The Elements of Teaching Writing

A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines

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Teachers are sometimes reluctant to give students models for writing because undergraduates are entirely too good at imitating the form and style of a specific essay. The exercise begins to resemble "copying" and can limit variation and creativity. Models work best, therefore, if they are first the subjects of informal writing and discussions on the general features that make this piece an example of successful writing in a form or genre used for certain purposes. Using more than one example, or referring students broadly to certain types of articles in certain publications, can also reduce slavish imitation.

We've described informal writing as varieties of practice and rehearsal that can improve the quality of performance. From a slightly different perspective, however, we can think of informal writing as a way of *delaying* performance: keeping the imminence of performance from interrupting kinds of thinking and learning that are of great value in themselves.

We know teachers in a variety of fields, from English to physics, who want to delay the finished product indefinitely and work entirely with informal, unfinished writing as a mode of learning. Teachers in an advanced biochemistry course once explained that they did not want to assign complete reports on experiments because the goals of getting significant results and reaching conclusions — goals built into the form of a finished report — interfered with the kinds of attention necessary to conduct real experiments and thus learn experimental science. For these teachers, laboratory notes are both effective and sufficient forms of writing.

For related reasons, Europeans often argue that American undergraduates are overexamined: required to perform in graded papers, examinations, quizzes, or problem sets on a weekly basis throughout the term, as though the purpose of education were to strengthen and measure short-term memory. If students are accustomed to demonstrating knowledge shortly after they get it, they will view writing as a way of getting information and ideas assembled on paper as quickly as possible.

Few of us would say that we want to teach our students to jump to conclusions, but this is what formal writing assignments often invite students to do. Informal, unfinished writing can encourage students to suspend judgment and think of both writing and learning as works in progress.

Revision, the subject of Chapter 4, can also be used for these dual purposes: to improve performance and suspend premature judgments.

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- Have students respond to your responses — an imperative step.
- Ask students to resubmit edited essays.
- Have students review the comments on a set of essays.
- Respond to patterns of sentence-level errors in a set of essays in a subsequent class.

What can instructors do to help students control stylistic choices?

- Have students examine models and imitate them.
- Provide models from students' essays.
- Assign mini-essays for practice.
- Encourage listening and reading aloud.
- Assign essays with varying rhetorical contexts.
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- Provide additional time and additional opportunities for practice.
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- Consult ESL specialists at your institution for assistance.

Defining Terms to Clarify Instruction

> When we talk about helping students write at the sentence level, we may, without realizing it, have one of two quite different tasks in mind. Much of the time, we're thinking about helping students avoid making mistakes. We're talking about *error.* We also may wish, however, to help students improve their *style,* a different matter altogether.

Attending to style, we aim to help students learn how to make *choices* about sentence patterns and diction rather than how to correct mistakes; we're consequently apt to have a more positive mind-set. Unfortunately, it's all too easy not to sort out which task we have in mind and to confuse problems of error with matters of style.

We agree with the approach of a superb teacher of writing and teaching at Cornell, Lydia Fakundiny, who urges new instructors to get their own writing vocabularies and teaching practices straight. She notes that teachers should distinguish among certain important terms, as we will try to do in this chapter.

Important Terms

- *Mechanics* refers to conventions such as manuscript format, formats for quotations, hyphenation, underlining/italics, capitalization, spelling, and use of the apostrophe.
- *Syntax* refers to basic sentence grammar (mistakes in syntax would include faulty word order, errors in verb tense sequences, dangling modifiers — in other words, "bad grammar").
- *Punctuation* is what Fakundiny calls "an adjunct/aspect of syntax": punctuation is tied to the creation of meaning through syntactical arrangements.
- *Register* (or *usage*) indicates the degree of formality or informality of vocabulary or syntax.
- *Style* refers to choices of words and sentence patterns; discussion of style can include the choice of register. It does not mean discussion of error in mechanics, punctuation, or syntax ("bad grammar").

Like Fakundiny, we hold that it is counterproductive to condemn students for "grammatical errors" when they actually have written in a *style* we don't approve, for instance using the passive voice where we would choose the active. We should not criticize a student's style when her mechanics are flawed — when the student may need, for instance, to learn how to format quoted material.

To think about how to help students at the sentence level, therefore, we need to distinguish between helping students learn how to correct their mechanics, punctuation, and grammar and how to make wise choices of style. These tasks call for attention at different times in the writing process and may call for different methods.

The Current State of Student Writing

Why students need continuing study and work on sentences for mechanical errors and also for style demands consideration before we approach the *how* of such study. Many instructors feel emotionally afflicted at the sight of mechanical or grammatical errors in student writing, wonder what to do about them, and because of them may conclude that student writing in general has hopelessly degenerated. *Why,* they wonder, *must instructors in college still face the job of helping students learn to write correctly?*

But has student writing degenerated? Have high schools failed in their job? Here are four considerations to modify our reactions.

- *Most teachers when reading students' writing are automatically on the lookout for sentence-level errors.* We may scour essays for such errors even before we contemplate what the student is trying to say. Joseph Williams (Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Chicago and author of the classic text *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*) observes in his essay "The Phenomenology of Error" that we search for errors in students' writing with an industry unlike that which we apply to anyone else's work. He makes this point convincingly at the end of his essay when he reveals that it is filled with "errors," few of which, if any, we will have noticed. We look for and find errors where we expect them: in student writing.
- *Sometimes it is actually easier to notice and comment on sentence-level errors than on the more substantive problems of a student's essay.* We may find it daunting to determine how to help the student who shows only a thin knowledge of the essay's topic, who has proposed a thinner thesis, and who has supported it with the thinnest of evidence. It's easier by far to locate the source of our distress in sentence fragments, spelling errors, and improper citation methods, even though we might barely notice these errors if the essay's substance were sound.
- *Some of the "errors" that so greatly alarm us in student writing are not absolute matters of right and wrong but are determined only by taste and discipline — they are actually matters of style.* For example, opinions vary by discipline and occasion about whether or not the use of *I* or of the passive voice is permissible. We also often count as error "rules" which are in fact matters of etiquette in formal standard usage. For instance, the distinction between *that* and *which* — frequently a target for teachers who bemoan students' "bad grammar" — is a rule that, according to Joseph Williams, "first appeared in 1906 in Henry and Francis Fowler's *The King's English*. . . . The Fowlers thought that the random variation between *that* and *which* in restrictive clauses was messy, so they simply asserted that henceforth writers should (with some exceptions) limit *which* to nonrestrictive clauses" (*Style* 24). The "rule" has existed ever since, primarily in the handbooks of grammarians, but rarely in the practice of professional writers, including that of grammarians themselves.
- *Studies show that students aren't, in fact, making more mistakes.* In an extensive study they made in 1988, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford found that "college students are *not* making more formal errors in writing than they used to" as compared with students studied in 1917 and 1930, although the errors are different (more spelling errors, for instance). They also found that "teachers' ideas about what constitutes a serious, markable error vary widely. . . . Some teachers pounce on every 'very unique' as a pet peeve, some rail at 'Every student . . . their. . . .' The most prevalent error, failure to place a comma after an introductory word or phrase, was a *bête noire* for some teachers but was ignored by many more" (402). We ourselves confess that we continue compulsively to root out students' misuse of *hopefully,* even knowing that the battle is virtually lost: it is to be hoped that some future generation of teachers will neither know nor care that *hopefully* once meant *only* "full of hope."

The Recursive Nature of Learning to Write

But sometimes we read a student's essay, whether in a first-year or upper-level course, and find that at the sentence level the writing is, beyond question, poor. There may be fractures in the grammar, flawed mechanics, inappropriate choice of style, or shifts in register.

Interested as he was in the production of sentences, Joseph Williams pursued the question of why first-year law students so often write terrible prose, leading their professors to question not just how they got into law school in the first place but how they got such high grades in college. The gist of Williams's insight into the situation is that learning to write is not a linear progression. Getting to a certain degree of excellence in one field is no guarantee of excellence when a person writes in another. Instead, the development of writing skill, like the process of writing, is recursive. When students start to write in a new and difficult subject, they may get into trouble with sentence structure, with use of vocabulary, even with control over basic sentence correctness. Most of those first-year law school students had been fine writers before and would be again. Given enough practice, they would produce correct and even stylistically elegant sentences; eventually they might

edit the *Law Review*. Writing effectively was simply a process they had to relearn, even at the sentence level of grammar and style. The same is true, Williams observes, for freshmen in college. They don't need to be immediately belabored about error: they need practice with their subjects (Williams, "On the Maturing," and Williams and Colomb, "The University of Chicago").

It seems, then, that students' essays may not always deserve such intense scrutiny as we may wish to provide from the get-go. When students do have trouble, immediate and primary attention to errors or to stylistic choices may not solve the problem. It is nevertheless true that improvements are often in order. Given the above background, the question is when, where, and how we might provide assistance with error and with style.

When, Where, and How to Attend to Sentences

Let's tackle first what seems to many to be the most aggravating problem, namely, how to help students rid their sentences of errors.

Who Attends to Error, and When?

Few teachers have confronted the problem of error and etiquette — deviation from standard English — more directly than Peter Elbow, who has dedicated his life to teaching writing and to thinking about how best to teach writing. In a recent discussion of the needs of unskilled writers, "especially writers who grew up using nonprestige dialects of English" ("Inviting" 365), Elbow asks how, in one semester, an instructor can avoid crippling students by asking that they constantly attend to error, and yet prepare them to produce standard written English (SWE). We cannot teach students everything they need to know in our individual classrooms, he points out, and if we try to do so, we will focus on just the wrong thing: surface features of language rather than substance. We will also tend to discredit nonacademic dialects. What should we do?

Elbow observes that "correctness" has little to do with *substantive criteria* for judging writing, that is, "the criteria that most teachers use in judging most essays: sticking to the topic or question or assignment; getting the information or concepts right; having good ideas of one's own; reasoning carefully; giving enough arguments, evidence, and examples; organizing effectively; and making meaning clear at the sentence level" (382). He points out that "it is possible to meet every one of those criteria and still use lots of language people call wrong" (382).

So in multiple drafts Elbow allows, indeed encourages, his students to use any dialect, any language, they want. In a final, separate step, however, Elbow requires that the essay be submitted in SWE. And here is the catch: he makes "not the impossible demand that all [his] students know enough about English grammar and conventions of usage to [copyedit] without help, but rather the pragmatic and feasible demand that they know how to take charge of their writing process" (367).

> What Elbow wants is that students acquire "the practical ability to take whatever steps are necessary to get the desired grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling — *even if that means getting help*" from "spell checkers, grammar programs . . . , writing centers, learning labs, roommates, friends, loved ones, and even paid typists or editors" (366–67).

The main point, Elbow asserts, is that "as teachers of writing, we need to recognize that taking whatever steps are needed for successful copy-editing is an important and inherent part of *what it means to be a writer*" (367). Certainly, any academic or professional writer relies heavily on copy editors, paid or unpaid.

Following Elbow's suggestion may remove a mind- and hope-killing fixation on surface correctness (rather than on substantive criteria for writing) by turning the process over to the writer, making editing or sentence revision simply a job that, as a last step, has to get done. Student writers must learn how to do that job, no matter what kinds of help they need to elicit. It's part of a writer's work. And if they do that work after the substance of the essay has developed, as Elbow suggests, the help they receive will not compromise their authorship of the work.

What Can Instructors Do to Help Students with Error?

Making the editing project a matter-of-fact, finish-the-job task that appears after the real, intellectual work of writing has already occurred can remove the sense of burden from teachers and students alike. Placing attention on error last, and turning responsibility for it over to students, does not mean, however, that instructors can or should abnegate all responsibility for addressing sentences. You should of course seize appropriate occasions and methods for helping students eliminate error. In the following list we offer suggestions for attending to and reducing error in students' drafts and finished essays.

- *Arrange that students act as proofreaders for each other.* In line with making students responsible for their own proofreading, students can proofread one another's completed essays in class before they turn them in. You can use this time to move through the classroom, answer questions, and spot-check the kinds of "errors" they are finding. It's a good idea to have the student editors sign their names to the essays, make suggestions and corrections in pencil, and discuss their proposed changes with the writers. Note that it's best *not* to give students this proofreading task on early drafts when as readers they should be attending critically to substance, not to surface.

- *Encourage listening and reading aloud.* When students proofread their essays, they usually *look* for problems, and if they are just visually scanning the text, they won't find many. Experienced, professional writers, by contrast, usually read aloud or silently vocalize their work while they read. Almost all writers can hear errors, ambiguities, and awkward phrasing before they see those problems.

  Even when they understand why instructors recommend that they read drafts aloud and listen to the language they have used, our students typically ignore this advice in practice, because of habits and time constraints. To reinforce this advice, you can demonstrate its value in class or in conferences. (In conferences we often make a copy of the student paper and read it aloud while the student looks and listens for sentences that need revision.) Helping the writer hear problems is more effective than simply pointing them out or making corrections.

- *Assign a handbook.* While helping students assume responsibility for correctness, you can make sure they know about the resources available to them for assistance. One important resource is the handbook, or writer's reference, which students can read and use for instructions on how to cite Web sources, format the layout of a manuscript, and so on. Students do, however, have to be taught where to find those instructions and be made aware that you insist they follow them. If you know students own a handbook, you can refer them to it for issues of correctness and style.

- *Categorize errors.* When you respond to essays at the editing stage, it's a good idea to focus on the two or three most immediately important sentence-level issues, finding categories into which to group your most common observations. To help a student grasp and correct those problems, you can indicate the presence of a category of error in the essay and include an end comment suggesting ways to solve the problem. You might ask the student to consult a handbook and do a few extra exercises for a particular problem; or you might ask the student to resubmit the essay with a certain category of error corrected. When new essays come in, you can note whether the old errors have or have not disappeared.

- *Have students respond to your responses — an imperative step.* Some years after one of the authors graduated from college, she reviewed the many essays she had written for one of her courses. To her surprise she found that in every essay she had misspelled the same word. An industrious student, she had never paid the least attention to her instructor's correction of her error. If she had had to resubmit the essay to her instructors with all sentence-level errors corrected, she would have been forced to notice the recurring comments. Comments on sentences will do very little good if students don't read and follow up on them — a common situation.

- *Ask students to resubmit edited essays.* It makes sense to ensure that students edit their essays, just as professional writers do after a manuscript has been accepted for publication. At this point students will be working not on ideas or organization but on improving and correcting sentences and on the mechanics of their essays. One way to handle this step is to record a grade for an essay only after the student resubmits it with such matters attended to.

  It can be quite effective to ask students to spend ten minutes in class going over the essays you have just returned and making any required sentence-level corrections or changes. This exercise provides an opportunity to see whether or not they can make the requested changes, and it ensures that students read your comments.

  If it is not possible to have students resubmit essays in polished form, it becomes that much more important to categorize the problems for students, record them in your own records, and attend to those particular features in the students' next writing.

- *Have students review the comments on a set of essays.* A similar technique asks that students periodically review their writing, with your comments, and write a brief report summarizing your observations and explaining how they intend to take action on any difficulties you have been targeting. This procedure ensures that students will review and reflect on your discussion of their work, with some hope that they will apply their insights to future writing.

- *Respond to patterns of sentence-level errors in a set of essays in a subsequent class.* When you are going through a batch of students' essays, one of the simplest ways to attend to sentence-level errors is to notice what mistakes appear in most of them and to start making an exercise sheet for use in class. If, for instance, you notice that many students are having trouble making pronouns and antecedents agree or that they use commas where semicolons or colons are required, you can write down interesting sentences from the essays in which these errors occur.

  An important note: When it is possible (and it isn't always), avoid concentrating only on "correcting" errors. Students often learn more when they practice doing something correctly from the start, rather than going on error hunts; and, of course, this is a much more positive approach to the study of language. For instance, an effective exercise asks students to provide the punctuation for sentences (from student essays or an assigned reading) from which all the punctuation has been omitted.

Who Attends to Style, and When?

Much of the time, sentences that instructors don't care for are actually "correct." The problems lie rather in students' choices of sentence form and of diction. Perhaps the student chose to use the active voice where the passive voice is preferred for most of a lab write-up. Perhaps the student chose a level of diction inappropriate to the situation at hand. Perhaps a student wrote mostly in simple sentences where complex sentences would help create a more sophisticated voice and also would help clarify relationships among ideas.

Many students, however, simply aren't aware of the choices available to them in terms of syntax (including punctuation) and diction and are even less aware that context (genre, discipline, audience) should determine their choices of diction and sentence form. There are some fairly simple methods instructors can use to help students raise their stylistic awareness.

What Can Instructors Do to Help Students Control Stylistic Choices?

- *Have students examine models and imitate them.* Students often think there is just one right way to write. They may have no notion that what is "right" in one place is "wrong" in another. They may expect, indeed want to insist, that you teach them *the* right way to write. You can't do this, but you can spend some time helping students learn that they must always make stylistic *choices*. Indeed, you may want to insist that your students learn how to choose the stylistic characteristics appropriate for your discipline.

  It is therefore helpful to have students examine the different ways in which writers write, because they have different voices or because the occasion or purpose, the genre or discipline, varies. By looking at professional models, you and your students can discuss characteristics of style — of syntax, register, or punctuation — the choices authors make to affect meaning, voice, and tone.

  For instance, students might look at a journal such as the scholarly publication *Science,* where they could compare a research article with its abstract (article: ". . . the seasonal behavior of CO_2 frost at the Martian poles is not symmetric"; abstract: ". . . frost remains at the South Pole of Mars during much or all of the year but disappears during summer at the North Pole" [Paige 1160, 1138]). The language of the article proper is in a more formal register: the sentence is written in a style in which nouns dominate and uses a scientific vocabulary. For the abstract, the authors chose to use stronger verbs and less formal language.

  It can be profitable to spend several minutes in a class comparing paragraphs written by different authors in readings that

  you have assigned. If you prefer one style to another, make clear why, provide a model, and *have students write short imitations.*

  Joseph Williams suggests that students might study and then imitate a sentence that uses multiple coordinated structures, such as this sentence written by Eva Hoffman in "Minor Art Offers Special Pleasures": "For the amateur spectator, such . . . works are the daily fare which provide good, honest nourishment — and which can lead to appreciation of more refined, or deeper pleasures" (Williams, *Style* 180). The relative clauses *which provide good, honest nourishment* and *which can lead to appreciation of more refined, or deeper pleasures* are parallel: *which can lead* parallels *which provide; pleasures* parallels *nourishment;* and *refined, or deeper* parallels *good, honest.* Students can experiment with sentences that construct similar parallel clauses.

  Students can try to re-create a writer's style. It can be very effective to type a short passage from an admired writer, minus the punctuation, and have the students then supply the punctuation, eventually checking their choices against the author's. Or you can make all the sentences short. Students then combine sentences, using subordination or coordination. If instead you have combined sentences, students can try to shorten them.

- *Provide models from students' essays.* Often you can turn to students' essays for sentences that provide excellent models of choices in syntax and diction. You can use these in class for discussion and for later imitation. Perhaps you might cull well-written sentences that illustrate features you'd like to promote and have students imitate — perhaps a sentence that lays out a clear three-part parallel structure, perhaps several sentences that beautifully incorporate a quotation, perhaps a sentence that (like this one) employs *anaphora*, the repetition of an opening word for a sequence of clauses or sentences.

- *Assign mini-essays for practice.* It's one thing to read instructions and analyze someone else's style and another to put observation into practice. Have students write a paragraph in which they quote and discuss a source, or in which they imitate a particular style (short sentences or long; differing levels of formality), or in which they choose between a colon or a dash for the preferred construction of voice. Review these sample paragraphs and have students compare their creations with professional models.

- *Encourage listening and reading aloud.* When we read aloud, as anyone who has given a speech knows, we catch the infelicities of sentence structure and use of diction that may have eluded us when we read our text silently. Our ears catch the fact that every sentence ends with the same word; we notice when a sentence structure lacks grace.

- *Assign essays with varying rhetorical contexts* (see Chapter 2). Students of animal science might write two reports on why a cat died, one intended for the files, the other for an audience of doctors. They then can report the same case in a letter addressed to the owners of the cat. Students can write grant proposals, letters to senators, memos — all selected by the instructor according to the genre typically used in a subject, all requiring that the student control different styles, make deliberate choices about diction and sentence syntax.
- *Ask students to include certain kinds of sentences in their essays and to underline the sentences so that you can identify them quickly.* Requiring students to incorporate a colon, for instance, can result immediately in more sophisticated choices of syntax. (See the section "Sentence Patterns Worth Discussing" later in this chapter for other possible candidates.)
- *Collect sentences from a batch of student writing that could benefit from stylistic improvement.* If, for instance, you notice sentences with missed opportunities for coordination or parallelism, or sentences that rely on the passive voice where the active would be preferable, you can collect those for use in in-class workshops.
- *Have students analyze their own styles.* Students can study their own style by choosing one or two paragraphs in an essay they have written and circling all the subjects or all the verbs, counting the length of each sentence, or examining their use of parallelism, coordination, or subordination (see discussion of these terms later in this chapter).

Aspects of Error and Style Meriting Attention

Some readers may be thinking that it is all very well to talk about how to respond to sentence-level issues but that it's difficult to do so if as the instructor you don't know what to say about sentences.

You see a sentence and know something is wrong but can't figure out what. You'd like to talk about style, but you have never studied it. It is tempting at this point to say that because you are an educated person, you know enough already to be able to talk to students about their writing, even at the sentence level. You make sentence-level decisions all the time. Anything you don't notice is probably not worth noticing. To an extent, this is true. It is also true that it is wise to teach only what you know very well and are confident about.

> Acting on a little half-learned, superficially acquired knowledge about sentences can be more harmful than doing nothing: it is worse to "correct" a student for an error that doesn't exist than to say nothing at all when you are in doubt.

For instance, we have observed that instructors may, in an excess of semi-informed zeal, call any verb form that includes is (*She is going to the store now*) a "passive" verb and therefore request changes.

So a bit of selective, though thorough, study can be a very good thing. As we have already mentioned, when you decide to engage in sentence-level instruction, in whatever form and however minimal, you can end up confusing students rather than helping them if you haven't straightened out your own understanding of the basic vocabulary of sentences. Fortunately, as an educated person who writes a great deal, you have much intuitive knowledge that can quickly become conscious knowledge. Conscious knowledge can make it considerably easier to assist students who have produced what could otherwise seem to be just peculiarly awkward sentences.

This book, however, is not the place in which to provide a course in sentence analysis. Like the authors, you may find it interesting and gratifying to consult a handbook or a book on style, even if you don't assign one to your students.

Two excellent texts are Joseph Williams's *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* and Richard Lanham's *Revising Prose*. These are not handbooks, which are sources of rules and other general information about writing. Rather, they describe how sentences work; both tackle this project primarily in terms of subjects and verbs. Both are extremely smart books that can be used for the analysis of prose in almost any field. John Trimble's *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing* also provides an excellent introduction to the subject.

Having said that we cannot here provide you with a course on sentence analysis, we can, however, provide you with a list of the twenty most common errors in student writing as well as a quick rundown of "things to look for" in sentences that will help with the study of style. If the terms we use here — or the rules of correctness — are not familiar to you, you will probably want to do a bit of brushing up by consulting a writer's reference. (A good and very popular example is Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*.)

The Twenty Most Common Errors

According to Connors and Lunsford's extensive 1988 study, the twenty errors occurring most commonly in student essays are as follows, in descending order of frequency (403). We have supplied short examples for some errors and discuss others in the paragraphs that follow.

1. No comma after introductory element [*Well it wasn't really true.*]
2. Vague pronoun reference [*See discussion below.*]
3. No comma in compound sentence [*I like to eat but I hate to gain weight.*]
4. Wrong word [*His F in math enhanced his alarm about his D in chem.*]

5. No comma with nonrestrictive element [*See discussion below.*]
6. Wrong or missing inflected verb endings [*I use to go often to town.*]
7. Wrong or missing preposition [*Moosewood Restaurant is located at Ithaca.*]
8. Comma splice [*See discussion below.*]
9. Possessive apostrophe [*Student's backpacks weigh far too much.*]
10. Tense shift [*I was happily watching TV when suddenly my sister attacks me.*]
11. Unnecessary shift in person (pronoun) [*When one is tired, you should sleep.*]
12. Sentence fragment [*See discussion below.*]
13. Wrong tense or verb form [*I would not have said that if I thought it would have shocked her.*]
14. Subject-verb agreement [*Having many close friends, especially if you've known them for a long time, are a great help in times of trouble.*]
15. Lack of comma in a series [*Students eat, sleep and do homework.*]
16. Pronoun agreement [*See discussion below.*]
17. Unnecessary comma(s) with restrictive element [*The novel, that my teacher assigned, was very boring.*]
18. Run-on or fused sentence [*He loved the seminar he even loved the readings.*]
19. Dangling or misplaced modifier [*After being put to sleep, a small incision is made below the navel.*]
20. Its/it's error [*Its a splendid day for everyone.*]

These are errors you may spend some time on, whether with individual students or in class. Notice that many of these mistakes have to do with punctuation, primarily with the proper use of the comma. The following are explanations of a few of the less self-explanatory errors. (For more complete information, consult Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook* 13–27. Lunsford offers explanations and examples to accompany the "twenty most common errors" list.)

Number 2, Vague pronoun reference. John told his father that his car had been stolen. The reader cannot know whether the second *his* refers to John or to John's father.

Number 5, No comma(s) with nonrestrictive element. A nonrestrictive element contains information that could be omitted. It therefore requires a comma (or commas) to set it off from the word it describes.

When the comma or commas are omitted, the meaning can be changed to something quite different from what was intended. In the following example (b) alters the meaning of (a). (a) *The students, who had unsuccessfully concealed their participation in the prank, were expelled.* (b) *The students who had unsuccessfully concealed their participation in the prank were expelled.* Sentence (b), without commas, distinguishes between what happened to students who didn't conceal their guilt and those who did. Sentence (a), with commas, simply adds information about the students.

Number 8, Comma splices. Comma splices use commas, without a conjunction, to join two or more clauses that can stand alone grammatically; they are the cause of the most common form of run-on sentence in student writing. Writers use a comma as a stop, where they should have used a period or a semicolon. These punctuation errors often occur when novice writers mistake conjunctive adverbs such as *however* or *therefore* for conjunctions. Instead of writing *Chloe liked the cat; however, she was allergic to it,* they will write *Chloe liked the cat, however, she was allergic to it.*

Number 12, Sentence fragment. Sentence fragments usually occur when writers fail to attach a phrase with a comma to the preceding sentence, *not* because the fragment needs a subject and verb. (*He went shopping in the local sports store. An outing he usually enjoyed* becomes, correctly, *He went shopping in the local sports store, an outing he usually enjoyed.*)

Number 16, Pronoun agreement error. When someone plagiarizes from material on a Web site, they are likely to be caught. Someone is singular, but the pronoun *they* is plural. The sentence can be revised in several ways: *When someone plagiarizes from material on a Web site, he or she is likely to be caught.* Or *When students plagiarize from a Web site, they are likely to be caught.*

Sentence Patterns Worth Discussing for Style

You will probably find it more interesting and productive to help students investigate such matters as style or register (rather than errors per se), because in these areas students learn that they must make choices rather than just follow rules and that these choices give them control over their writing, over their voices. Both Joseph Williams and Richard Lanham emphasize the subject (or agent) and verb (the action) as the basis of clear, controlled sentence construction. You can often help students write better sentences by examining the following features of their sentences.

THE SUBJECTS OF SENTENCES

- Are the subjects/topics of the sentence made the agents of the action (subjects of clauses)? *It is impossible for your claims to be proved conclusively* vs. *Your claims cannot be proved conclusively* (Williams, *Style* 106).

- *Are sentence subjects used consistently throughout a passage of text?*

  Inconsistent subjects:

  The patient is 5'4" and weighs about 84 lb. A *high-calorie diet* will help her gain weight. Constipation will be controlled by a high-fiber diet.

  Consistent subjects:

  The patient is 5'4" and weighs about 84 lb. A *high-calorie diet* will help her gain weight. A *high-fiber diet* will control her constipation.

  The *patient* is 5'4" and weighs about 84 lb. To gain weight *she* should go on a high-calorie diet. To control her constipation, *she* should maintain a high-fiber diet.

THE VERBS

- Does the student rely on forms of *to be* (is, was, are, etc.)? (*I am hoping that I will be getting an A in the course* vs. *I hope that I get an A in the course. He was angry* vs *He reacted angrily*.)
- Does the student put action into noun or verb form? (*His* reaction *to the speech was an angry one* vs. *He* reacted *angrily to the speech*.)
- Does the student have control over the choice between active and passive voice? (*Decisions to plagiarize were made widely across campus* vs. *Many students across campus decided to plagiarize*.)

PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

- Does the writer string together long sequences of prepositional phrases? (*Throughout our lives, we are exposed to a lot of different teachings and one of them, in our society, is the value placed upon a life in which we are successful* vs. *Our society teaches the value of success* (Lanham 49, 50).

SUBORDINATION, COORDINATION, PARALLELISM

- Does the writer have control of a range of options? Can she or he decide among the following possibilities?

(a) I committed my sin in haste; I repented my sin at leisure.

(b) I committed my sin in haste, and I repented my sin at leisure.

(c) Although I committed my sin in haste, I repented my sin at leisure.

In sentence (a) the writer relies on *parallel structure* to connect the two sentences (and two ideas): the two parts of the sentence are identical in structure (subject, verb, direct object, adverbial prepositional phrase; certain words are repeated in the same spots).

Sentence (b) *coordinates* the two clauses with a coordinating conjunction, *and*.

As in sentence (b), some novice writers rely on *and* where *subordination*, as in sentence (c), would be used more suitably to reveal cause and effect, to establish hierarchies. Subordination is created by the use of *although*, to construct a *subordinate clause*.

SENTENCE LENGTH

- Does the writer appropriately vary the lengths of sentences? Some students write sentences that are all about twelve to fifteen words long. They may not know how to construct a longer sentence, or they think that long sentences are "bad." They may also not appreciate the rhetorical force of a very short sentence.
- Does the writer vary the parts of speech at the beginnings of sentences? Sentences consistently beginning *Orwell says* or *This is / There is* may indicate that the writer is summarizing rather than analyzing. Students' lack of sophistication in sentence structure may be revealed by their beginning most sentences directly with the subject rather than with a prepositional phrase, a participle, or (especially) with a subordinate clause. Such students often begin sentences with *This is* or *There is* because they do not connect sentences to each other with the use of introductory elements.

  Example:

  Orwell considers the use of the passive voice to be politically significant. *He* believes this because he sees that politicians use the passive voice to conceal their misdeeds. *He* thinks that the passive voice even helps them to conceal their misdeeds from themselves.

  Rewrite:

  Orwell considers the use of the passive voice to be politically significant. *Observing* that politicians use the passive voice to conceal their misdeeds, he accuses them of concealing their misdeeds even from themselves.

COLONS AND SEMICOLONS TO CREATE CONNECTIONS

- Our experience suggests that many beginning writers, fearing error, systematically avoid using colons and semicolons altogether. A student who can control colons can produce the following sentence, with its more sophisticated connection of ideas, rather than the sentence in the preceding example.

  Orwell considers the use of the passive voice to be politically significant: observing that politicians use the passive voice to conceal their mis-

deeds, he accuses them of concealing their misdeeds even from themselves.

For a much more thorough discussion of how to analyze sentences, consult a book such as those by Williams and Lanham. Any writer's reference will provide helpful information and examples on such matters as subordination, coordination, and parallelism, areas in which students can often benefit from developmental exercises.

Responding to the Sentence-Level Problems of ESL Students

Students for whom English is a second language (ESL students) may make sentence-level errors and have difficulties that differ from those of native speakers. You may therefore want to respond somewhat differently to the essays of ESL students and provide different kinds of assistance. As with native speakers, you may find, however, that the response to your assistance is slower than you would wish. Learning takes time, usually more than you will get to spend with these students. From our colleague Judith Pierpont, a specialist in helping ESL students with their writing, we have learned the value of the following practices.

- *Provide additional time and practice.* For the most part, nonnative speakers of English will benefit from the same kinds of assistance that you provide native speakers. Nonnative speakers may, however, need extended deadlines, additional drafts, and more opportunities to edit. You may have to decide whether you want to see only correct work from ESL students, with an accompanying decrease in richness of thought, or if you want to encourage depth of thought and elicit correctness later.
- *Discuss the most appropriate kinds of response to students' essays.* When responding to the writing of ESL students, it can be helpful to consult with students about what type of response, in terms of sentence correctness, they consider to be most helpful. Do they need to have you actually make the changes (for example, insert or delete articles in the writing of Asian language speakers)? Do they prefer that you underline errors so they can figure out what's wrong on their own? Do they require only that you put an X in the margin, leaving the search for the error up to them?

  Your ESL students will be at different stages of expertise, and the method should be chosen to suit their abilities. Many ESL student writers will know the "rules" better than you do, but (as with native speakers) you can help them by identifying patterns of error and then giving them opportunities to make the needed corrections and practice correct patterns.

  We might note that, even more than with native speakers, it would be unfair to judge the worth of an essay in terms only, or primarily, of its sentence correctness. Let ESL student writers know — and demonstrate to them — that you are interested in *what* they have to say, not just (at the sentence level) *how* they say it.
- *Help ESL students learn how to take charge of correctness on their own.* As with native speakers, you can encourage ESL students to take charge of correctness on their own, by any devices available to them, whether those include getting able roommates, friends, or members of their families to review the final drafts or consulting tutors at your institution's writing center. You can certainly encourage ESL students to take advantage of the tutorial service offered by your school. If you are actively working with these students on ESL issues, however, make sure that they tell you the kinds of assistance they have received, and when you want to know what they can do on their own, tell them not to get help from others.
- *Seek outside assistance.* Many colleges and universities employ one or more specialists in the teaching of ESL students. If you find that you have a number of such students in your classes, you might benefit from consulting with these specialists to make sure that you are neither shortchanging your students nor overburdening yourself with unneeded or unhelpful efforts. Some institutions are able to provide additional assistance for ESL students beyond what you can give.

Do not be surprised if you fail to eradicate all error from your students' writing or to transform their writing styles: getting rid of old habits may not happen in the semester that students spend with you, no matter how insistent you are, but other teachers may reap the fruits of your instruction. And also, do you recall all those mistakes and infelicities you've found in your own supposedly thoroughly proofed manuscripts?