

Freshmen Writers are like PLAY-DOH.® They both come in a variety of colors. After you remove PLAY-DOH® from the container you try to fashion it into something recognizable, and interesting. Just playing with PLAY-DOH® can be creative, fascinating and fun.

Likewise, writing can also be creative, fascinating and fun.

Both the PLAY-DOH® and the students need the freedom and space to expand. PLAY-DOH® is packaged in a defined container in order to market and ship it. Too often freshmen are standardized into a certain set of parameters, also. The students believe that if they stay within certain boundaries, they can expect to earn a “C” in the class and go happily on to the really important courses in their majors. At least that’s what many students think, as a rule.

You know that you have a group of students suppressed into defined parameters if, after you have read the syllabus with them, they ask any or all of the following questions:

- How many papers do we have to write?
- How many pages do the papers need to be?
- How many words do you require?

- Do you want our names on the left or the right side of the first page?
- Do you want a cover sheet?

The official departmental guide lines may state that first semester writing students must write four papers. Some semesters it takes the class, me and Devine Intervention to produce four acceptable papers. Some classes have to learn how to write a clear sentence first. Then you move them on to paragraphs which seems to a concept beyond comprehension to some. The next step is to teach them to arrange the paragraphs together into an essay where the paragraphs are related and flow into each other. Basically they essay makes sense and are readable.

Other semesters, to restrict a class to writing only four papers is to block creativity. A group of students may easily write four papers in the first six weeks, and then move on past the basic rhetorical forms. If you hold these students to only four papers creates boredom and increased absenteeism.

I don't free-float through a semester. I have a file cabinet full of tested topics and "learning opportunities" (exercise/drills), but you have

to assess the level of previous learning before you can say how many papers/essays will be required.

ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR.....

Hearing that some teachers require a certain number of words per paper makes me shake my head. I wonder how students actually learn to write with a word limit set on them. If you assign a paper of one thousand words, the student may not have more than 850 interesting words to say; then they start writing filler. (“Do you count *a*, *an* and *the* as words?”) They know they must be accurate to the sacred word count. They will write anything to reach the required word count. The contrary is true too. A student may have fifteen hundred interesting words to say; why penalize them for writing more? I have heard this tale more than once. A student’s grade was lower because they wrote over the stated word limit

I am puzzled how a teacher with a family and/or outside interest, has the time to count words on a multiple set of papers. Some teachers may make students count the words themselves and put the word count

at the top of the paper. Now with auto word counters on computers it makes it easier. That doesn't teach anyone to write...only count words. They should have learned to count before they get to college.

Some students will try to write as little as possible if given the chance. In my classes one typed page and a sentence on the second page does not constitute a two page paper. One student told me he had always written short papers because that way he would make fewer mistakes. Getting a lower grade because of the mistakes put the emphasis on the wrong thing. Mistakes can be corrected, and a writing teacher should help the student learn to correct the mistakes—or not make them at all.

Most Freshmen students will try to convince you that they aren't creative. What that means is that they didn't write to please their high school teachers. I once had a student write a two page paper telling me she couldn't write. At least one student in every class tries to tell me he/she isn't creative. I ask them if he/she has ever lied to his/her mother. The entire class laughs; everyone has lied to their mothers. That ends the discussion on lack of creativity.