



# Teaching Public Relations

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## Contest Makes Teaching AP Style Fun and Easy

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**D**o you sometimes feel that you spend more time writing comments on student papers than your students spend reading them?

Is it difficult for you to convince them that grammar, spelling and punctuation matter?

Do you require your students to buy *The Associated Press Stylebook*, and realize at the end of the semester that they've never opened it?

If your answers are "yes, yes, and yes," don't despair. Several years ago, my answers were the same. Then I adopted a technique which has saved me a tremendous amount of grading time while improving my students' writing. It makes a contest of using AP style.

The contest is easy, promotes healthy competition and utilizes peer teaching and team learning. Research (Michaelson, 1991) has noted several advantages of team learning for students and teachers.

For students, team learning provides a social support base that is especially helpful for disadvantaged students. It provides similar problems as those students will encounter on the job. What they learn from the experience is how to work with colleagues and task group members more effectively and productively.

Teachers also benefit from team learning because empowering teams gives students more of the responsibility for learning, making teaching easier and more fun.

Team learning requires that you divide your students into teams at the beginning of the semester. It's best to have them write a few paragraphs about their past experiences with writing and working in groups. From their writings, you can quickly determine the best writers in the class. Distribute them across the groups. Then distribute those who note some team leadership experience or skill. The idea is to get at least one good writer and one leader in each team. Then distribute the others so that your groups are not homogeneous.

Don't be tempted to let students voluntarily group themselves. Researchers (Feichtner & Davis, 1984) have found that teacher-selected groups are more productive and satisfying to students than are student selected groups. This is partially because students select friends and those with similar interests and

abilities. Yet, the most productive groups are composed of different types of students playing different roles.

According to the same researchers, an average group size of five is best. I prefer groups of three to five. Once formed the groups should remain together throughout the course so that they can get to know each other and form a team. According to Michaelson (1991), the permanence of groups is important to establish group influence for motivating attendance, handling discipline problems, and pulling in those students who had rather work alone. Teams should be constant throughout the contest.

I allow my students to write their assignments out of class. I know many teachers do not allow this, fearing that the work will not be completely their students' own. In newswriting classes, teachers want students to get used to writing under deadlines. Forcing them to compose an article during a class period prepares them for deadline pressure.

However, public relations practitioners generally have more time to compose their articles. I believe the time provided for out-of-class writing assignments is more representative of the time provided to practitioners. Furthermore, I don't mind if students confer with and get suggestions from others when writing. This too, I believe, better mimics practitioners' work, and I'm generally familiar enough with each student's style to detect if the writing is not theirs.

Professors who have their students do all of their writing in class may not have time for the contest because its major weakness is the class time that it requires. I devote the entire class period to the contest on days that I hand papers back. Proofing before handing in papers requires another quarter of one class period. Yet, I believe this class time is well spent because the contest involves students in active learning. It motivates them to learn and to apply that learning to their writing.

Here is how the contest works. Before students hand in their papers, teams meet for about 15 minutes. Team members proofread for one another. When I grade, I look specifically for the principles I've taught for that writing assignment. I do not correct spelling, punctuation, or AP style mistakes. Most mistakes, I ignore. Those that really glare at me, I circle.

When I hand the papers back, the teams meet briefly to correct anything that I've circled and to catch mistakes they originally missed. I allow them between five and ten minutes depending on the number in the teams. Then they have to exchange papers with another team.

I keep records of which teams compete against which. Then I switch them around for each writing assignment. If you have an even number of groups, you can let them check each other's papers. For instance, groups one and two, groups three and four, and groups five and six will compete by proofreading each other's papers for the first writing assignment. The next time, teams six and one, teams two and three, and teams four and five will compete. When you have an odd number of teams, keeping the competition moving among teams is more difficult. I generally keep records by noting in my grade book "team one graded for team two, team two graded for team three," etc.

After the teams have proofread their own papers, they give them to members of the competing team. That team then proofreads the papers trying to find mistakes. I usually allow between 20 and 30 minutes for this step. Then I return the papers to their writers, whose teams have another five to ten minutes to appeal any noted mistakes.

*The Associated Press Stylebook* decides all appeals. The team alleging and the team appealing the mistake must find support in the stylebook and note the page number. Most of the time, the students reach an understanding. I intervene only when the stylebook appears to contradict itself, and then I do so

by guiding the student's search through the stylebook.

Having to provide the page number in the stylebook motivates students to look up potential mistakes. Tracking down the correct AP style motivates them to read the stylebook and to learn how to use it. In the process, they learn more than just the answer to their specific questions.

When the appeals are finished, I tally points. Each team gets a positive number for the mistakes its members find on the other team members' papers. Each team gets a negative number for the mistakes found on its members' papers. The difference is each team's score for that assignment. I write these scores on the board in the form of a table:

<b>Team</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Total</b>
1	15	6	+9
2	6	15	-9
3	11	3	+8
4	3	11	+8
5	2	6	-4
6	6	2	+4

Then I record the total score for each team in my grade book. The score accumulates with each writing assignment. At the end of the semester, the class goes for pizza together. The team with the most positive points doesn't pay. The rest of the class, including me, divides the bill.

It's surprising how much competition for free pizza can motivate students. Maybe it's not the free pizza but the peer pressure that motivates them. Whatever, it works.

Students who begin the semester making many mistakes feel the peer pressure to proofread better. Soon they make fewer mistakes. Students who make few mistakes from the beginning become role models for the others. They get lots of positive feedback and attention which motivates them to become even better proofreaders.

With each writing assignment, students make fewer grammar, spelling, punctuation, and AP style mistakes, and they learn more from those mistakes. Meanwhile, I'm relieved from marking every possible mistake on students' papers and can concentrate on grading how well they demonstrate the principles taught for that assignment.

During the many years that I have used the contest, only one student has complained about the time and effort devoted to the contest not counting toward a grade. The rest get caught up in the competitive fervor and the peer interaction.

I've never conducted an experimental study to statistically test differences in the amount of AP style my students learn compared to those whose teachers grade based on AP style or those whose teachers give AP style exams. Yet I know my students proofread better since I started using this contest than they did before.

But even if there were no differences in learning, I would still use the contest because it's easier for me and more fun for everyone.

## References

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