Grammar as Fashion

Grammar and spelling rules of Standard Edited English aren’t the “givens” we sometimes think they are. They change over time to reflect trends of usage, so, though we sometimes call these standards “correct” or “right,” it’s more accurate to call them “proper” or “appropriate.” Linguist John McWhorter writes that grammar rules are “arbitrary fashions of formal language that we must attend to just as we dress according to the random dictates of the fashions of our moment. Remember that what is considered ‘proper’ English varies with the time just as fashion does” (84). Grammar and spelling rules are rooted in culture and era. For example, during Benjamin Franklin’s time, it was perfectly acceptable for him to write “chusing a Friend” instead of “choosing a friend.” We would count that as bad grammar and bad spelling today, and we might label someone who writes like this “illiterate.” Also, grammar varies by culture. U.S. English always includes the period or comma inside the quotation marks, whereas British English includes it only if it’s part of the quotation.

Grammar and spelling rules may be “arbitrary,” but we still want to prepare our students for the current job market, and grammar is as important as being well-dressed for an interview. Even Benjamin Franklin might stumble trying to learn today’s Standard Edited English, but as he put it, “Genius without education is like silver in the mine.” Everyone needs a little polishing.

In an effort to polish students’ grammar, WAC encourages instructors to help their students take charge of their grammar. While we believe that the instructor is not responsible for teaching grammar rules, there are a few steps you can take to empower your students to write better assignments. The happy result will be more enjoyable grading on your part. This newsletter also addresses how to comment on papers and how to employ Minimal Marking that won’t take a lot of time and even reduce the time it takes for you to grade essays and exams. Read on for ideas.

Help students create a tool kit to improve their grammar. This newsletter includes models of three 20-minute workshops on grammar, self-editing, and peer editing that can be incorporated into any discipline. In addition, we have included a list of resources and websites that you can share with your students to help them overcome their specific grammar challenges.
The Low-Down on Self-Editing for Your Students

Everybody makes mistakes. A recent New York Times article on the war in Afghanistan states, “As it is the Americans are now pouring more resowurces into the Afghan security forces than ever before.”\(^1\) Resources, of course, is misspelled, but their proofreaders didn’t catch it. Our students make plenty of mistakes too, as they should. In fact, if your students aren’t making any mistakes, it could be because they aren’t trying anything new. But, like the proofreaders at The New York Times, they also need to learn to edit their mistakes.

First of all, self-editing is a matter of professionalism. It’s like remembering to tuck in your shirt. Students won’t always have understanding teachers who are willing to overlook grammar and spelling mistakes. Many of their high-stakes communications with potential employers, colleagues, and clients will be written—for example, résumés, emails, memos, and articles. We know that a person’s physical presentation can open or close career doors, and so can grammar and spelling.

Many successful writers are self-acknowledged awful spellers, and some have learning disabilities like dyslexia. But these professional writers are aware of their weaknesses and take measures to strengthen their work. They send it out to copy editors to clean it up, or they have their assistants do it for them. **Proofreading is a professional practice.** Even tenured professors of English proofread, then have someone else proofread their work before they submit it.

Second, self-editing is a necessary skill for a lifetime learner. As educators, we hope to teach our students how to research and continue learning even after they’ve graduated. We want them to be proactive learners, using the resources available to them, not relying on someone to tell them how to do every little thing. **Requiring students to self-edit sets the pace for students to begin self-educating.**

Let your students know it’s fine to make mistakes, but make it clear that it’s their responsibility to take care of them. As much as possible, put the ball in their court. Teach them to be professionals.

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Atul Gawande, in the *Check List Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* argues that no matter how expert you may be, well-designed check lists can improve outcomes. Encouraging students to create their own personalized grammar challenges check list aids them in improving the quality of their writing.

This workshop is designed to encourage students to take charge of their grammar weaknesses.

1. **5-minute freewrite:** Ask students to put into their own words what grammar is and what their greatest grammar challenges are.

2. **5-minute discussion:** Ask students to discuss their definitions of grammar as a class.

3. **5-minute list:** Ask students to create a list of grammar errors based on their freewrite and any other grammar errors that they frequently make.

4. **5-minute brainstorm:** Students should then pair up and discuss creative strategies for proof reading two or three of their commonly made grammar errors with a partner. Take more time if you’d like to cover their whole lists and share ideas with the rest of the class.

Some examples that you can start students off with are:

- If you tend to leave out apostrophes, check every word that ends in “-s” or “-es” to see if it needs an apostrophe.
- For misspelled words with “ie” or “ei,” use the rhyme, “I before E, except after C or when sounding like A as in neighbor and weigh.”
- If you tend to confuse certain words—for example, except and accept—set your computer’s autocorrect settings to flag those words, or use the Find function, then check a dictionary to make sure you used them correctly.
- If you have problems with sentence run-ons and comma splices, experiment with using dashes and semi-colons for those extra thoughts you want to tack on at the end (parentheses are often effective too).
- A memory-help for affect and effect is RAVEN: Remember, Affect is a Verb and Effect is a Noun.
- *There* vs. *They’re* vs. *Their* *There* = that place: This is a place word, so it contains the word here. *They’re* = contraction for *they are* Pronouns have apostrophes only when two words are being shortened into one, so think about what letter is begin left out (“a” for “they are”). *Their* = possessive of *they*: This is a possessive word, so it contains the word heir.
- *To* vs. *Two* vs. *Too*  
  *To* = preposition or first part of the infinitive form of a verb: It should always be part of an action.  
  *Two* = the number 2: *Two, twelve, and between* are all words related to the number 2, and all contain the letters “tw.”  
  *Too* = very, also: *Too* can mean also or can be an intensifier, and you might say that it contains an extra “o” (“one too many”).

**For further use:** You can have your students continue to update this check list throughout the semester. Every time they get a paper back, they should add the mistakes that they made to their check list, as well as strategies for overcoming these mistakes in the future. At the end of the semester, have your students analyze the check list to see how many grammar items they can now catch on their own.

Encourage students to post to a **Collaborative Grammar Checkbook** on Black Board in order to share their creative strategies for proof reading commonly made grammar errors with the entire class.
Self-Editing Workshop

Though we tell our students to proofread, they don’t always know what that means. Taking a few minutes to guide them through it in class can strengthen their editing skills.

1. Preparation: On the day that an assignment is due, have students bring their grammar check lists to class.

2. 5-minute presentation:
   - A grammatically perfect paper is not automatically an effective paper (you still have to focus on content and organization); nevertheless, poor grammar is a distraction from an otherwise stellar paper.
   - No one does his or her best work at the last minute.
   - Make sure you give yourself time to proofread.
   - Ideally write your paper, then set it down overnight or even for a few hours, so that you can reread the paper with fresh eyes.
   - Don’t rely completely on Spellchecker. Spellchecker doesn’t recognize legitimate words that are spelled correctly, but used incorrectly (for example, to vs. too).
   - Read all the way to the end. Many typos and mistakes are in the last one or two paragraphs.

3. 10-minute workshop:
   Before students turn in their assignments, have them read over their papers with their grammar checklists and correct any errors that they have made. You can either have them turn in their papers with hand-written corrections or allow them to bring a revised print-out to the next class.

For further use: After introducing self-editing the first time, self-editing will only take 10 minutes for each subsequent time.

Beyond Grammar: Introducing Students to Correct Style Usage to Improve Their Writing Skills

Teach students to use their style handbooks or websites by hosting a competition for extra points.
   - Divide the class into 2 or 3 teams.
   - Call out a problem such as “How do I cite a web-based periodical?” or “When do I use block quotations?”
   - Whoever finds and can read the answer first (using the index or table of contents) gets a point. (Have students raise their hands to avoid chaos.)
   - The team that reaches 5 points (or whatever number you determine) first wins extra points on a quiz or homework grade.
WAC research suggests that the most helpful tool in getting grammatically correct drafts from students is through the use of a peer editing session. Most students are better editors of someone else's draft than proofreaders of their own, so having students exchange drafts and look for flaws helps them find many more grammatical errors than they would find on their own. This workshop teaches collaborative learning and encourages student responsibility for grammar and spelling.

1. **Preparation**: Create a list of 5-6 items you would like students to check for in each other’s papers.

2. **5-minute presentation**:
   - Mistakes are good, because they’re signs that you’re learning new things.
   - Ask: “Would you rather if your peer told you about the spinach in your teeth or let you walk around with it all day?”
   - A true friend will help you catch mistakes. The more you mark, the more you care.

3. **15-minute workshop**: Have students read over each others’ papers with an eye for the 5-6 items you’ve chosen to focus on. Walk around to answer questions and encourage them in their feedback.

**For further use**: If you have an additional 15 minutes, have students exchange papers with a second partner to get more feedback. This workshop can also be used for writing issues besides grammar and spelling—for example, content, organization, citations, or proper style. Here is a sample checklist for a peer editing workshop on incorporating quotations:

- Every quotation is set off in proper punctuation.
- Every quotation is explained.
- Every quotation helps propel the writer’s argument.
- Every quotation and outside idea is credited to an author.
- Every in-line citation also appears in the bibliography.
- In-line citations and bibliographic entries follow the correct style guideline.
Editing Tools Handout for Students

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/

This website is both comprehensive and user-friendly. It features general items that are useful for students – sections on “Grammar and Mechanics,” “The Writing Process,” “Internet Literacy,” “Research and Citation,” and “General Academic Writing.” It also has a section on “Professional, Technical, and Job Search Writing.” This section features sound advice on resumes, cover letters and the like, while also delving into stylistic questions of professional writing with sections like “Business Letters: Accentuating the Positives,” that give students a taste of the rhetorical culture of their chosen profession.

For specific answers to grammar questions and accompanying grammar exercise worksheets see:

- OWL Grammar rules and exercises for ESL students: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/678/01/
- OWL Spelling exercises: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/660/01/
- OWL Grammar exercises on tense consistencies, adverbs and adjectives, pronouns, prepositions and articles: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/exercises/2/

Grammar Quick and Dirty Tips
http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com

This website provides grammar tips and quirky mnemonic devices to help you remember challenging grammar points.

The Oatmeal Comic
This series offers fun, visual approaches to learning grammar rules:

- When and why to use an apostrophe: http://theoatmeal.com/comics/apostrophe
- Correcting commonly misspelled words: http://theoatmeal.com/comics/misspelling
- When and how to use the semicolon: http://theoatmeal.com/comics/semicolon
- Correcting commonly misspelled words: http://theoatmeal.com/comics/misspelling
- When and how to use the semicolon: http://theoatmeal.com/comics/semicolon

Usingenglish.com
This website is especially helpful for ESL speakers. It clearly defines over 3,000 idiomatic expressions in English.

CSI Writing Center
http://www.csi.cuny.edu/oas/writingcenter.html
You can make an appointment at the CSI Writing Center or take advantage of their workshops. The Writing Center offers several forms of student support. Students with regularly scheduled appointments meet for one class period (50 minutes) a week with a designated tutor, sometimes one-on-one and sometimes in small groups that include up to three other students in the same class or at the same level. Drop-in tutoring requires no appointment. Tutors are available during drop-in hours to assist students with immediate concerns regarding a specific assignment (check the website for current hours).
Quick Strategies for Grading Grammar and Spelling

1. Don’t grade what you can’t read.
The most efficient way to make sure students edit for as many grammatical flaws as they can find is to base a large portion of their assignment grades on how easy the draft is to read. If you get a badly edited piece, you can just hand it back and tell the student you’ll grade it when the errors are gone. Students get the message very quickly and turn in remarkably clean writing.

2. Minimal Marking
Use Minimal Marking so that students are responsible for finding their own grammar mistakes; this will also save you time. Mark an “X” at the end of a line containing a grammar, spelling, or punctuation error. Look for patterns of errors. Focus on one or two errors so as not to overwhelm the student or yourself with editing. For more information on saving time grading, see the WAC newsletter on Grading Issue No. 3, December 2010 available at http://www.csi.cuny.edu/wac/newsletters.html.

3. Writing Center
Encourage students to make an appointment at the CSI Writing Center, located in 2S-216. (http://www.csi.cuny.edu/oas/writingcenter.html).

For Further Reading

Bushman, Donald; Elizabeth Ervin. (1995). *Rhetorical contexts of grammar: Some views from writing-emphasis course instructors*. In Hunter, Susan; Ray Wallace (Eds.), *The place of grammar in writing instruction: Past, present, future; Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.*


Do I have to be an expert in grammar to assign writing?
http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop2f.cfm

If you would like to see previous issues of the CSI WAC newsletter go to http://www.csi.cuny.edu/wac/
Call for Contributions

Call for Contributions for the May issue of the CSI WAC/WID Newsletter on "Summer Productivity":
When we face the wonderful prospect of summer, many of us have great plans to enjoy ourselves and be productive. Sometimes, we end up being productive but find that we have had little fun or rest. Other times, we had lots of fun and rest but weren't productive. The best summers are those when we somehow manage to produce good work and also enjoy a delightful summer. What went right during those summers? For our final WAC/WID newsletter for this academic year on "Summer Productivity", we invite short contributions (approx. 350 words) on the subject; they can be whimsical or serious, quirky or straightforward. What works for you to make you write and enjoy the summer? What gets in the way?
Please send your contributions to WAC coordinator Hildegard Hoeller at hilhlrr@aol.com by April 15th, 2011.

Call for Contributions to our new "Letters to the Editor" column:
Starting with our May issue, we will publish letters to the Editor that respond to any of our previous newsletters. If you tried out some of our suggestions or have further thoughts on any of the newsletters, please write to us hilhlrr@aol.com by April 15th, 2011.

Please let us know about your experience in using these research findings and worksheets with your students.
We welcome comments, questions or reflections on this month’s newsletter. Some responses may be published in upcoming WAC/WID newsletters.

You may send comments to Professor Hildegard Hoeller at hilhlrr@aol.com.