

Managing Feedback on Student Writing

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A few challenges in grading student writing

Challenge 1: We can't assess writing with a scantron as there is no universally agreed upon style of good writing. Instead, the quality of a work of writing is determined by individual taste, situation and community taste (professional or disciplinary expectations).

Challenge 2: Unlike their professors who have been *indoctrinated* into a disciplinary community, students often have a limited grasp of disciplinary situations and disciplinary communities. As a result they *invent the university* every time they write because the context for writing is always hypothetical.

Challenge 3: Though we may search endlessly for it, there is no such thing as an ideal/model writing sample because all writing is situational, and also always a work in progress. This means that the writing we grade is never *final*, only a *draft*.

Challenge 4: There is a limit to how much commentary and correction on a single draft of student writing will improve their overall writing ability because improvement in writing requires situational awareness, time immersed in the language of a community, and opportunity for revision of previous work.

Implications of these challenges:

An analogy to sport: expecting students to learn to write by correcting every error we see in their work would be like expecting an athlete to learn to pitch by detailing every stance, posture, movement, or action in “the perfect pitch.” This approach is seldom successful. Instead, effective writers are more commonly built by sustained and strategic commentary on their writing as they progress through the learning of their craft.

The implications of the sporting analogy to the teaching of writing:

- As much as you may want to, you can't comment on *everything* that's wrong/not working in a student draft.
- Not commenting on some error is not condoning that error; rather, it's being strategic about student learning.
- Writing instructors have to distinguish among:
 - Personal taste: "I prefer verbose terse active voice phrases in writing."
 - Community/disciplinary taste: "The field the student is entering avoids first-person"
 - Situational "rules" for writing: "Newspaper articles are inappropriate sources in this paper"
- We all have to acknowledge that our grasp of language was many, many, years in the making; likewise, our students have an enormous deal of ground to cover between freshman year and where we imagine them to be in terms of language abilities after graduation.
- Lest we forget, we all make writing errors despite our advanced degrees.

Part I: When and How to Comment on Grammar And Mechanics



How do we strategize what to comment on and what to save for later in student drafts?

Consider a **hierarchy of concerns**. A rule of thumb is that higher order concerns must be addressed before writers can address lower order concerns. For example, there's little point correcting grammar if the thesis, argument, and organization are all fundamentally flawed.

1. Purpose: Thesis, Argument, Audience
2. Organization
3. Development & Support
4. Style & Voice
5. Paragraphs
6. Sentences
7. Grammar
8. Punctuation
9. Mechanics
10. Word choice

Hierarchy of Concerns

Handled well in commentary on a draft.

Purpose: Thesis/Assignment/Audience

Organization

Development & Support

Style & Voice

Paragraphs

Sentences

Grammar

Punctuation

Mechanics

Words

Difficult to handle in draft commentary, better handled in class workshops, or one-on-one conferences.

A quick note on *kids these days*:

Researchers Connors and Lunsford (1988) compared types and frequency of errors among collections of college student writing in 1986 with collections of college student writing in 1917 and 1930. The result?

1917: 2.11 errors per 100 words

1930: 2.24 errors per 100 words

1986: 2.26 errors per 100 words

If today's students kept with this more than century-old tradition of error in writing, that would mean we should expect about 34 errors in a 5-page essay.

Tips and strategies for improving student grammar and mechanics:

Strategy 1: Find ways to distinguish between **lack of editing and proofreading** and **lack of knowledge**.

- Rather than correcting student grammar errors in a draft, place a check mark beside the line with an error, or highlight the line on the computer. Let students know that these are areas with error and they should come to your office if they can't determine the error in the line.
- Assign a small, low point value, writing early-on and assess this writing rather harshly for grammar and spelling errors. This may signal to students early on that they will need to careful proofread work in your course.
- Use peer-review sessions to have peers highlight areas of grammatical and mechanical error on partner drafts.
- Utilize in-class time to briefly cover errors that you saw across multiple drafts.

Tips and strategies for improving student grammar and mechanics:

Strategy 2. Design assignments that encourage the development of a work of writing over time, including multiple drafts and revisions.

- Have multiple rounds of peer-review.
- Require the submission of a first draft to you for commentary.
- Provide opportunities for students to revise a graded draft by addressing comments and errors.

Tips and strategies for improving student grammar and mechanics:

Strategy 3. Realize the limitations of your error markings.

- Even if there are a dozen different types of errors in a draft, focus on the three most serious and request or require a revision of the work in light of those three errors.
- Summarize major errors that happen throughout a work at the end of your commentary on a draft (i.e. “As you re-write this pay close attention to unnecessary capitalizations. This is something you’ve done throughout.”)
- Focus comments on revision as opposed to editing
 - Editing comment: “GRAMMAR!” “FRAGMENT!”
 - Revision comment: “This passage has numerous mechanical errors, such as fragments and tense shifts which might mean you need to spend more time thinking through what you want to say here. Think carefully about what you’re trying to say in this passage and then try writing a fresh paragraph that focuses on that idea.”

A Final Thought on Grammar and Mechanics

It's not uncommon to hear faculty bemoan the idea that they should even need to teach grammar and mechanics in an upper-division writing course. *They should know this already! Aren't they learning this in earlier courses?*

Some points to consider on this matter:

1. Rest assured, students are being taught grammar and mechanics in first year writing courses.
2. Grammar and mechanical mistakes are known to **increase** as writers face challenging ideas, content, and material.
3. Grammar and mechanical mistakes also **increase** when writers can't authentically gauge the community for which they're writing.
4. For formal writing skills to stick, students have to be immersed in formal/academic readings and opportunities to write formally/academically. Our internal writing voice is often the product of the readings and language uses in which we immerse ourselves on a daily basis.



Before continuing to read this document, spend some time thinking about the following:

What is one tip, strategy, or consideration for improving student grammar and mechanics that you might implement in your grading of student writing during finals week?

What is something you might revamp next semester in response to these strategies?

Part II: When and How to Comment on Writing Content



Some notes on commenting:

- Fear, anger, and anxiety blocks meaningful learning and in many cases grading and the pressure of schooling are bound up in our student experiences with learning, coursework, and writing. This means that **harsh, aggressive, terse, punitive commentary on student writing may only serve to create more anxiety and less learning.**
- The purpose of commentary is not to point out all areas of error, but to **strategically and incrementally improve** student writing, as we would a “perfect pitcher.”
- If a work of writing is never final, but always a draft, then commentary should emphasize **opportunities for revision** rather than emphasizing **final determinations or evaluations.**

Student learning improves with mitigated criticism

[Direct criticism—no mitigation]: *Your paper has not fulfilled all of the assignment requirements because it is missing a conclusion discussing whether you are a good match for the company you researched. The writing needs proofreading, and several source citations are missing in the text of the paper. The paper could use more research on your employer.*

[Mitigated criticism—positive and negative elements]: *Your paper's introduction was really excellent, as was your detailed information on salaries and the career path for this position. The stages of the recruitment process were well-covered and gave good direction. Your paper hasn't fulfilled all of the assignment requirements because it is missing a conclusion discussing whether you are a good match for the company you researched. The writing needs proofreading, and several source citations are missing in the text of the paper. The paper could use more research on your employer [p. 330].*

Establish different reader-roles for different assignments

Examiner: The "teacher as examiner" is looking for a correct answer-a specific answer that the teacher already knows. Often in quizzes or short answer exams the teacher plays the role of examiner.

Proofreader: A teacher playing the role of proofreader focuses on sentence-level correctness in her response.

Interested Reader: An "interested reader" is the role we play when we read texts for pleasure and for our own purposes, and the kind of readers we most often imagine when we write. Interested readers are not focused on just criticizing and judging writers or marking errors in grammar, but interested readers do evaluate what they're reading and think about where they agree or disagree with the author.

Representative of a Discourse Community: As college teachers we are helping initiate students to the ways of thinking and making meaning in our discipline, and one stance we can take when we respond is as representatives of our "discourse communities" the rhetorical communities of readers and writers in our discipline.

Wider Audience: One way to get out of the "teacher as examiner" rut is to ask students to write for a hypothetical wider audience, and to role-play that wider audience when you respond. For example, students could write reports to government organizations or a company's Board of Directors, feature articles for magazines or newspapers, book reviews for journals or Amazon.com, manuals or brochures aimed at the wider public, or Web sites with resources for future students.

Know the limitations of commenting

- Research has shown that students have **difficulty revising a work beyond 10 comments**. Consider limiting how much commentary you provide on a single draft. Again: you can't comment on everything, so focus on incremental improvement.
- If a draft is fundamentally flawed, such as it doesn't meet the basic assignment focus or guidelines, there is no point in commenting further. Instead, consider requesting a meeting and requiring revision.
- If there are many high-order concerns (lack of an apparent thesis, poor organization, unsupported or undeveloped ideas), it is premature to comment on low-order concerns (word choice, mechanics, punctuation).

Consider the creation of longer, more in-depth “stock comments” that can be pasted-in when you see common errors in a draft.

Here’s an example “stock comment” I use when I have students writing argumentative editorials:

“Topic sentences for paragraphs help guide the reader through your work by connecting both the primary argument of that paragraph and the main subject of the paper. This means that every topic sentence should express some relationship between an argument and the topic, thereby guiding readers from argument to argument as you look to convince them. See if you could rephrase this topic sentence to more clearly present both an argument and its relation to your subject.”



What is one tip, strategy, or consideration for improving commenting on student work that you might implement in your grading of student writing during finals week?

What is something you might revamp next semester in response to these strategies?

Part III: No Excuse Rules

"No Excuse" – What Students Should Know

Students should know...

Basic grammar and mechanics
Capitalization
Eliminating Sentence Fragments
Eliminating Comma Splices
Parallelism

Students should know...

Basic citation practices:
that a source should be introduced before quoting from it
that long quotes should be block formatted
that direct references to information require page number references

Students should know:

That audience-awareness should change their writing style.

What Students Might Not Know

But they might not know...

Specific individual stylistic preferences, like avoiding split infinitives ("The population is expected to **more than** double in the next ten years".)
What words in your discipline are traditionally capitalized (i.e. in Rhetoric and Philosophy "Truth" is a specific choice over "truth").
Whether your discipline prefers active or passive voice
How to handle statistics and percentages in writing
What words are considered too informal for your discipline (i.e. nowadays)

But they might not know...

Discipline-specific citation practices:
How to use APA/MLA/CMS, etc.
Formatting requires, such as whether you require a cover page and abstract page in APA.
Whether your discipline prefers summation with parenthetical reference only or paraphrase and quotation with full introduction of sources.

But they might not know:

How much formality you expect in your class
Whether you expect formality in informal reflections and short writings
When colloquialism is appropriate as a matter of persuasion vs. inappropriate.
The details of the situation you're asking them to invent as writers.

As the graphic above demonstrates, it's important to distinguish among what a student "should know" and what they "may not know."

Students who have completed their First-Year Writing have been learned some of the general skills of college level writing

Students entering a writing-emphasis or writing-related course in your field bring with them a rhetorical training and sharp general skills in college-level writing, but they do not bring with them knowledge of your personal taste in writing styles, knowledge of specific writing practices in your academic discipline or professional field, or knowledge of writing moves that are related to the situations or contexts that take place in your field. It is the job of faculty at all levels of the curriculum to helps students build on their general writing knowledge so they may learn and adapt to the specific writing knowledge required of them in courses across the curriculum.



Google Docs



Part IV: Assistive Technology



Here are some technologies that can help you manage feedback on student writing

- Track changes in MS Word
- TurnItIn Feedback Studio
- Highlighter/Commenter in Adobe PDF
- Google Docs
- Jing/Voice Recording on D2L

Our library now carries access to a very helpful e-book: John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas* 2nd Ed:

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