensure) students’ messy rehearsals and, simultaneously, nudge them toward products that emblemize their accomplishments.

After a brief review of revision scholarship below, I will critique an all-too commonplace classroom grading policy—the percentage-grading system—that evaluates through a quixotic calculation of percentages based normally on one-draft submissions plus “participation.” As a consequence of percentage grading, where the evaluative vagueness does not attend to the workings of language, instructors have been spotlighting the computation of final grades instead of teaching students about the means and methods of shaping and crafting their writing. Within the micro-localized context of responding to students’ papers, it leaves instructors with little room for the type of discursive analysis of students’ assignments that could broaden and extend their habits of mindful revision. As an alternative grading assessment, I have adopted a point-accrual grading system, which endorses process pedagogy, explicitly focusing upon the formative outcomes of revision. Without divergent methods of evaluating, commenting, and (yes, admittedly) assigning grades to student papers, we will have a difficult time in unpacking students’ decision-making about composing tasks and fostering their metacognitive awareness of their own revisionary habits and behaviors.

## Reviewing Revision

In her now-canonical study, “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” Sommers (1980) examines the way that students define the term *revision* and recognizes that their conception of it has less to do with reorganizing or reworking the theme of the paper (higher order types of revision) but instead with rewording (or superficial revision). Ineffective revisers scan their papers for places where they can “scratch out” certain vocabulary words, replacing them with “a more decent word or a better word” (p. 381). Wallace and Hayes (1991) confirm Sommers’s assertion, writing:

Many researchers have found that inexperienced writers typically treat revision as a local task, that is, a task of changing words and sentences rather than of modifying the goals or organization of the text to meet criteria of the rhetorical situation. (p. 55)

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, researchers and practitioners purported numerous approaches to revision yet lamented about the lack of revision occurring in American public schools. Even today students seem to get few chances to revise and therefore minimal opportunities to understand the procedures and sub-processes of revision. As a result of missed opportunities for revision and evaluation systems that reward final products instead of explored processes, students reluctantly apply these redrafting strategies and, moreover, revert to their go-to methods of surface-level revision.

In her longitudinal study, *Rehearsing New Roles*, Carroll (2002) claims that students’ writing development doesn’t always progress in a linear fashion as students move from one assignment to the next and one course level to the next. During one writing assignment, revisions may not progress in a linear fashion as students negotiate invention/organization/style/research/formatting, but may loop through recursive drafts of progression and regression as they compose. In fact, Carroll (2002) encourages faculty to attend to the places where student work regresses; the point of writing regression may tell us more about student writing challenges than the relieving, happy moments of writing improvement ever will. Carroll (2002) writes:

Students' literacy develops because students must take on new and difficult roles that challenge their abilities as writers. In fact, student writing may sometimes need to get "worse" before it can get "better." Because many college writing tasks are essentially new to students, they will need repeated practice to become proficient. (p. 9)

Most importantly, I would argue that while composing a literacy task students must have opportunities of repeated practice that enculturate them "into the long-standing mental habits, or dispositions, that will enable them to use that expertise in new situations" (Brent, 2011, p. 411). Taking a writing course where they know it is okay to err but not okay to be complacent with the "not-yet-enough" provides students with a safe "contact zone of proximal development"<sup>1</sup> in which they feel comfortable and rewarded enough to stretch constantly into a new flexibility of composing.

### **Auditing the Percentage-Grading Policy**

In an unscientific review of composition syllabi from one semester's Freshman Year Composition (FYC) courses at my institution, I identified and counted the instances when instructors used percentages as a means of assigning grades to their students; I estimate that at least 75% of the syllabi used this ratio-expressive form of (retro)grading. While this type of generally accepted and commonplace percentage-grading policy can point to scaffolded steps of assignments and, in some cases, allude to the act of revision, it doesn't explicitly articulate how these percentages add up to a final grade or relate to the positive advantages of the revision process as seen in Figure 1.

## Course Grading Policy

*Class Participation and Various Homework/Informal Writing Assignments*—20%  
Including:

- At least one conference with me
- At least one tutoring session at the Writing Center
- At least one post-grade Paper Revision
- In-Class Presentation(s)
- Curiosity Journal
- Reading Log

*Portfolio Writing Assignments*—80%

Including:

- Narrative Essay—15%
- Interview—15%
- Annotated Bibliography—10%
- Inquiry-Based Research Paper Proposal—10%
- Inquiry-Based Research Paper—20%
- Portfolio Cover Letter/Self-Assessment—10%

Figure 1. *The Course Grading Policy section of my syllabus.*

In this genre of percentage assessment, students receive a letter equivalent on a literacy behavior, class participation, or assignment grade that then transfers into an equation of grade ratios that then calculates into a grade. Frankly, percentage grading offers students little reason to do anything but a perfunctory attempt at revision and often guarantees an equation for frustration when it comes time for the final negotiation of grades. With the normative breakdown of grades into A through F, students would have a hard time imagining how they could achieve a 30% level of success on any given assignment and how that would impact an overall course grade. If instructors intend to underscore the quality of writing and perpetuate the value of revision, how does this percentage-of-productivity metric effectively evaluate the increasingly ameliorated quality of a student's writing? Unfortunately in this lights/camera/fraction approach to grading, the instructor and the student end up on alternate ends of the assessment



universe, both feeling fairly untreated in the ratios of these transactions. In what seems a counterintuitive and counterproductive calculation, students would more likely question how their professor computed the grade rather than how their own writing fulfilled the rhetorical, strategic, and even grammatical criteria of the course.<sup>2</sup>

### **Revising Grading Policy as a Means to Valuing Revision**

As an alternative to this all too commonplace (and complex) evaluation system, the point-accrual point system affords students a rationale for the points assigned and a reason to attempt accumulating more points through additional revision. In a nod to the Ciceronian elements of discourse, students must base their revisionary choices on acquired knowledge about the topic, know-how about genre structures, attention to factual accuracy based on research, sensitivity to audience needs, style criteria as established by classroom discussions, and appropriate formatting choices. In an initial assessment experiment in a business-writing course, I decided that the grading system should mimic a system of transaction where students would accrue points during the semester and would then exchange these points for their earned grade at the end of the semester. While the discourse community of business-oriented writers have already set established criteria for their commonly used genres, reasonably lending itself to this grading policy, I have since adapted this “fair-trade grade agreement” in all of my courses as a means to promote greater equity in my student-teacher partnerships through transparency and dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

My course description grading policy is duplicated in Figure 2. On the first day of class, students receive this point-accrual grading policy so they understand from day one that they will “earn” their ultimate course grade and that I don’t “give” it.<sup>4</sup> While I do evaluate the writing and assign points as a more experienced guide, they have as many opportunities by which they may redraft and improve their document.

## Grading, Absence, Lateness, and Deadline Policies

In this course, your words will earn your grade for you—not only by the quantity that you produce but by the quality of their expression. Each assignment will have a certain value that you will accumulate in your course account. For example, a memorandum may be worth 100 credit points. The first time you submit a draft of the memo you may receive only 25 points because you didn't fulfill the expectations of the assignment. You may then revise the memo and have credit added to the subsequent drafts. After multiple drafts your memorandum may go from a value of 25 points to 95 (or 100!) points, but this depends upon your willingness to revise, your ability to respond to critiques about your writing, and your motivation to resubmit your work. Once you have gained points on an assignment, you may never lose them; subsequent drafts that don't show improvement based on commentary and class exercises may not accumulate more points, but your assigned points for a piece of writing cannot decrease once gained.

However, you may lose points from your account in a number of ways. In the business and administrative world, people must adhere to deadlines. If an employer requests something done by a specified time and date, your reputation and position depend upon your ability to produce the assigned task. In this course, for every day you submit your assignments late, you lose 10 points. Once you lose these “missed-deadline” losses, you may not recover them.

You may also lose points by lateness to class or absence from class. For tardiness, every 10 minutes that you arrive at class late, you lose 5 points. You may regain these “tardiness losses” by submitting a memorandum to me during the course's next session meeting that states the reason for your lateness. You must compose this memorandum, fulfilling all of the criteria of the course (clearly written, convincingly persuasive, and professionally presented—proofread and typed). Absences are a different situation. For every absence you lose 50 points. If you want to regain these points, you must also submit a memorandum that states why you were absent, what evidence you are attaching to justify your absence, and what you've done to inform yourself about what you missed. Depending upon your rationale, your evidence, and your efforts in preparation, you could regain part or the complete amount of your absentee losses. Notice that in all these memoranda, you attempt to make something happen: securing your points and thus improving your ultimate grade.

Figure 2. *The Grading, Absence, Lateness, and Deadline Policies of my syllabus.*

### Assignment Points & Grading Scale

Complaint Letter.....	100 pts.
Response to Complaint Letter .....	100 pts.
Resume.....	100 pts.
Resume Cover Letter.....	100 pts.
Mid-semester Self-Evaluation Report.....	100 pts.
Post-Conference Memorandum.....	100 pts.
Brochure .....	100 pts.
Flyer #1.....	50 pts.
Flyer #2.....	50 pts.
Rhetorical Analysis.....	500 pts.
Cooperative Group Project:	
Proposal .....	25 pts.
Project .....	100 pts.
Journal.....	175 pts.
Portfolio Cover Letter .....	100 pts.
Total.....	1700 pts.

As seen in the list above you can accumulate 1700 total points. Throughout the semester, you and I will keep an account of your points, and, at the end of the semester, you will exchange your accrued points for the grade you have earned. The point grade scale follows:

A+	1700+ extra credit or extra effort points		
A	1650–1699	C	1350–1399
A-	1600–1649	C-	1300–1349
B+	1550–1599	D+	1200–1399
B	1500–1549	D	1101–1199
B-	1450–1499	D-	1001–1100
C+	1400–1449	F	1000 or fewer

Figure 3. The Assignment Points & Grading Scale portion of my syllabus.

Each assignment has a designated amount of potential points. I announce the points on the first day of class and provide an accompanying final grading scale designating how many points a student needs to earn an A, A-, B+, B, B-, etc. They receive the following charts on potential

assignment points and the final grading scale (Figure 3). As stated in my policy explanation, my students can revise their assignments as many times as they choose, with the agreement that once they have gained points on an assignment they cannot lose them. If they submit a revision that does not show adequate change, they may not merit additional points, but their scale of accumulated points can never slide backwards. If a new submission has demonstrated superficial changes, I can respond not only with advisory commentary but also a lack of increased points, which then helps them discern the tactical (in)effectiveness of their revision. My lateral point designation does not diminish what they have already achieved in their work nor does it symbolize deficiencies, but it directly signifies a need to do something else—something “not-yet-done”—namely, an alternative emendation that yields better rhetorical results than a sleight of slight word-change. If the accumulated points on a draft signal how students have fulfilled certain aspects of the assignment, the remaining heretofore-unearned points symbolize just how much more they need to stretch to achieve their rhetorical goals.

### **Recounting Revision**

In contradistinction to Carroll’s (2002) findings, I have noticed that students’ revisions in one 15-week course do not regress as much as they move laterally; they often make improvements on what I comment upon in one submitted revision but then that alteration reveals yet another problem in the text’s rhetorical meaning-making. For instance, if they add more details to improve the persuasive elements of their text, they may notice that these additions then need more transitional phrases. The redrafting of transitional phrases may then alert them to the odd organizational structure that has resulted, which then demands restructuring and/or rethinking of the content. When students’ resubmitted drafts do not improve but instead reveal other rhetorical difficulties, I can focus upon the next message-conveying problem to be solved rather than on what they did “wrong.”

As a means to offer an abridged illustration of a student’s lateral and then eventual forward-moving revisions, I have amalgamated a few students’ complaint letters (see Figures 4, 5, and 6) as a means to exemplify

revision difficulties yet still retain the anonymity of any individual writer in one of my courses. The capitalized statements in brackets in these figures represent the types of commentary that I might return to students, which normally appear in an in-text tracking system where my comments come up in a soothing rather than accusatory color (read: blue not red).

Dear Mr. M, [BUSINESS LETTERS USE A COLON INSTEAD OF A COMMA AFTER THE GREETING. USE THE PROPER TITLE FOR THIS PROFESSOR/ADMINISTRATOR; SEE COLLEGE WEBSITE FOR DESIGNATED TITLE.]

On behalf of the Master of Policy Administration (MPA) students at Criminal Justice College, there is an issue with students getting in contact with their academic advisors for assistance with the completion of their degree. As completing this degree is an important factor within all of your students lives and careers, we need your help in resolving this issue. [INSTEAD OF STATING THAT AN ISSUE EXISTS, EXPLICITLY ARTICULATE THE PROBLEM DIRECTLY AND ACCURATELY.]

In the past efforts to resolve this issue [YOU HAVEN'T YET EXPLICITLY STATED THE ISSUE, SO YOU CAN'T DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING DETAILS YET.] Prof. W visited every Saturday lecture room introducing herself as the MPA advisor. However, her hours of visitation sometimes do not work for many of our students. When she visits the classroom, or when students can visit her. With many of the MPA classes held at night, Prof. W sometimes lectures a class or simply unavailable at hours where most of the MPA student body is actually present on campus. [THIS PREVIOUS SENTENCE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE.] However, for students who did not know that there was a designated advisor, or as to whom that individual may be, this [<A NON-REFERENTIAL THIS] then created a lot of havoc within the graduate community. [YOU'VE GIVEN CONSIDERABLE DETAILS ABOUT THE ISSUE, BUT HAVEN'T YET STRAIGHTFORWARDLY ARTICULATED THE PROBLEM.]

Within the Fall semester of 2011, who did know Prof. W could simply email her for academic advisement. [THIS PREVIOUS SENTENCE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE.] In one instance, I was asked by Prof. W to submit certain documents to her at a given date and time. However, due to my work schedule, I was unable to do so and therefore my issue was never resolved. [AGAIN, RIGHT DETAILS THAT DON'T YET RELATE TO AN ARTICULATED PROBLEM; ALSO

CONSIDER HOW TO REORDER THESE IDEAS FOR BETTER COHESIVE UNDERSTANDING.]

On behalf of the MPA student body, I would like [<HEDGING] to ask that this issue be to be addressed immediately to eliminate further frustrations.

Sincerely,  
A. Student

*Figure 4. Complaint letter example draft 1.*

In the first draft of this complaint/request letter (Figure 4), the student loosely follows a business letter structure; however, the document does not clearly articulate the problem with accuracy or organizational coherence. The author also doesn't adhere to some specific, globally discussed criteria that discourage passive voice ("to be" constructions) and hedging. For this first submission, the student receives 60 points out of a possible 100, indicating that the draft has achieved certain aspects of the task yet still needs to resolve the accuracy of facts, an attention to the reader's needs, and fulfillment of composing criteria.

Figure 5 represents what a student might submit on a second draft. In this draft, the student still hasn't articulated the actual problem nor revised according to global in-class exercises, thus not responding to my initial commentary. In response, I note these discrepancies of revision and alert the writer that the resubmission gains no extra points. The message highlights insufficient revision not deficient writing abilities. In these examples, a student's revision and correlating point accumulation may move laterally; however, the possibilities of the student's writing development still has movement because the student has new rhetorical improvements to problem-solve. Through these incremental, albeit sometimes stuttering, revision developments, students recognize the rhetorical tactics that shape writing into increasingly more lucid prose. The quid pro quo of student revisions and instructional responses demonstrate this back-and-forth progression-regression that students and I cooperatively review and modify on one piece of writing but yet may lead students to a better understanding of their own revision strategies on future composing ventures.

Dear Mr. M., [YOU STILL HAVE NOT ATTENDED TO MY FIRST COMMENTARY ON THE GREETING.]

On behalf of the Master of Policy Administration (MPA) student body at Criminal Justice College, there is [<TO BE CONSTRUCTION] an issue with students getting in contact with their academic advisors for assistance within the program. [YOU STILL HEDGE WITH THIS STATEMENT.] This [NON-REFERENTIAL THIS; YOU HAVEN'T EXPLICITLY ARTICULATED THE PROBLEM YET.] creates a problem when students seek academic advisement for the completion of their degree. As the student body feels very strongly about this, we ask for your help in resolving this issue.

In the early Fall 2011 semester, Prof. W visited every Saturday lecture room introducing herself as the MPA advisor. During the course of the introduction, Prof. W stated her hours of visitation in which students could meet and discuss their academic issues with her. However, the hours of visitation do not work for many of our students. [YOU HAVEN'T STATED WHY.] Furthermore, like many of the MPA classes held at night, Prof. W lectures her own classes during evening hours. According to a student survey, the majority of the MPA student body is present on campus during evening hours. Unfortunately, told to e-mail their advisor during the daytime for help, students could not receive assistance with their academic concerns during the evening hours. [AGAIN, YOUR LAST SENTENCE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE.]

In one instance, Prof. W asked me to submit certain documents to her at a given date and time. However, due to my work schedule, this [NON-REFERENTIAL THIS] could not take place. Therefore, my issue took quite some time to resolve. In addition, similar situations within the MPA student body have created lots of havoc for our students. With many issues left unresolved, students have become frustrated with the advisor as well as the college. [YOU REPEAT "ISSUE" WITHOUT RENAMING IT; SEE OUR HANDOUT ON METHODS OF TRANSITION.]

On behalf of the MPA student body, this issue with advisement must get addressed immediately to eliminate further frustrations. You must explicitly state what you want done to resolve this issue.

Sincerely,  
 A. Student  
 [REVIEW AGAIN THE COMMENTARY I GAVE YOU ON YOUR FIRST DRAFT. YOU STILL NEED TO REVISE ACCORDING TO THOSE CRITIQUES AS WELL AS TO SOME NEW POINTS I'VE DESIGNATED ABOVE. YOU EARN NO EXTRA POINTS ON THIS DRAFT.]

Figure 5. Complaint letter example draft 2.

Admittedly, even as I recount this response about my response techniques, I can sense the cursory reactions that another instructor might feel about the minutiae of this grading policy and its accompanying responses—yet this feeling parallels the process of submission/response between instructor and student. As any instructor can imagine, this *qui-pro-quo* pedagogy demands a lot of student work to achieve thoughtful revision as well as a considerable amount of intellectual energy on the part of the instructor. Yet, I have found that my reading time actually accelerates because I look for organizational, structural, and rhetorical issues rather than becoming overwhelmed by impenetrable layers of composing problems or being bogged down in grammatical technicalities. Also, I've created an Excel file where I input points with each revision, allowing software to do the counting. The brain time that I would have (mis)applied to incidental commentary or grade marking now gets dedicated to the analysis of my students' discursive attempts and achievements. While this point-accrual grading system has invoked my students' higher-order thinking, it has likewise stimulated my higher-order teaching.

Beyond the bureaucratic work of accounting, seeing students improve their rhetorical and composing "habitudes" through revision justifies the multiple readings that I endorse throughout the semester. In Figure 6, I offer what a student might achieve if resilient and responsive to revision recommendations. Arguably, a journal article cannot portray the oft-tedious procedures that go into evaluating and grading, and in consideration of the length of this article, I have not shared all of the sample interstitial drafts that students conceivably submit; however, in this final submission, the student finally produces an exemplary letter that follows the structure of a complaint/request business letter, articulates a well-explained problem,



offers ample discriminating details, proposes a resolution, and follows the formatting of business genres. Through a succession of revised submissions that address issues that I raise in my critiques, the student finally achieves the type of letter that an administrator could use to solve a bureaucratic dilemma. The words have done something.

Dear Prof. M:

On behalf of the Master of Policy Administration (MPA) students at Criminal Justice College, a committee of concerned graduate students and I worry that we do not receive adequate advisement from professors. This lack of available advising creates problems when students seek guidance toward the completion of their degrees.

In the early Fall 2011 semester, Prof. W visited every Saturday course introducing herself as the MPA primary advisor. During the course of the introduction, Prof. W stated her afternoon office hours in which students could meet and discuss their academic issues. However, her allotted hours do not work for many students who either work or spend long hours commuting from work to campus. Furthermore, with many MPA classes scheduled at night when Prof. W lectures, student cannot arrange appointments. Therefore, most MPA students cannot seek advisement because of conflicts with her limited office hours and her teaching schedule. Consequently, the one MPA advisor cannot assist students who need her guidance.

For example, Prof. W asked me to submit certain documents to her by a given date and time in person. However, due to my work schedule, I could not fulfill her request. Therefore, my issue took quite some time to resolve. Similar situations within the MPA student body have created many similar conflicts for other students. With many advisement issues left unresolved, students feel frustrated with the advisor as well as the college.

The MPA program must address this advisement issue immediately to avoid the frustration of dedicated students and the currently unresolved scheduling conflicts of the MPA advisor.

Sincerely,  
A. Student

*Figure 6. Complaint letter example final submission.*

With the point-accrual grading system, I can move students through a series of layered rhetorical, stylistic, and grammatical improvements that eventually produce a cohesive, comprehensive final product. Undergraduates frequently need four to five drafts to arrive at this point, and I warn them that in the work-a-day world they wouldn't have this revisionary luxury. Yet in my opinion, a writing course should afford students the space and time to work through this oft-belabored revision process with an instructor who willingly and patiently guides them. Similar to the sample student's complaint about advisement, if writing teachers do not allot time where students rehearse and muddle through this revision process, where else might it happen?

In assessing the evolving rhetorical tactics and composing strategies of their writing, students require "a teacher who will respect and respond to his students, not for what they have done, but for what they may do; not for what they have produced, but for what they may produce, if they are given an opportunity to see writing as a process, not a product" (Murray, 2003, p. 6). By introducing this point-accrual evaluation system, I have come to better understand and more thoroughly appreciate the blurry line between students achieving final products and the considerable trial-and-error efforts they make when revising. Except for students who do not engage in the revision process (and therefore, in my opinion, don't engage in writing), students reflect positively on this point-accrual system because of the opportunities it affords them, the appraisals they receive, and the palpable changes that they perceive in their writing abilities in one 15-week course. For example, in project feedback, one student registers some frustration but then recognizes growth: "I grew annoyed with you when you gave me a 99 on my cover letter, which had one "to be" verb. On the bright side, after all the hard work and tedious revisions, I learned how to do in-depth drafting of my writing." In another portfolio cover letter, a student writes, "As a re-established reviser, I learned how to effectively use revision to make my arguments clearer, strengthen the sentences in my writing, and remove passive ('to be') verbs. As I learned the importance of revision, I emerged as a clearer and effective writer over the course of the semester." This student's neologism—"re-established reviser"—makes me smile and offers me a sense of optimism that, with this point-accrual grading policy, I may proselytize more converts into the convictions of revision.

## Notes

1. Here I conflate the ideas of Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) whose “zones of proximal development” consider the conceivable distance between actual development and the level of potential development with “contact zones” (coined by Pratt, 1991, p. 34) where interactions occur between two different cultures (here, teachers/academia and students/learners). So, a “safe contact of proximal development” signifies a space or situation where generative occasions of potential development can be created by teachers and experienced by students.

2. I cringe further in imagining the oral justification that might accompany this grading procedure. It might sound something like the following: “Well yes, Student X, you did receive As on three out of four papers, but those essays were each only 10% of your grade; the final paper on which you received a C- was 45% of your grade, and you didn’t have much class participation (25%). The other 20% came from random quizzes taken during the semester, so by my calculations, you’ve earned a C+, but I’ve decided to bump it up to a B-.” In my opinion, the quantum theorizing it would take to calculate this grade and then the desk-side effort it would take to justify it to a student seems an exercise in rhetorical mumbo jumbo plus applied mathematics rather than a conducive discussion about language usage, literacy acquisition, and rhetorical finesse.

3. I initially used this grading method in my business writing courses with advanced undergraduate and Master’s-level students, yet I have since applied it to my freshman-level composition courses. The accumulation of points has helped incoming freshmen to adapt their “habitudes” about revision quickly, thus improving their writing. Additionally, I work in an urban, public institution with a large population of English Language Learners; seeing the slow but steady rise of points on their redrafted papers gives these oft-unconfident writers the encouragement to forge ahead through the labor of second-language acquisition. In my responses, these students read where their writing improves as well as where they need to work more, and in their points they recognize how their linguistic labors can have value.

4. It gives me great pleasure at the end of the semester when a student happily arrives at my office door and thanks me for the A. I always respond, “Please, don’t blame me for your success.”

## References

- Adkison, S., & Tchudi, S. (1997). Grading on merit and achievement: Where quality meets quantity. In S. Tchudi (Ed.), *Alternatives to grading student writing* (pp. 192–209). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Brent, D. (2011). Transfer, transformation, and rhetorical knowledge: Insights from transfer theory. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 25(4), 396–419.
- Carroll, L. A. (2002). *Rehearsing new roles: How college students develop as writers*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Danielewicz, J., & Elbow, P. (2009). A unilateral grading contract to improve learning and teaching. *College Composition and Communication*, 61(2), 244–268.
- Fishman, J., Lunsford, A., McGregor, B., & Otuteye, M. (2009). Performing writing, performing literacy from theory to practice. In A. Lunsford (Ed.), *Theory to practice: A selection of essays* (pp. 93–115). New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Harris, J. H. (2006). *Rewriting: How to do things with texts*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Knapp, J. V. (1976). Contract/conference evaluations of freshman composition. *College English* 37(7), 647–653.
- Marchionda, D. (2010). Point by point: Adding up motivation. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 37(4), 408–420.
- Murray, D. M. (2003). Teach writing as a process not product. In V. Villanueva (Ed.), *Cross-talk in comp theory, second edition* (pp. 3–6). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Pratt, M. L. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*, 33–40. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>.
- Reichert, N. (2003). Practice makes perfect: Contracting quantity and quality. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 31(1), 60–68.
- Sommers, N. (1980). Revision strategies of student writers and experienced adult writers. *College Composition and Communication*, 31(4), 378–388.

- Sommers, N., & Saltz, L. (2004). The novice as expert: Writing the freshman year. *College Composition and Communication* 56(1), 124–149.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wallace, D. L., & Hayes, J. R. (1991). Redefining revision for freshmen. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 25(1), 54–66.
- Willis, M. S. (1993). *Deep revision: A guide for teachers, students, and other writers*. New York, NY: Teachers & Writers Collaborative.
- Zigmond, R. H. (2006). The numbers approach to grading papers. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 33(3), 296–304.

### Copyrights

© JRW & Authors.

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the Journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

McBeth, Mark. (2015). "Revising by Numbers: Promoting Student Revision Through Accumulated Points." *Journal of Response to Writing*, 1(2): 35–54.