

# Writing Matters

From assessment studies conducted by The University of Hawai'i Manoa Writing Program

It's 9:45 Tuesday night. You're reading a report from your pile of student papers. Your smile grows slowly as you read. *Wow, you think. A breath of fresh air. She's really gotten it together.*

Thursday night, 7:45. You've reached the last report. Slowly your eyebrows rise. *Help!*, you want to cry. You find yourself circling verb forms, correcting punctuation, and jotting questions marks. When you finally feel *I'm drowning*, you stop. 'Why am I marking all this?' you wonder. 'This paper isn't even making a point.'

It's a predictable sequence: students make writing errors and instructors try to eliminate them. Unfortunately, UH students tell us instructors' "corrections" on final drafts don't help *because many language errors are rooted in problems with understanding content*. In this issue of Writing Matters, we focus on strategies for helping students gain control over their written language. Your extra attention as you design assignments and offer comments to guide students' revisions of their drafts can both help students and save you time. The suggestions we offer come primarily from instructors who have taught several writing-intensive courses.

When I got my paper back, she had marked all kinds of mistakes. I wasn't surprised because I just couldn't get it—the readings were so hard and there was a lot I couldn't figure out. That's why I couldn't get the words right: I never understood what I was writing about in the first place. I should've chosen a different topic. —*Marketing major*

## ***IN THE BEGINNING:*** DEVISE ASSIGNMENTS TO PROMOTE EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE USE

Our assessment studies indicate that the more unfamiliar a would-be author is with a topic, or the more novel the task, the greater the incidence of surface error. Both native and ESL speakers tell us that if they cannot understand complex concepts or make sense of academically-challenging reading, they have trouble "finding the right words." So the first key to helping students gain language proficiency is shaping assignments to help them understand content.

- Sequence due dates so that students can become comfortable with both the content and the language of their topic. You could, for example, require written reading notes, an organizational plan, a first draft, and a revised draft on different dates over a six-week period.
- Give students enough time to read thoroughly and enough time to make foreign content familiar by writing informally about it. Many teachers require that students keep reading "logs" and write syntheses that reflect different points of view. Students can help each other understand difficult texts by discussing their responses in pairs or small groups. You can then ask students to use their informal writing to draft a tentative thesis and one-paragraph summary of likely arguments.

## ***IN THE MIDDLE:*** GIVE FEEDBACK ON CONTENT, PRESCRIPTIONS ON STYLE, AND ADVICE ON USAGE

*Require* a well-developed draft two or three weeks before the final is due. *Require* also that it be readable, though not ready-for-publication "perfect."

- Focus your own comments—and perhaps solicit student comments—on how well the draft deals with content and structure concerns. Does the draft follow the assignment? Is the thesis appropriate and clear? Is the thesis fully and soundly supported? Is the material organized effectively?
- Give students samples of the style "rules" they should follow in preparing their final draft. Students tell us that they often don't understand an instructor's "marks"—they don't know which marks relate to usage dictated by style sheets (e.g., APA, MLA), which to a teacher's personal preferences (e.g., *shall* versus *will*), and which to actual language-usage error. Your clarifications in these areas will help them figure out where to look for help in achieving correctness.

My professor told me he was changing my grammar errors, but it wasn't a grammatical error. It was the way I worded things. Like he circled all the 'therefore's' in my paper. —*Art major*

- Teach students how to fix one or two of the most frequent kinds of error before they do their final edit. Experienced instructors often demonstrate how to fix the most consequential errors (e.g., sentence fragments) rather than mark each error on each student's draft. Such demonstrations are most helpful when followed by a peer editor's placing a check mark in the margin of a draft near instances of the focal errors. The student author is then responsible for locating and correcting the errors before the final draft is submitted. Some instructors ask students to keep a record of errors: it can be an editing checklist with future assignments.

### ***NEAR OR ON THE DUE DATE:*** **HELP STUDENTS LEARN TO EDIT THEIR OWN WRITING**

During the class just before a final version is due, require students to participate in a 20-minute "editing workshop."

- Have students read their semifinal drafts aloud to an "editing partner." When students read aloud, their implicit mastery of grammar often kicks in (studies report that writers who read their texts aloud self-correct grammar errors up to 90% of the time). Unfortunately, the "correction" comes so automatically that the reading author usually doesn't note it. That's why having an editing partner—someone who points out differences between what an author spoke and what an author wrote—can be most helpful.

The following is a transcript of a student self-correcting errors (underscored words are the student's verbal corrections):

Written Draft—According to Lanai corporation's current condition, the management can ignore the debt and only focuses on the expansion. The combination of new bond and warrant is the most effective strategy.

Reading—*According to Lanai corporation's current condition, the management can ignore the debt and focus only on the expansion. The combination of new bonds and warrants is the most effective strategy for the corporation.*

- Or, have students bring copies of a draft to be "marked" by other students (authors' names can be removed or left on).

- Have students consult resident "editing doctors." Some instructors appoint pairs of students as "editing doctors" early in a semester ("You two will become class experts on run-on sentences; you two, on APA citation form"). The pairs learn the rules in their area and other authors can consult them during or after the in-class editing workshop.

The professor required us to have our reports proofread before turning them in. The person who read mine found some mistakes that I missed. That really helped. —*Zoology major*

After you've received the final papers, consider these strategies:

- Take advantage of the "cooling off" period. Students tell us they often don't proofread. You can counter this by collecting final papers on the due date and doing nothing with them. Next class, return the papers to their authors for a final proofread and edit. Inform students that it will be their responsibility to proofread *before* the due date on the next assignment.

- With unreadable papers, simply "Return to sender." Sometimes a student's draft may be indecipherable because usage, mechanics, and spelling errors have taken blinding control over meaning. Don't waste time "marking" errors. Ask the student to make the paper readable so you can give it a fair evaluation.

### ***WHEN READING FINAL PAPERS:*** **HIGHLIGHT WHAT WORKS**

How should you mark final papers? Research indicates that most students pay little attention to instructors' careful markings of language errors. Attention to error is better provided via the approaches we just reviewed. On the final paper, seasoned WI instructors suggest that you capitalize on students' writing strengths. We've learned that when instructors highlight what students do well, students are more likely to focus on what they know how to do as writers and to see subsequent writing tasks as opportunities for new learning.

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## **PARTING WORDS ON A PERENNIAL PROBLEM**

Let's face it. The elimination of all usage, punctuation, and spelling errors in student writing may be as elusive a goal as buying a defect-free car. Learning to become skillful writers and editors takes constant practice and patience. The more instructors can help students assume responsibility for correct language use, the more students will be able to become skillful, effective writers. For most students, that's a responsibility worth assuming.