

First-Year Writing

Workshop: Error in Student Writing

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Methods for Responding to Student Writing Clarity and Surface Problems

Assumptions:

- Everyone can improve their clarity; no one can become completely clear all at once, or even in a semester, a year, or a few years. That's just true.
- Motivated writers revise for clarity; unmotivated writers do not.
- That a teacher should evaluate students' writing for clarity (among other criteria), does not mean a teacher should mark/correct/address every failure to be clear.

Suggested guidelines:

1. Clarity issues should not be the first issue that we raise with students who enter our classes. Read rhetorically, as a person, first. Feedback on students' first essay might only include assessment and brief mention of clarity issues. Wait. Engage with students and build the relationship first. For example:

Dear Marjorie, I am so pleased to have read your draft! Your perspective on why writing is so difficult to learn is fascinating to me. You are an engaging, passionate writer, and I think you have much to offer readers. I'm really glad you're in my class...[feedback on development and focus]...Oh, and finally, I'll briefly say that you have significant issues with clarity, as you no doubt have heard. Primarily I see problems with run-ons, imprecise language, and your use of comma (you overuse them). I want you to do your best with editing (as we'll talk about in class) for the next essay, and then we'll cope more with this in your next essay. [or this message can be delivered orally in class—faster]

2. Make students aware of your assessment of their ability to write clearly, and the consequences of this assessment. For example:

You have a good argument but the clarity of your writing is weak enough to cause confusion, and you miss opportunities to be really persuasive through elegant writing. Your grade would be a B+ if the clarity of your prose was at the level of your argument (evidence and analysis as well), but it is instead a C+.

I hear brilliance in your prose, particularly in paragraphs 2, 4, and 5. I am also struggling to understand you in many sentences. I'm really not sure what you're saying in the paragraphs I have highlighted. As a first step, I would like you to re-read and re-write these sentences, then re-submit. I can't evaluate the paper with a passing grade until you do. If your sentences are still unclear, we'll go from there.

Your prose style is really fabulous. I am truly impressed. Awesome clarity of prose (and this has helped in your final assessment). The argument gets away from you, however. Though you have an exciting argument in the first paragraph, it's not the argument you actually end up making through the rest of the paper.

3. Give language to the major problems students are having and direct them, briefly, to a source for more information. Don't bite off for yourself—or for students!—more than can be chewed. We need to give students language for their clarity problems and direction for where to go for more information. Many students will not follow-up on this directive, so don't spend an undue amount of time on this. The point is that students need to see that they are making the same mistake over and over again, and that fixing it has major pay off. For example:

Maria, You are progressing nicely in many ways, and so now it's time to address your clarity issues. To begin, I think about half of the confusing parts come from a problem with overusing pronouns (that, this, she, he, it, etc.). The problem is that when you say "this really bothers me," I actually have no idea what "this" is. So, a simple solution. First, read the section on p. 305 on in the handbook. Second, go through this entire paper and highlight every time you use these words (I started this in the first paragraph). Then go back and substitute the pronoun with the actual thing you're trying to say. Re-submit this improved draft with your portfolio. And use this highlighting process when you write your next paper, toward the end of the process when you have entirely clarified your ideas, and before you submit it to me.

I know you have been frustrated with learning the conventions of standard English, and that the logic of English is just hard for a second-language student to master. I see tons of success here, as you know, but we also need to move your clarity up a notch. I want you to really read the "Multilingual" section in the handbook. Read it and then see me so we can talk about what doesn't make sense. Today we are lucky because a search engine like google can help you with USAGE, which is your major problem. For example, you wrote "expected confirming" because you didn't know that that the sentence required the "to be" form of "confirm" rather than the "ing" form. It's incredibly confusing to non-native speakers, I know. But be aware that you have a problem knowing when to use the ING form and when to use the TO BE form. So, after you have finished your paper go to google and type in quotations marks what you have written: "expected confirming" and you'll see that very few entries come up. This is true for any irregular (wrong) usage. For now, just work on the ING/TO BE distinction. I've highlighted these that occurred in the first 2 paragraphs. [This is a fun lecture to do in class if you have a lot of ESL students; it's fun to see how it works. Note. This exercise essentially comes from Lunsford's *The Everyday Writer*.]

4. Dealing with Assessment. As a very general rule of thumb, I think we can say that students whose is unclear to the point of being confusing is in the **below C** range – D or F, maybe C-. If a student has prose that is distracting by error or poor choices, she may be in the C or low B range. These are general ways to think about clarity and assessment – not laws to obey.
5. Teach Editing. Many students, perhaps even most, do not know how to edit their writing. Or maybe they do know how, technically, but they are reluctant to actually use their editing abilities. They don't want to re-read their papers. Only confident people really want to re-read

their own words. The rest of us dread it, or do it on duty. We need to persuade students of the value of editing, and to teach them some tricks. Here are some methods:

- A. Final Draft Object-Lesson. Using the final draft of one self-assured student, distribute the draft, or project publicly (ideally) and then ask the student to read the draft aloud. Listen as s/he shifts the language, correcting as s/he goes. After a paragraph or two, point out this self-correcting behavior to the class and then ask the student to go ahead and make the changes needed. Get the class involved to help with the revision. Next, stop the process and ask the student to read aloud from the bottom of the paper, one sentence at a time. This makes errors even more obvious. Next send all students to reread and edit their so-called final drafts. Let them take their essays home to type up the changes. These activities teach students that good writers revise by avoiding problems, re-wording, listening to how it sounds. This doesn't work for all students, for all of the time, but it helps.
- B. Mini-Lessons. See below.
- C. Specific Issues In-Class Activities. After reading a batch of essays, identify one or two very common issues and develop a workshop related specifically to working on that issue. First, ask students to identify a feature that reoccurs, and second, require students to complete a set of questions to evaluate whether or not they have made the right decision. Example:
 - i. Comma Splices and Fused Sentences. Go through the explanation of what these are with students, drawing on student examples. Have students look at two sentences you have copied from their writing and ask them to vote on which one is fused and which one is correct. Do this a couple of times until most students are getting the right answers. Call on students who don't seem to get it; have them try. Then, ask students to work in pairs to identify all the comma splices and fused sentences in each of their paper drafts. Highlight these sentences. Go around the room to make sure students are identifying sentences correctly. Using the handbook or a worksheet, have students change the sentences by separating the sentence into two, by adding a coordination conjunction (and, but, etc.), a semi-colon, etc.
 - ii. It's/its, their/they're/there, your/you're. Write the list on the board and ask students to highlight every single time they see any of these words in their papers. Then, ask students to evaluate each use separately. Some tricks: if *its* can be written as *it is*, write *it's*. Same goes for *they're/they are*, *your/you are*. For *there* can be substitute another noun – just try John, and you can see how it makes general sense in most cases, i.e., “They're was a horrible disaster” sounds not entirely wrong as “John was a terrible disaster.” You can see how it should be *there*, not *they're*.

Selected mini-lessons from Dartmouth College:

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/faculty/methods/grammar.shtml>

1. Circle errors without labeling them. Most instructors who use the technique of labeling every error see it as a "beginning" strategy. They are less likely to continue to label all problems as the term progresses, believing that students must eventually learn to see error for themselves. In this spirit, as the term goes on, they circle errors without labeling them. This strategy makes our students responsible for puzzling out the mistakes they've made. This strategy works best when you remember to tell students what you're doing and what you expect them to do with your marks.
2. Mark errors when they first occur and then ask students to find these same errors as they reoccur. Some instructors mark errors the first or second time that they occur in a paper and

then instruct students to look for similar errors elsewhere in their work. Students who review their papers for particular kinds of errors ultimately become closer, better readers of their own prose.

3. Look for patterns of error. What does one do when the grammar problems are severe and errors pop up in every sentence (for instance, in papers by non-native speakers of English)? In this situation, it is wise to look for patterns of error.
 - A. Does the student consistently make article mistakes?
 - B. Are there persistent subject-verb agreement problems?
 - C. Is the student struggling to make sense of tenses?

Students with severe and complicated grammatical problems are best served when a professor points out the most serious patterns of error and provides some substantial explanation of these errors in the summary comments. Furthermore, isolating patterns of error in this way helps ESL students to understand the broader patterns and principles of our language.

4. Prioritize error. Finally, when addressing papers especially troubled by grammatical problems, a professor will want to prioritize the errors. Students can be overwhelmed by too much direction or editing—sometimes the most effective approach is to choose one or two types of error per paper to address. As always, prioritize those that provide the greatest interference.

[IN-CLASS]: The most effective way of handling grammar instruction is to hold a *five-minute grammar lesson*. Take a few minutes at the beginning of class to address particular grammatical issue. For instance, if students are misusing semi-colons, show them the correct usage, and then use examples from their papers to illustrate the error and to discuss how to correct it.