I’ve noticed that the things I worry the most about, and thus waste lots of time, effort, and sleep on, often turn out to be much less serious than I originally anticipated.

W. Gary Griswold (qtd. in Haswell and Lu)

Stress is like pain tolerance or writing speed: we’ll never know whether we feel and react exactly the way others do, or whether by the world’s standards we’re unique, over- or under-reacting. Is my job more or less stressful than an air traffic controller’s or a wine taster’s? I’m clueless. But I wouldn’t trade.

Despite such ignorance, I can compare the stress caused by various jobs and activities I’ve engaged in and therefore predict (and sometimes reduce) the likelihood that I’ll feel stressed in a particular week. My list may be very different from someone else’s. I know, for instance, that some people would rather spend hours on the phone than commit themselves to paper or email, while I’m just the opposite: I prefer a morning of email to an hour on the phone. But I hope you can apply my approach to your own unique stressors.

If you’re worried about freaking out, flipping out, burning out, stressing out during your first year of teaching, do some self-analysis. Make yourself a list of things most likely to bring on the tight neck and the elevated blood pressure. Be specific. Don’t just say “teaching.” Is it planning? Grading? Dealing with unruly students? Getting no response to your questions? Having to admit you don’t know the answer to a grammar question? Forgetting names? Getting blasted on evaluations by students who smiled throughout the semester?

I’ve worried about all those things and many more, at various points in my career. At the moment, it’s the last one that sometimes makes me wonder if I’m in the right business. But that’s a veteran’s worry, something that developed over years of evaluations, not something a new teacher should fret about.

The bits of advice that follow respond to my own worries and those of people I’ve worked with. I hope the specific advice proves useful
to you. But more important, I think, is for you to pinpoint your own stressors, to figure out as precisely as you can what’s keeping you awake at night. Then ask around until someone comes up with a solution or at least an approach that makes sense to you. As I argue throughout this book, the best therapy may be finding someone who can say, “Been there, done that. It’s a pain but you’ll survive.”

**FIND OUT WHAT YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE TEACHING**

We feel like frauds in part because we sometimes feel that we don’t know what we’re teaching. What is Freshman English or First-Year Composition? For that matter, what is “composition”? A huge array of activities takes place under those course titles—everything from old-fashioned critical analysis of literary texts to workshops in which the teacher disappears and students’ papers seize the spotlight. The size of that array disturbs some people, because it implies that students who take different sections of the same course within the same university, or who take courses by the same name in different universities, get radically different instruction and therefore practice radically different skills.

Because of that worry, no writing program tolerates every possible focus in its composition classes, and you need to find out where your program draws its boundaries. You can learn a lot from whatever material the program provides—texts, generic syllabi, goals, assignment descriptions. But try also to read the syllabi of veteran instructors. How do they break away from the course guidelines? When do they stick to the party line? Do teachers focus on writing as an art, with literary publication the long-term goal? Do they see the course as a game—follow these rules of genre, grammar, and citation and you’ll get an A? Or do they see it as a service course, preparing students to negotiate the demands of different kinds of academic discourse? Each is a legitimate focus, and a particular course may try to do all three at once, but usually the writing program will have a fairly consistent emphasis.

You almost certainly won’t have to create your own definition of the course, and at this point your main concern should be making sure you don’t break any unwritten rules. When you make up your syllabi or assignment descriptions, you’ll probably want to run them by a veteran or two, asking them to check for things that the program doesn’t condone.

As for “composition,” it’s a slippery term. As James D. Williams points out, some use “composition” and “writing” interchangeably, while for
others, writing “is a broad term that usually refers to fiction and journalism, whereas composition refers to academic writing, particularly the sort of writing that students produce in an English or composition class” (2). I’m a literalist about the word: I see “compose” in it and take that to mean that a “composition” class should focus on helping students to learn to compose texts. (A “rhetoric” class by contrast analyzes texts to determine why they’re successful.) Find out about the emphases and limitations on the kinds of texts students are supposed to compose—only “academic writing”? only nonfiction? only prose? only responses to literature?

Don’t lose sleep if you don’t know the answers to such questions before your first class meeting. It’s unlikely that the genre police will storm your classroom and arrest you for teaching limericks. But the more you can find out now, the less you’re likely to stress from discovering that you’re doing it differently from anyone else.

BE YOURSELF

Common as this admonishment is, it sounds pretty stupid. What choice do you have? But because we’ve all spent so many years watching other teachers, we all have memories or images of good, bad, and perhaps ideal teachers, and new teachers often get bombarded by advice about being anything but themselves: Be tough! Be nurturing! Be cool! Be warm! Be aloof! Be down to earth!

Faking it takes energy and adds stress. Who you really are will come out eventually—and that’s a good thing. Ultimately, we may be the most important and lasting lesson of our courses. Years from now, our advice about essay leads or paragraphing will have evaporated from our students’ brains, but students may still remember, may have internalized, the enthusiasm we bring to writing, our emphasis on discovery, our high standards and generosity. If they like us, they may like our subject, and that is, to a large extent, what it’s all about. The “you” that stands in front of a class may not be identical to the you that relaxes with friends over a beer. My teaching persona is more upbeat, tolerant, optimistic, and encouraging than the “at home” me. But that doesn’t mean the teaching me is “fake”; it’s just a slice of me in which certain traits take the stage and others hide in the wings.

“Being yourself” as a composition teacher is particularly difficult because we play so many roles. As Lad Tobin describes, in a day’s work for English 101, we may be asked to be—or feel we ought to be—performers, dinner party hosts, parents, preachers, facilitators, coaches, midwives,
drill sergeants, circus trainers, oracles, cheerleaders (82-87). Recognizing the roles you’re playing and how they may conflict can help you make more comfortable compromises. If you feel uneasy being the drill sergeant, maybe you should indulge your parental role more often and see how that feels.

Focused on “being ourselves,” how do we handle the model teachers in our heads? Think of what elements the great teachers in your past shared. A mental survey of my twenty-one years in school reveals that one characteristic links all the truly outstanding teachers—they all made it clear that they cared about each individual student and what each one wrote. In other words, they were human—generous humans. The other stuff—the intellectual (or perhaps literal) sleights of hand, the clever tying up of the day’s discussion as the bell rang, the ability to help us see new things in texts and our own writing and to discover ideas where we thought we had none—all were subservient to, and in some ways an outgrowth of, the simple desire to connect one-on-one. In time, you too will learn to juggle chainsaws in front of an audience; the crucial question now is, Do you care about your students? Perhaps at this second, you’re too nervous or too stressed to say, unequivocally, “yes.” But if you’re still not sure by the end of the year, you may want to reconsider your career direction.

Having the ideal teacher in your head has a positive side: you can ask yourself what your teacher would do in a situation you’re confronted with. (Or, as one of my students once detailed in a paper, you can determine how to act by doing the opposite of what your most hated teacher would do.) On the other hand, as Elizabeth Rankin shows in Seeing Yourself as a Teacher, comparing yourself to the model teacher can be debilitating and paralyzing. If, during your first semester of teaching, you hold the image of The World’s Best Teacher in front of you all the time, the ways in which you don’t measure up will be painfully obvious, and you may not last long enough to give yourself a chance to resemble that great teacher. You may admire the brilliant lecturer who could speak for an hour without notes or “ums,” but chances are you’re not going to become that person. And the star lecturer approach—which might have seemed so ideal in a literature class—would probably flop in composition anyway. I know I’ll never be as warm, learned, and patient as my grad school mentor, David Levin. But being Brock seems to work for most of my students, some of whom wouldn’t have appreciated David. As Donald C. Stewart says, “Other vocations are about doing; we are about being. That is why what we do is so important” (30).
Some new teachers fear being themselves in class because they want so much to be liked, and they fear students won’t like them unless they sand off the edges of their personalities and put on a smiley face. It may take them years to accept that, as Susan Hynds puts it, “good teachers are never liked by all students. They are often blamed by those who seek mediocrity” (161).

BE HUMAN

That is, when you’re faced with a difficult student issue, do the human thing, the humane thing, rather than follow the rules or play the role or keep the boundaries up. As Edward Corbett says, “Mercy is frequently a restorative virtue, . . . intransigence [is] . . . sometimes nothing more than unconscionable rigidity, and . . . a mere pat on the back can often be the impetus that impels one toward the finish line” (8). I’ll grieve with the student about the dead cat rather than point out that the paper says nothing and says it badly. Or I’ll give a student a break on the final grade so she can get into the nursing program, paying more attention to effort and improvement than output.

There are plenty of good reasons not to take this stance. Answering the desperate midnight student phone call may mean I don’t get any sleep that night. Becoming a student’s lovelife advisor may commit me to hours of emails. Many teachers legitimately decide they don’t have that kind of time and don’t want to play those kinds of roles. But I find that refusing to go beyond the official boundaries of my role creates more stress; I worry about the decision and about what I’ve turned into, and I’m never happy about it. I sleep better if I’ve been what I consider a good person.

You’ll be advised, “Be tough at first, then ease up slowly.” We certainly don’t want to break our own rules and throw out our deadlines in the first week. And if you can’t say “I’ll think about it,” being tough is probably a better policy than backing down, which could lead to a stampede of requests. Certain students—veteran high school bullies—seek out weaknesses and exploit them. But those same bullies, as well as other students with a strong sense of justice, will rebel against the arbitrary rules, unfairness, and pettiness that sometimes characterize the “tough” teacher. So my advice would be to abandon the tough mask as soon as possible and move instead toward being real and honest. In the long run, students like being taught by people, not rules.

It’s not an either/or choice but a balance, as Rankin puts it, of “care and distance” (13) of “struggling always to ‘make teaching personal’
without ‘taking it personally’” (39). “We must make it personal,” she con-
duces, “if we want our work to have meaning” (43).

DON’T IGNORE YOUR COMPLEX FEELINGS

Lad Tobin’s Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition
Class argues convincingly that the relationships among students and
between students and teacher can have a tremendous effect on students’
learning and that we need to understand ourselves and our own com-
plex motivations in order to treat our students as fairly and humanely as
possible. Tobin recommends that we “pay more careful attention to the
research and experience of psychotherapists” to understand ourselves and
our interactions with students (29). “By engaging in ongoing self-analysis,
by becoming more self-conscious about the source of our misreadings, by
recognizing that our unconscious associations are a significant part of a
writing course, we can become more creative readers and more effective
teachers” (39). I imagine that most of us resemble Tobin: “recognizing
and somehow naming the source of” our feelings helps us manage those
feelings (35). If you’re awake at the wrong hours of the night, stressing
about why your students don’t respond well to you, analyze your feelings
and see if admitting to some will dissipate them.

That’s the way I make tough grading calls: I let stress be my guide. If I
can’t decide on the B-minus or the C-plus, I’ll write one of the grades in
my book and pretend for a day or so that that’s the final grade and see if
it keeps returning to my consciousness like the ghost of the improperly
buried. Usually, the nagging voice represents an argument that deserves
more respect. For instance, Jackie would have had an A-minus for the class
if she hadn’t gotten a B for participation. But after I wrote the B-plus in
the book, the chiding voice kept pointing out that she had been silenced
by a dominating group of rude men, and I shouldn’t penalize her for my
own inability to control the class. So eventually I raised her grade.

DON’T CLING TO “THE WAY MY TEACHERS DID IT”

“We find there is a tendency for graduate students to hold tightly to [what
worked for them as learners], distorting information about teaching to fit
their personal visions of effective teachers” (Nyquist and Sprague 64).

“One of the central problems of both courses [the preservice course
on teaching writing and the teaching assistant seminar]: how to convince
new teachers that they cannot rely on their own educational experiences
as a guide for teaching all students” (Stygall 40).
Once on their own in a classroom, new teachers tend to forget much of what they’ve been taught as adults and instead replicate some of the ways—and some of the “facts”—they were taught. So they resurrect the five-paragraph essay or hypercorrect their students’ papers or spend much too long flogging a favorite story to death—all because one of their teachers did it that way.

Both writing students and writing teachers must learn by unlearning. What habits or approaches have you unconsciously absorbed as “the way it’s done”? Make a list of ideas or emphases that originated in your far past—are they nonsensical prohibitions like those listed in “Yes You May” (Appendix A)? Judgments about the relative value of writing and literature or of various genres? Models of how English teachers behave with students?

Dig especially into clashes between the voices of the present and those of the past. Those clashes create stress. Try to pinpoint why a new idea disturbs you and see if it violates some cherished principle. Then . . . the hard part . . . try to determine if the principle still holds. You’ll find that you’ll breathe much easier when you accept, despite the outrage of your seventh grade English teacher, that “cutting corners” with headings and bulleted lists makes a lot of sense.

David Smit concludes from work by Hillocks (1999) and Kennedy (1998) that “although English teachers may very well have been taught to teach writing in more flexible and open-ended ways, when push comes to shove, they resort to the same old rigid rules and conventions that have been the bane of the profession since the nineteenth century” (73). Your methods professor probably won’t be there to warn you about such backsliding. You need to monitor yourself, becoming more conscious of when and why something pedagogical bothers you.

GO AHEAD, LIKE YOUR STUDENTS . . . AND BELIEVE THEM

We shouldn’t need encouragement to like people we’re trying to help, but some institutional cultures dictate that teachers distance themselves from students. I don’t think you can be an effective teacher for long if you don’t like your students, and I see no need to create artificial detachment. You may discover, as I did, that while I wanted to throttle most of my classmates when I was an undergraduate, as a teacher I don’t often find my hands straying to a student’s throat. Students are much easier to like when you’re a teacher.

Peter Elbow did the world a favor in 1973 when he assured us that we don’t always have to play the critical, resistant, distanced “doubting” game
that we’ve been raised on, but can instead play the “believing” game; we can believe in and enter into the text we’re studying. More recently, inspired by Wendy Bishop, Elbow has written about the importance of liking our students. Read “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment,” if you need confirmation that your warm, perhaps unrealistically positive feelings about your students are pedagogically appropriate. Or read McLeod about self-fulfilling positive expectations and especially about the “golem effect” that negative expectations can have on student-teacher relationships (106-113). “The research on teacher empathy suggests that there is a robust positive correlation between high teacher empathy and student achievement” (115). So don’t worry if you don’t fit into the Gradgrind school of knuckle-rappers.

For me, liking my students extends to believing them. Unless I have a very good reason not to, I believe their stories about dying grandparents and the roommate borrowing the car with the laptop in it. I choose to believe them because I don’t want suspicion to warp our relationship and sap my energy. And when students understand that they can win the excuses game without even trying, they often resort to being honest.

USE YOUR IMAGINATION

I’ve already referred to one rather negative way to use your imagination—to dream up everything that could go wrong, so you won’t be unpleasantly surprised and may even be prepared to deal with the nightmares that come your way. Some people find it comforting, in any stressful situation, to imagine the worst that can happen, with the hope that the “worst” won’t really look so bad. Knowing that the worst isn’t likely to happen should relax us.

Whether or not you can find comfort in self-created nightmares, imagination may be your best teaching friend and stress-avoider. Our business is full of rules and standards, from due dates to grading rubrics to punctuation conventions. Of course, you need to remember the rules you’ve set up and those that have been created for you by your department or school. But in a stressful situation, thinking outside the box is likely to serve you much better than being able to recall the exact dimensions of the box. You have a “no late papers” policy, but what do you do about the student who works on the school crisis line and gets a suicide call just before class? How do you handle the student who broke her elbow the morning of the final? What happens when the LCD projector breaks and your plan to demonstrate PowerPoint for forty-five minutes goes down the drain?
No amount of worrying can prepare you for all such contingencies, and no one can train you to think imaginatively rather than panic. But I’m betting that you do have the ability, and perhaps the most comforting thing you learn during your first semesters is that you can think quickly and creatively in such situations. Things happen so rapidly during a teaching day that you’re probably not aware of how many decisions you make and how clever some of them are. Take the time to review each day, not to second-guess yourself but to convince yourself that you did it today, you made decisions and survived, so chances are you can do the same thing tomorrow.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Increasingly, high school and middle school English classrooms look like circuses or rec rooms, with posters, games, “centers” of various sorts, and, in rich schools, computers and audio-visual equipment everywhere. That’s wonderful, but I’m grateful that few people expect such extravagance at the college level. While we can make good use of virtually any pedagogical technology, almost everything about writing can be taught—and has been taught!—with nothing more stimulating than pencil and paper. I fear the widespread desire to spend money on computers rather than people has more to do with politicians’ warped priorities and coziness with computer makers than it does with any pedagogical logic.

Schools vary widely on how much technology they invest in and how much emphasis they put on students’ ability to use it. Obviously, if the course is supposed to familiarize students with certain computer functions, you’re going to have to learn those functions yourself. But if you feel no such pressure, you can reduce stress for the first few semesters by not worrying about all the things you could do. Get comfortable teaching with the basic tools first. Then gradually experiment with audio-visual-techno aids as the basics become old hat for you—and as both you and your students need new things to explore.

LEARN TO STALL

After extolling the virtues of spontaneous, creative decision-making, I may seem like a hypocrite to advocate asking for more time. But “let me think about it” should be your default answer to student questions that you haven’t thought through, requests for breaks and substitutions and special treatment and instant grades. I feel especially strongly on this last point; there’s nothing worse than skimming a paper and saying “probably a B-
plus” and then later realizing that you’d been trying to see all the strengths of the paper to encourage the student and now when you balance those with the weaknesses, you realize it barely creeps into C territory. If pressed for a grade on the spot, my standard response has become “at least a D”; after that, students are grateful to wait for some reconsideration.

Email has made the stall-for-time answer almost universally applicable. It used to be that the student had to wait until the next class, maybe the next week, for an answer. But now you can say, “I’ll email you as soon as I get home,” and not feel that you’re ruining the student’s weekend.

We’ve got to keep our promises, though. I try to write down some code that will remind me of the student and the request, and not wait for the student to bring up the issue again. I don’t want students to start thinking that my “I’ll think about it” means “forget about it.”

WORRY ABOUT IT LATER

Experience is unquestionably the best teacher, and we don’t learn its lessons unless we analyze the day’s triumphs and failures. But wait until you get home, take a shower, do your best to induce a state of optimism, so you’ll see your failures as opportunities for growth. If at ten a.m. you start thinking about the mistakes you made in your nine o’clock class, you’ll have a long day. Serious worriers benefit from setting up a weekly or nightly worry group with like-minded others to laugh away obsessions, perhaps even hold ritual burnings of bad evaluations or obnoxious emails.

CONNECT

That’s one of the beat-you-over-the-head themes of this book: connecting with others will keep you sane. Sharing the day’s disasters will almost certainly make you feel better about them and worry less about the next day. Of course, you need to find the right people to share with. Do you need the perhaps clueless empathy of other novices? Or the reassurance of a veteran? Sympathy or solution? It’s easy to get overwhelmed by others’ easy fixes for your insoluble problems. So I’d look for a good listener before anything else.

People who are (or have been recently) in your shoes can help make life easier for you in countless ways, but most novices need, first, someone to confirm the validity, the normalcy, of their feelings. Yes, it’s normal to feel that you might throw up before your class. Yes, it’s typical to feel crushed between the responsibility and commitment you give your job and the other responsibilities and commitments in your life—to being
a grad student, for instance. Yes, it’s okay—in fact, it’s just fine—to do a little victory dance after a class or conference that felt right.

Seek out the right people to talk to. Of course, you don’t have time to be social, but your psyche can’t afford to be isolated.

ABANDON “CORRECT” INTERPRETATIONS

There are correct answers in English class—to questions like “Who wrote The Turn of the Screw?” or “What’s the conventional punctuation for indicating that another independent clause is coming?” But I’m talking about literary interpretations. These days, with many of postmodernism’s insights now taken for granted, few theorists would argue that there is a single right answer to questions like “Why does Hamlet delay?” or “What’s the meaning of ‘Once More to the Lake’?” Yet my students report that many of their teachers still spend hours of class time pursuing the right (that is: “the teacher’s own”) reading, so I assume that many people reading this book feel some pressure to come up with a “correct” reading of anything they assign the class.

But take a load off your mind. Abandon the idea of a “right” or even a “best” way to interpret a given text. Forget discerning what the author intended. (See Chapter 6.) Work instead to elicit interesting, provocative, relevant readings, readings that capture your students’ imaginations and make them want to read more or write. If you’re teaching composition, after all, almost all the reading you assign should lead to writing; I’m suspicious of writing teachers who spend a lot of time on literary interpretation, teaching literature as literature. Give up the all-knowing expert role—it scares our students, and trying to live up to it would make anyone uptight. Model instead the curious and inquisitive reader who develops an hypothesis, checks it against the evidence, and delights when the hypothesis leads to new insights.

RESPOND SMART, NOT LONG

For many English teachers, the essence of stress is the paper Everest growing ever larger on their desk, waiting for response and/or grades. No one can make them magically go away. Even veterans who have been honing their skills for thirty years spend lonnnng hours whittling down that pile. But there are ways to make that process less onerous, some of them counter-intuitive.

Separate grading from responding. Ideally, we respond (however briefly) every time a student turns a paper in, but we grade only when it’s done
Avoiding Stress

. . . or when a student needs to know how done it is. Grading can be a relatively rapid process, especially when you’ve read the paper before. Responding is to help student writers identify consistent strengths and weaknesses and make the final paper better. Thus, everything you say to a student should pass the “Useful for revision” test, and if you find yourself writing a long comment on a paper that won’t be revised again, stop. (I admit I don’t always follow that advice. I do sometimes write long final comments—but they’re part of my ongoing dialogue with particularly interested and engaged students, ones I know will read the comments and make use of them.)

Don’t mark everything. Occasionally you’ll have a student—probably a future English major—who asks you to “mark it up.” Some good writers have consistently earned A’s yet seldom get the critical push they need to improve further. Marking every misplaced comma is a favor for such rare people.

But the average student gets overwhelmed quickly and probably won’t even look at a page with scores of careful editing marks. So the teacher picks one, two, possibly three things to critique and finds three or four examples in the paper. Even some students who say “Mark everything” don’t really mean it—they’re acting out of a sense of masochism or macho toughness, a feeling that English should be painful and discouraging. When you get that kind of request, question it.

Don’t get hung up on grammar and mechanics. They’re the easiest things to mark, but even if your comment points to other issues, if you mark mostly grammar, students will conclude that’s your main concern. I’m not saying ignore grammar. We have scores of clever ways to teach it. But bleeding on the student’s paper is not one of them.

Keep your comment short. You may have hungered for teachers’ comments when you were a student, but we have to remind ourselves constantly that we are not typical of students or writers. Never skimp on praise, of course—all writers need support (although, as my colleague Denice Turner points out, they need to earn it, the cult of self-esteem notwithstanding). But try to explain the two or three things you have marked, and perhaps hint at something you’ll want to cover in the future (“maybe on the next draft we can work on punctuation”), just to make sure the student doesn’t get the sense that “Done” is just down the road, and move on. Be certain, however, that you’re evenhanded with your response, not privileging one type of student or one sex above another—a common English-teacher blindness, as Elizabeth Birmingham points out (2000).
Engage. Students get frustrated when teachers seem to ignore the ideas in a paper and focus only on how successfully they’ve been conveyed. Students who take their papers seriously have done some important thinking about their subjects, and they want the teacher to acknowledge and engage with that thinking. So be sure to indicate to the writer that you understand and are interested in the ideas—summarize them, ask questions about them, extrapolate logical conclusions, ask for examples, make tentative connections, relate them to your own life and thinking. Without such a base in content, your comments will leave the student thinking that only surface issues and errors matter.

Develop shortcuts. You may feel too busy to do this at first, but take a breather at some point and ask yourself what you’ve been repeating often in your comments and how you could keep from saying it again. Some teachers create macros on their computers, so they can hit <alt>P and call up a paragraph on passive voice. Teachers who require a particular handbook have it at their side as they write comments, and can say simply “read 325-327 on passive voice.” Others give students a handout describing common problems and solutions. I do not encourage developing your own code where a marginal P indicates passive. We’re in the business of communication, and students shouldn’t need a translator to understand us.

If you develop a rubric for each assignment—a good idea—you may be able to use the rubric as a responding shortcut. Just circle the appropriate description of each of the paper’s features. Students who want to know specifically how those general descriptions apply can come talk to you.

You may find the “comment” feature in your word processing program useful, and may discover that you can save time by exchanging papers electronically with some students—especially if you’re teaching online. I find that doing anything electronically with students requires either that I take a tough “computer problems are your problems” stance or that I resign myself to spending extra time with the few individuals who can’t read my electronic comments or who use some bizarre program whose files I can’t open. Use your strengths and abilities, but don’t assume that your students have matching strengths.

Use peers. I don’t ask peers to grade papers or to look at someone else’s grammar, except under very controlled circumstances. But, working in groups either in class or on their own, peers can provide—“free”—much of the feedback that you’d want to give to student writers. You probably can’t just turn groups loose on each other’s papers; you need to give them some fairly specific instructions. My standard charge to peer
### Persuasion Scoring Standard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The paper links every assertion to evidence and uses a wide variety of sources and types of evidence.</td>
<td>The paper presents relevant facts and opinions and draws from a number of recent, credible sources.</td>
<td>Evidence is either missing, poorly connected to conclusions, drawn from only a few sources, or drawn from non-scholarly sources.</td>
<td>The paper lacks evidence or assertions or both; convincing only to National Enquirer subscribers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Argumentation | Convincing web of evidence, tight logic, and gracious acknowledgment of the opposition. | Argument makes sense, without huge leaps or gaps, and shows awareness of opposing views. | Main point is difficult to discern, connections between ideas are shaky, logical gaps and fallacies common. | The paper has no apparent meaning, stated or implied, and makes no attempt to be convincing. |

| Organization | Lead, end, order, transitions, and structure all support the purposes of the paper. | Structure may be a bit confusing, lead or end may be bland or repetitive, but the reader has little trouble following the flow of ideas. | The reader has to keep turning back to the previous page to try to connect ideas. The paper has little or no skeleton. | Paragraphs could be scrambled with no loss to the paper. Paper reads like a freewrite. |

| Style/Voice | A recognizable, consistent voice that engages the reader. May approach elegance. | Most sentences read well, and the paper has a very human sound or feel. | Wordiness, sentence problems, cliches, vagueness muffle the voice. | The writer is either trying to be someone he or she isn't, or isn't trying at all. |

| Technical Details | Grammar, citation form, mechanics flawless and conventional except when irregularities (like fragments) are used for special effects. | Some sloppiness, but generally technique is strong. | Frequent grammar, spelling, punctuation, and/or citation problems clutter the paper's surface. | Surface problems so frequent, they obscure meaning. |
reviewers: narrate for the writer the experience of reading the paper—what raised expectations in the reader’s mind, where did the reader get confused, which questions got answered and which didn’t? (See Chapter 7, “Orchestrating Peer-Response Activities,” in Roen for numerous suggestions about using peer groups productively.)

*Repeat after me: “Less is more.”* These suggestions about responding attempt to pry you away from a belief that’s very difficult for many of us to shake—that we cheat our students if we don’t put hours into reading, responding to, and fixing their papers. I still have that impulse, and when I’m working with a motivated, serious writer, I sometimes write pages of feedback, ranging from my own ideas and experiences related to the topic, to suggestions for further reading, to admonishments about bad habits. But for the average student, anything more than a paragraph or two of comments and half a dozen marks on the page will be overkill. Any amateur can trash a First-Year English paper. What takes expertise is finding the key elements in the paper and creating a short *constructive* response to them.

**GET TECHNOLOGY ON YOUR SIDE**

I’m at heart a Luddite, suspicious that any new technology benefits only those who profit from its sale. Unless you’re already a techno-wiz, one of the greatest mistakes you could make would be to try to march your first classes to the high-tech vanguard. Get the basics of classroom management down before you venture into hypertext.

That said, technology can sometimes save time without your having to invest weeks in learning new programs and training students to use them. Email is the most obvious example. It allows us to send out instructions over the weekend with the hope that a fair number of students will actually read them; to confront individual students soon after a class incident, but without the tension of a face-to-face encounter; to use class time most productively, turning what might formerly have been a lecture into a whole-class email. Be careful, though, to set limits; you don’t want to be answering “What did I miss in class yesterday?” emails.

During the semester when we invaded Iraq, I hit upon another use of email that helped me keep my sanity without coopting class time to rant about non-class issues. I’m too political and too opinionated to shut up when my country does something I consider abominable, but simply bringing up the subject and/or stating my opinion in class doesn’t go over well with my conservative students, many of whom consider it unpatriotic to question our political leaders.
Avoiding Stress

Figure 8

Feedback Guidelines and Questions

You can organize and write your response in any way you like, but be specific whenever possible. Enjoy the experience of communicating to someone who cares about something that matters. And somewhere in your response try to do the following.

1. Write a narrative or summary of your impressions of the piece.
   What happens in this paper? What is it trying to do? What are your general impressions of the voice of the piece and the character of the author? At this point, don’t make any judgments or even try to discern a point. You might think of this as the equivalent of an active listener’s response: “What I hear you saying is . . .” I often start off my response to a poem with something like “My reading of this is . . .” (Possible beginning of one reader’s impressions of “The Inheritance of Tools”: “In the first paragraph you connect pain, tools, and your father right away. I thought maybe the paper was going to be about anger at your father. But then in the next couple of paragraphs, you’re very respectful to him . . .”)

2. Discuss how the piece connects to your life. Does it raise any questions that might be interesting for you to pursue, or offer any answers to your own questions?

3. Provide your own answer to the “So what?” question. What is the paper’s point, purpose, reason for being? What takes it beyond being just an exercise or just an anecdote or just a description? Don’t give up easily on this question. If at first you see no point, dig, stretch, speculate. Your “wild guess” tells the author a lot about the impression the piece is making.

4. What works? What makes you laugh or surprises you or provides you with useful information? What is concise or insightful, well-phrased or well-thought? What grabs you or moves you or surprises you or makes you stop to think? Don’t skimp on this one; it may be the most important. Writers revise and grow by building on their strengths.

5. What might the author add or expand in order to answer questions that the paper has raised? What do you need to hear more about?

6. What sections seem less purposeful than others? Be careful how you phrase this. Just because you don’t see the point in a paragraph
doesn’t mean that the paragraph is “pointless.” Saying honestly “I don’t get it” gives a clear but not a harsh message to the author.

7. What confused you? What parts did you have to read twice? Don’t be satisfied with saying “Oh, I figured it out.” If you stumbled in a certain spot, other readers will too, and the author needs to know that.

8. (Optional and not usually recommended.) Make specific suggestions about changes—offer an alternative title or phrase, or perhaps a source the author might consult. Probably the best way to handle this step is to make notes for yourself about specific things on a draft that you might want to change, then when you get together, ask the author how much detailed critique she or he wants to hear, and what kinds of comments would be most helpful.

So I began sending out emails with the re: line, “War—read only if interested.” A student who had never said anything political in class turned out to be an excellent advocate for the administration position, and the two of us carried on a running conversation for most of the semester, with many students reading the exchange, and a few others contributing at times. Being able to rant made me feel somewhat less frustrated about the situation, and the conservative student felt that I was listening and responding to his ideas, which kept him from dismissing me as a knee-jerk liberal.

Be on the lookout for ways you might similarly use technology to save yourself time and hassle. At my school, creating a class website takes one request; customizing it takes about five minutes. But never ignore the time it will take you to learn a new system. Do the cost/benefit analysis, assume it will take you twice as long as anyone estimates, and unless someone insists that your class should have a website, don’t bother with it until you can see how it will save you time. I’ve found the class website particularly helpful when I have to be absent—students can carry on a virtual discussion or respond to posted materials—or when I want students to be sharing things like lesson plans without the expense of making copies for everyone. (See Moran, “Technology and the Teaching of Writing.”)

BRING EXTRA

Running out of things to do in class may occasionally please your students, but it isn’t very professional, and it’s not likely to leave you feeling good about the day. There’s no point in worrying about it when the solution is so simple: always be ready with an activity or two that you
don’t think you’re going to need. The best activities for such purposes don’t require handouts or preparation and aren’t tied to specific issues in the class. No matter what you worked on in the planned part of the class, if you have an extra ten minutes, you can have the class freewrite or brainstorm or do small-group idea exchanges about the preceding work or the upcoming assignment. Once you’ve taught for a few semesters, you won’t need consciously to plan such activities; you’ll be doing them enough already so you can add one more without hesitation. But at the beginning, it’s probably smart to note on your lesson plan something like, “extra time: list requirements for formal report.” Having it there may prevent that jolt of panic when the half-hour activity suddenly ends in fifteen minutes.

LEARN THE PRACTICAL DETAILS

Do your homework on your department.

- What are the photocopying arrangements?
- Is there likely to be a line at the machine when you need to run off a handout before class?
- Where can you go if the machine breaks?
- Where are the bathrooms, the drinking fountains, the nearest coffee?
- Who can help you replace the overhead projector bulb or adjudicate if another class claims your room and time?
- Are sweaters required in certain classrooms, short sleeves in others?
- Who traditionally controls the time between the official end of one class and the official start of the next?
- How do you get a TV and vcr for a classroom that doesn’t have them?
- Who chooses and orders books?
- Are students likely to have the class books on the first day?
- How does the add/drop system work? (This can be a major issue; you don’t want to add students to your list, thinking you have control, and then find that in fact a central computer rules the class list.)
• When is the paycheck supposed to come, and how can you make sure that it does?

Well before the first class, be sure to check out the rooms you’ve been assigned. If a room is unworkable, you may be able to get your class moved out of it. For me, an acceptable room needs two things: enough moveable chairs and a blackboard or whiteboard placed where everyone can see it. You may not yet have your own list of minimum classroom requirements, but you can imaginatively go through your day’s activities.

Where will you sit and stand?
What will you write on?
Are there enough chairs?
Can all the chairs see you and the board?
Can they be moved for group work?
Will you need to bring your own markers, erasers, or chalk?
Are there electrical outlets?
If you like to show slides, are there ways to darken the windows?

Do the location, layout, or features of the room offer any particular advantages? (For instance, some terrible classrooms adjoin comfortable lounges that may be unused during your class time. Or the room may have high-tech features that you’d never dream of “needing,” but since they’re there, you might find a use for them.)

Again, some pre-semester paranoia can lead to reduced first-day stress. I try to walk through the first day mentally, thinking about precisely what I plan to do when, what materials I will need, and what could go wrong. At least a day or two before the first class, I scope out any new building or classroom to which I’m assigned. Does the door lock? If so, who can open it? Will I have to keep my music turned down low because of an office next door?

Your office (desk, cubicle, cubbyhole, broom closet) deserves some advanced scrutiny too, and again, imagination is your best ally. Is the space big enough and private enough so you’ll feel comfortable meeting students, reading papers, writing there? Or should you check out the tables in the student union? If you have a finite number of office mates (that is, you’re not in a ghetto of a dozen graduate instructors), contact those mates as soon as possible, find out what their schedules are, when if ever you’ll have the office to yourself, what claims they’ve made on times, desks, bookshelves.

Negotiation with office mates can be a tricky business and is not something to leave to the frantic first day. Since compromise will almost certainly be required, determine before the negotiations what’s most
important to you—a private desk (could you stand someone else’s junk on “your” desk?), bookshelf or file space, control over decorations, the best furniture or the best position? Don’t assume that everyone will vie for the same things; people are surprisingly diverse in their office requirements. I’d be willing to give up a lot in order to start off on the right foot with an office mate. If you’re flexible and lucky, your office mate will be a key to your sanity, helping you with every other issue in this chapter.

LEARN THE PECKING ORDER

Unless you’re in an unusual institution, the composition program is not the most high-status academic unit on campus; the administration probably thinks about it only when parents complain that their kids can’t get into the general education writing classes. So you don’t normally need to worry about interference from outside your building.

But within your building, you need to know who has what kind of power, both nominal and real. Control over the writing program may be spread among many different people: the department’s chair, other administrators, and executive secretary; the writing program’s own administrator(s); departmental committees that deal with composition issues; and veteran writing teachers. In some English departments, tenure-track faculty would prefer not to expend any energy on composition and leave most decisions to the people in the trenches, the veteran instructors. (Be careful not to catch a condescending attitude toward composition; even if you’re headed for a lit Ph.D. or publication in *The New Yorker*, you need to respect the work you’re doing or both you and your students will suffer.) Other English departments recognize that the composition program justifies the department’s existence, and they take writing decisions as seriously as they would those of lit faculty.

You may deal with one person to get an office, another to resolve grade disputes, another to determine your salary, another if you have teaching questions. So who’s “in charge”? Perhaps most importantly, who makes decisions about future hiring? Most administrators are used to new instructors making impolitic mistakes as they learn the ropes at a new school, but it pays to be as savvy as possible as soon as possible. And if the major players don’t get along, as is common, you’re smart to learn quickly what the issues are, who can’t stand whom, and how the struggle affects comp teachers. Veterans and secretaries can help you.

COME TO YOUR OWN TERMS WITH TIME

No one ever has enough of it, students often want more of yours, and most people need plenty of it to get over their first-year fears and begin to
see how they’re building a career. Any advice about time sounds obvious, too easy, and therefore not helpful. Two warnings:

1. The time crunch doesn’t get any better—you’ll get more efficient at your teaching tasks, but you’ll also start spending time on committees or job applications or something endless and frustrating.

2. Other people’s time management techniques may not work for you. You can pick up professional tips, like marking up and commenting on only one or two things in each student paper, because that saves time and makes pedagogical sense. But in terms of how you arrange your life, what periods you reserve for yourself and how you get everything done that needs to get done, you will evolve a system over time that is as unique to you, and as much a product of your family, background, and experiences, as your eating habits. Some people don’t work after dinner; some keep weekends free. Some appear never to sleep. Some procrastinate and then do marathon grading sessions. I tend to do everything the moment I get it and to take off at least half a day every week—but I didn’t reach that resolve until I was in my forties. One problem is that our work has no natural limit—we could always dig up a little more background information about tomorrow’s reading or spend another hour on that essay we promised to finish a month ago.

Working nonstop is not the key—then you’ll just burn out or become so disgruntled that you’ll quit. And doing just enough to get by doesn’t work either—you’ll never give yourself a chance to become really invested in the work. People can change, or at least modify, their time habits, but it takes a lot of willpower and effort. For starters, when you feel you’re taking on a mountain of work larger than you ever have before, look back at the time habits of the past and ask yourself how they can accommodate this new influx.

That said, most successful people I know are list makers, and all good teachers develop their own lesson planning approach into something that’s flexible and thorough. If I were about to start my first year of teaching, I’d do what I will do starting my thirtieth: make lists of everything.

- things to do in the first class
- things to bring to the first class
- classroom features to check out before the first class
• copies to make before the first day
• nonschool things I need to check on

USE CONFERENCES

It may seem ironic—or cynical—to suggest, right after a section on time management, that you engage in what is surely the most time-consuming way to teach—conferences, one-to-one meetings with students. You can meet with more than one student at once and conduct productive conferences in five or ten minutes rather than half an hour, but if you have fifty students, even a ten-minute conference with each will take nine hours and leave you reeling.

So you need to see conferences as an investment. Much has been written about conferences—how to conduct them, their benefits for student writers—and after you’ve had a few yourself, you’ll see why most writing teachers consider them “so rewarding” (Corbett 6), the ultimate tool for teaching writing. But my concern here is, what’s in it for you? Why should you hold conferences if your program doesn’t require them?

1. It makes us feel efficacious: we’re doing something valuable. In class, we’re seldom sure we’re getting through, but after a conference, you can see on a student’s face the relief at finally having found a focus for a paper or finally having learned the difference between a colon and a semicolon. Difficult conferences make us want to tear our hair, but you’ll almost certainly leave a string of conferences feeling, “I got somewhere today.”

2. It’s the best way to learn students’ names, identities, and interests. Once I can connect a face, a name, and a paper, I usually remember the student’s name for the rest of the semester. And after I’ve met all the students once in my office, the class has a palpably different feel, more relaxed and friendly.

3. It can head off behavioral problems. Once you’ve met individually with a student and talked a bit about the student’s musical interests or dictatorial history professor, the student has a harder time seeing you as anonymous “teacher,” butt of backrow snickers. That’s why I put conferences in the chapter about stress—I think using conferences trades time for stress reduction. Just having a ten minute conference the first week with each student so impresses some students that they note it on the evaluation form fourteen weeks later.
4. It makes our classes better. When you know you’re soon going to meet all your students individually, you don’t have to take class time to try to deal with their individual grammar foibles. Reading students’ papers and talking about them in conference gives you a good idea of students’ common problems, knowledge that can determine your class emphasis.

5. We learn a lot from conferences. I find that I monitor myself more closely in conference than in class, and almost every day of conferences leaves me making a resolution to follow my own advice, do the things I’ve been telling students all morning. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Conferences teach us everything from how to revise tangled sentences—our students’ and our own—to how to praise and critique in the same breath.

So how do you conduct conferences? Much has been written to answer that question, too. Don Murray’s “The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference” is perhaps the most often-cited piece on the subject. Rebecca Rule’s chapter in *Nuts and Bolts* presents some of the refinements she worked out in the every-week, every-student system I cut my teeth on at UNH. Kate Freeland’s chapter in *Practice in Context* records her conversion from “teacher-centered conferences” to “collaborative” ones.

Here are a few quick tips:

- The student should talk first, explaining what works and what doesn’t, ideally suggesting what should happen next. As much as possible, we listen.

- You’ll save a lot of time if you use “cold” conferences: the student arrives with a draft, you read it while the student waits, and then you discuss it. That system may seem scary at first, but if you gather papers beforehand, read them on your own, and start thinking about or writing down how to approach them, the papers will take over your life.

- Schedule conferences for ten or fifteen minutes. That gives you enough time to read a five- or six-page paper and discuss two or three key elements in it. Five-minute conferences are possible, especially in class, but I hate feeling rushed all the time. Many students would love twenty- to thirty-minute conferences, but just do the math to figure out how much of your week that would absorb.

- Though even the laziest students generally appreciate the value of conferences, few students will come if you just say “I’ll be there.”
You need to require the conferences. I always pass around a signup sheet to get students committed, and I treat missed conferences as missed classes.

Lad Tobin reminds us that “Like writing, the writing conference is a process—not static, not a noun, not a thing, but rather dynamic, organic. It changes with each student and each teacher and each second” (43). It’s certainly valuable to have some stock questions ready—“What surprised you when you were writing? What was most fun? Is there anything you want to build or expand on?” But there’s always an element of spontaneity in conferences, and no two are exactly alike. That’s what makes them so interesting.

ACCEPT THAT YOU’RE EVOLVING

Jody D. Nyquist and Jo Sprague argue that most teaching assistants (TAs) evolve developmentally in reasonably predictable ways; although they focus on TAs, the evolution they describe no doubt occurs, perhaps at different rates, for many non-tenure-track teachers taking on new positions. (See Figure 9, which reproduces their figure 4.1, p. 67.) They worry that TAs “run the risk of freezing . . . prematurely” if they become convinced that they deserve certain labels or feel they have an immutable teaching style (61).

Movement through [the steps in the model, from “Senior Learner” to “Colleague-in-Training” to “Junior Colleague”] is a cumulative process. Even if it were possible, it would not be desirable to skip steps in a developmental process because each phase plays an essential role. The behaviors and attitudes of the novice phase are not to be shed, but transformed as growth continues. (77)

So if you find yourself feeling guilty for challenging your supervisor for the first time, or for pulling back from your students because your first case of plagiarism makes you so angry, don’t worry. You may have to experience such feelings on your road to being a happy, effective, confident writing teacher. You may even go through a period when your increased interest and confidence in your scholarly studies means that your “teaching effectiveness . . . may temporarily seem to regress . . . as [you] lose sight of what will be meaningful to beginning students” (70). At the least, Nyquist & Sprague’s table might form the basis of an apology to supervisors or students: “I must be in a developmental transition.”
GET YOUR OWN ATTITUDE

It’s a common experience for comp teachers—you teach two good classes; your students are excited and obviously learning; they appreciate how much you know and how much effort you put into helping them; you wander back to your building exhausted but feeling that maybe it is all worthwhile . . . and then the real world intrudes. The department chair ignores you in the hall; you get turned down for a parking permit because the computer can’t make sense of your in-between status; you overhear a couple of literature professors saying they’d rather lay asphalt than teach comp. And suddenly you feel very small.

It doesn’t help that much of what we hear about our jobs is clichéd and clueless—non-academics griping that we’re overpaid because we only work a few hours per week and no one knows how to spell anymore anyway, professors outside English assuming that anyone who can write can teach writing, people within English implying that in the hierarchy of status and value within our discipline, we’re on the bottom.
Worse, perhaps, few people appreciate the intrinsic benefits of the job that we must value to stay sane: the interactions with young people, the insights into their lives and minds, the thrill of seeing some tangible improvement, the in-the-trenches camaraderie of the comp instructor ghetto.

In part because the world around us finds it hard to imagine why we do what we do, we often internalize those doubts. We have trouble believing that what we do is meaningful or has any effect. We’re not sure we’re cut out for the job, even if we do believe in it. We may buy into the widely accepted notion that teaching composition is a transitional, temporary job, something to keep food on the table while we move onto something better, presumably involving literature.

A main goal of this book and my earlier *Composition Instructor’s Survival Guide* is to help teachers combat such feelings, answer such interrogations, feel good about what they do. You may find it difficult at first to get the veterans around you to talk about such things, answer such questions, be positive about their experiences. It’s part of the ethos of many writing programs to complain, to emphasize the difficulties. And yet people come back year after year. Talk to one of those always-returning vets alone; get them to tell you why they keep coming back. And if you watch them interact with administrators, lit people, “real” people, you may see that they have a comp trenches attitude, and they genuflect to nobody.

If this is your first job with full responsibility, you might want to do some thinking about the whole issue of stress—what does it mean to you, and how can you differentiate it from excitement, enthusiasm, being “psyched”? It’s possible to read the adrenaline rush that comes with the first day of a new class as stressful nerves or as part of the excitement that makes teachers come back each fall. Jobs with no stress at all may become boring. So I end where I began this chapter—know yourself and what bothers you. I’m not trying to keep your heartbeat slow all semester, but to avoid the migraines or whatever body symptom tells you, “this is too much.”