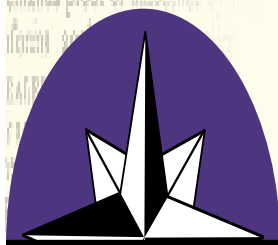


A Unified Theory for Assessment of Writing

By: Dr. Norman Carey



GradeMark is Turnitin's digital markup system that gives instructors the ability to edit and grade papers completely online. GradeMark makes it easier than ever to give students the valuable critical feedback so essential for building quality writing skills.

When the email went out calling for contributions to the Technology Newsletter, I underwent an epiphany that, without too much exaggeration, might be compared to that of St. Paul on the road to Damascus: Paul (then Saul) is “. . . on his way to Damascus to annihilate the Christian community there, is struck blind by a brilliant light and hears the voice of Christ saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Conversion_of_Saint_Paul) Why, I asked myself, have we been having so much difficulty in our department—and for so long—establishing a uniform and consistent system for assessing student writing? I believe that this question probably extends beyond the walls of the English building and reverberates across the school's curriculum. We established what we had hoped was a clear standard for grading papers; we went from the traditional “essay” assignment to smaller pieces of writing, using the “SPA” (statement, proof, analysis) format for paragraphs that we hoped would prove less intimidating; we sat down and corrected student writing together; we came up with a menu of the different kinds of writing we could have the students do. Finally, we created rubrics for each of these different modes of discourse. In spite of all this, students have to deal with different expectations, different definitions—even different terminology—in their travels from one teacher to another. It was while in the depths of this pedagogical abyss that I saw the light. It came in the form of a visit to the turnitin.com website.

Many of us have used turnitin.com as a means of preventing and occasionally detecting plagiarism. I knew that the site has expanded considerably and now includes a “Grademark” feature that allows a teacher to correct student writing online. I had used the Grademark program and was moderately satisfied with the features. What I did not know, and discovered only this last week, is that turnitin has completely revamped the Grademark program. What had been a reasonably healthy assessment tool is now a turbo-charged, rip-roaring monster truck of a program that provides the answer to all our problems (and all of our prayers) in the English Department. It is my contention that this site should be used by every teacher who requires student writing at Cushing Academy, and I will be mandating its use by all English teachers next year.

Why the evangelistic zeal, you may ask? Here is what the program does:

1. First and most obviously, the site has made national headlines because of its usefulness as a deterrent to plagiarism. But we all knew that.
2. Once a student's writing is submitted, the Grademark feature allows the teacher to highlight, underline, type comments, and strike through portions of text that need to be expunged. After underlining or highlighting a piece of text, a teacher can then insert a comment that, when the student places his or her cursor over what is highlighted, will show a bubble with the comment. That too, though, had been available in the first version of Grademark.

A Unified Theory for Assessment of Writing (Continued)

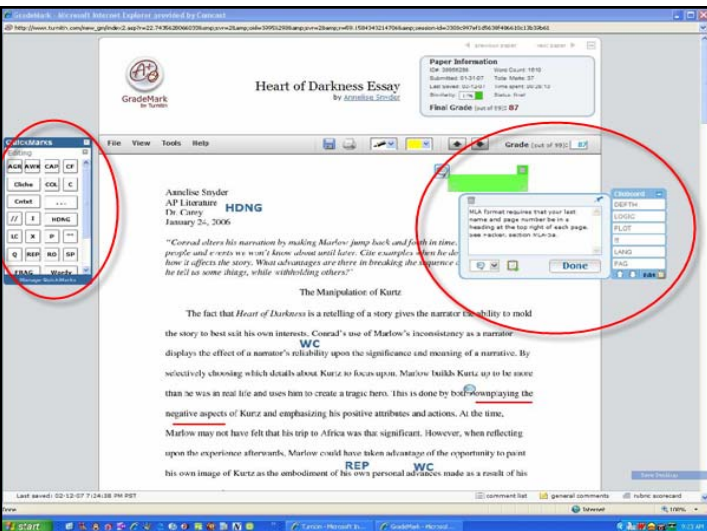


Image 1: The “image 1” screen shows a student’s essay that has been marked. The “Quickmark” palette is to the left of the text and another more content-oriented palette in a pop-up window to the right.

3. Here comes the good stuff: the program now allows us to create a “quickmark” library of abbreviations that we use most often in going through students’ work. That library of abbreviations can then be brought to the desktop and serve as a palette during the grading of a paper. I simply click on “Awk,” (Awkward) on my palette, for example, then click above the text where I want that abbreviation to show up. Done. As with the typed comments, a bubble appears that lets the student know what’s wrong, as well as providing a link to the section in Diana Hacker’s *Manual for Writers* where discussion of this problem can be found. I am using Hacker’s abbreviations and will ask everyone else in my department to do the same. A student will no longer see different abbreviations for the same errors. Also, I plan to work in assignments involving the use of the *Manual* to identify and correct the errors I have caught. Every student in the school is supposed to

have a copy of this incredibly thorough and useful manual, and it is high time that they (and we) begin using it. The consistency that we were desperately trying to establish is now at our fingertips with this technology. Why would one not want to use it?

4. At the bottom of the screen are two new tools as well: one a pop-up window for general comments on the paper, another with a “rubric scorecard” that grades the paper automatically once the instructor checks the appropriate boxes. The grade is then automatically imported into a writing grade book that can then serve as a portfolio of all the student’s written work. It takes some time to create the rubric, but once entered, it is available for all future papers submitted. Below “image 2” is a screen showing the scorecard:



Image 2: This is an image showing the scorecard based upon the rubric.

Everything that I had hoped we would be able to do to establish a consistent, thorough, and student-friendly means of assessment is now available through the [Grademark](http://www.turnitin.com/static/grademark.html) program. I am so excited by the possibilities and the power of this new tool that, like the converted Paul, I would gladly spread the word to those teachers interested in learning more about this truly exceptional and—let me say it—life-altering technology. The question is not why we should use [Grade-mark](http://www.turnitin.com/static/grademark.html) but, in light of what it can do for student writing in every discipline, why would we not?

<http://www.turnitin.com/static/grademark.html>