

ESL Writers

A GUIDE FOR
WRITING
CENTER
TUTORS

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Editing Line by Line

Cynthia Linville

Judy greets Tang at the door of the writing center with a smile, and as they get started on their session, Judy asks Tang what she can help him with today. Tang replies, "My professor said my paper cannot pass because it has so many errors in it. I need to fix every one of them. Please help me so that I can pass!" Nearly every experienced tutor has faced a situation like this one. Tang's goals for the session are very clear: line-by-line editing until the paper is error-free. Judy is facing a dilemma because, after glancing at Tang's paper, she knows that even if she corrected every error for him, one session would not be enough time to effectively edit Tang's paper. The first task of a tutor in this situation, then, is to negotiate a more realistic goal with her student.

A collision of student goals and tutor goals during writing center sessions is not uncommon. Students are often focused on the short-term goal of earning a passing grade on the assignment at hand, while tutors are often focused on teaching the students portable skills that can be applied to any assignment. When faced with editing an English as a second language (ESL) writer's paper, the tutor is often at a loss to determine how skillful an ESL student might realistically become in editing his own errors, knowing that he lacks the *native ear* for the language. Frustrated tutors are often tempted either to give the student too much help with errors or to give none at all, directing the student's attention to rhetorical issues instead. Most would agree that neither of these solutions is satisfactory. To help tutors with this dilemma, this chapter explores concrete strategies for providing appropriate and realistic help in editing ESL papers for errors, line by line.

Research has shown that college-level ESL students can and do learn to become proficient editors of their own texts when given the necessary instruction. For example, Dana Ferris conducted a semester-long study of ESL university freshmen and found that 28 out of 30 students were able to significantly reduce their errors over time as they practiced self-editing strategies.¹ When a student can learn what her most frequent errors are, and learn to recognize and correct her own mistakes, then she will be a proficient self-editor.

Convincing a student that learning to edit his own papers is both possible and necessary, however, is a difficult task for a tutor, a task that requires persistent and consistent effort. Despite the difficulty, I believe that teaching students to become effective self-editors is absolutely vital to fulfilling the writing center's mission of helping students become independent writers. The alternatives are unacceptable: providing a proofreading service, which creates the unhealthy dependency Carol Severino discusses in Chapter 5, or not providing the service at all.

Most tutors don't need to be convinced that teaching ESL students to self-edit is a worthwhile goal; they simply aren't sure how to go about it. Just as ESL students need to learn how to identify and correct errors, their tutors need to learn how to do so as well. This is more difficult than it seems because tutors will need resources beyond their native knowledge of English to carry out these tasks. When faced with a paper filled with grammatical and lexical mistakes, tutors need strategies for spotting *patterns* of recurring errors, pointing those patterns out to the student, and providing rules about how to correct those errors. In addition, tutors need to know which kinds of errors are most important to address. This chapter explores six types of major errors that ESL students and their tutors can correct together. While focusing on this limited set of errors will not enable students to produce error-free writing, this narrow focus will enable students to improve their writing. Most important, though, it provides a way to limit the focus in an ESL writer's paper to certain types of errors. I find it important to note, however, that a tutor is not a grammar teacher. His ability to help is limited, as Paula Gillespie explores in Chapter 11; and yet, a tutor must master some knowledge of grammar in order to understand the six types of errors (see Chapter 14 on the need for tutors to learn more about the structure of English). Sometimes a tutor will find it necessary to refer a student elsewhere for more instruction, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Before examining these issues in more depth, a summary of goals discussed so far might be helpful.

Goals for the Student

Acknowledge the need to become a proficient self-editor.

Learn what his most frequent patterns of error are.

Learn how to recognize these errors.

Learn how to correct these errors.

Goals for the Tutor

Teach the student how to become a proficient self-editor.

Learn how to identify frequent patterns of error.

Learn how to correct (and teach students to correct) six major error types.

Learn when to refer students elsewhere for more instruction.

Error-Correction Research

Some researchers note that while proofreading is usually against writing center policy, many students request this service, and some tutors do provide it. In one study, the authors suggest that writing centers should consider lifting the ban against proofreading.² Research has shown, however, that direct error correction (crossing out errors and writing in corrections) does not prevent students from making the same errors in the next paper, nor does it seem to promote student learning.³ In addition, scholars generally agree with writing center pioneer Steven North: the overarching purpose of writing center tutoring is to “intervene in and ultimately alter the composing process of the writer,”⁴ that is, to *improve* students’ writing skills toward the goal of making them independent writers. Accordingly, most writing centers have a policy against tutors acting as proofreaders. Teaching students to become self-editors, then, is the tutor’s best alternative. At the same time, tutors will need to point out some types of errors that ESL students are not able to recognize on their own, as described in Chapter 2.

Dana Ferris has demonstrated a successful approach in teaching students to become effective self editors through: “(a) consciousness-raising about the importance of editing in general and of each particular student’s areas of need; (b) training in recognizing major error types; (c) teaching students to find and correct their own errors.”⁵ ESL writing specialists agree that identifying errors should focus on those that are the most frequent, serious, and treatable.⁶ Serious errors are usually defined as those that interfere with communication; treatable errors, those that students can most readily learn to self-correct.

Clearly some students will evidence serious errors not included in the six error types presented in this chapter. When *any* error is interfering with communication, it should be addressed. Tutors should be aware, however, that some language features, such as prepositions, articles, and precise word usage, can take many years to learn; thus while such errors may be serious, they may need to be handled differently than other errors. This will vary depending on the student’s level and ability.

Six Error Types

Six error types that are treatable and are often frequent or serious in ESL college compositions follow:

1. subject-verb agreement
2. verb tense
3. verb form
4. singular/plural noun endings
5. word form
6. sentence structure

Subject-verb agreement errors occur when the subject does not agree with the verb in person or number. These errors can be as simple as *He walk every morning* or as complex as *Every teenager knows how to choose clothes that flatters her figure*.

Verb-tense errors occur when an incorrect time marker is used. For example: *I was working on my paper since 6:00 AM*, or *Even though this is my first day on the job, I have already found out that there were some difficult people here*.

Verb-form errors occur when a verb is incorrectly formed, as we see in the following sentences. *I will driven to the airport next week*, and *I was cook dinner last night when you called*.

Singular and plural errors often occur when there is confusion about which nouns are countable and which aren’t. For example, *I have turned in all my homeworks this week*, and *I set up six more desk for the afternoon class*.

Word form errors occur when the wrong part of speech is chosen: *I’m happy to live in a democracy country*, and *I feel very confusing this morning*.

Sentence structure errors refer to a broad range of errors that occur for a variety of reasons: a word (often a *to be* verb) is left out; an extra word (often a duplicate subject) is added; word order is incorrect; or clauses that don’t belong together are punctuated as one sentence. For errors like the following, asking the student for the intended meaning is key, as Minett explores in Chapter 6.

As a result of lack of moral values being taught by parents and the reemphasis by school many children have little respect for authority.

Note that sentence structure errors often contain other types of errors within them.

While these six error types *are* rule-based and thus treatable, it is important to note that the rules behind these errors are more complex than tutors may first believe. To deal with these errors effectively, tutors often need to know a good deal more about the grammatical structure of English than they often do, and unless they can explain the errors clearly and accurately to their ESL writers, it is advisable that they avoid grammatical concepts with which they are not familiar. This will quickly become apparent in line-by-line editing sessions. In addition, there are exceptions to every rule, exceptions for which ESL students will demand explanations. Because of this, effective tutors will need to study, discuss, and even debate grammatical rules together before they can provide this kind of help to ESL writers.⁷

Tutor Resources

Successful tutoring sessions begin behind the scenes with the appropriate tutor resources and training. One resource every writing center needs is an ESL grammar handbook. If you can only choose one, I suggest Janet Lane and Ellen Lange’s *Writing Clearly: An Editing Guide*.⁸ A handbook and workbook

combined, this text provides clear rules, strategies, and practice exercises helpful to both students and tutors. In addition, the unit topics correspond to the errors discussed (with additional errors covered as well).

Writing Clearly is also a helpful resource in developing ESL grammar handouts for use in tutoring sessions.⁹ A concise, clear resource sheet on *each* of the six major error types is needed in order to follow the suggested tutoring strategies presented in this chapter. I recommend that each resource sheet include an explanation of the error and the grammatical rule(s), several corrected examples of the error, and three to five uncorrected practice sentences.

Another valuable handout is a list of ESL resources available *outside* the writing center. There will be times when a tutor *cannot* be of help in line-by-line editing because the student does not yet have the level of language acquisition necessary for such a task. In those times, a referral to an ESL grammar class or intensive English program may prevent the student from leaving the writing center empty-handed. A list of interactive ESL grammar websites is also helpful.¹⁰

The handbook, grammar resource sheets, and referral sheet make it possible for tutors to use the following strategies without any additional training; however, additional training and practice in ESL error-correction will help tutors gain more knowledge, feel more confident, and be more effective during tutoring sessions. Ask a tutor trainer for suggestions.

Tutoring Strategies

At the opening of this chapter, Judy is beginning a tutoring session with Tang, who has unrealistic goals for their hour together. Judy's first task is to negotiate a more realistic goal with Tang. She might begin by reflecting back and affirming his stated goal. "I understand that correcting the errors in this paper is very important to you, and we will certainly spend most of our time during this session focusing on your errors." Next, she might gently inform him that the goal of an error-free paper at the end of the hour is not possible, but let him know what is. "I do need to tell you, though, that we won't have time today to correct *all* of your errors, so we're going to focus on your most frequent and serious errors here. Is that OK with you?"

Tang might need time for this point to sink in. In rare cases, he may become angry, depressed, or difficult as he feels his hopes being dashed. It would be best for Judy to pause until Tang has understood this point. (Role-playing practice outside the session is useful for situations such as these. Tutors need practice maintaining calm confidence even when the negotiations go awry.) A reminder that the clock is ticking might be helpful in persuading a student to move ahead.

Before Judy begins examining Tang's paper, however, another step in the negotiation is needed. Judy needs to outline the procedure, especially if Judy and Tang have not edited together before. Judy might say, "I'm going to take a

look at your paper and point out what some of your most serious errors are. Then we'll review the rules behind those errors and correct your paper together. Is that OK?" Once they are in agreement on the procedure, Judy is ready to begin looking for Tang's patterns of error, focusing on the six error types previously outlined.

A paragraph from Tang's paper might look something like the example here.

Jackson applied for a job and was given an interview since he had all the necessary skills for the job; however he *does* [verb tense] not have the moral values *suck as respect other people or when not to use abusive language* [sentence structure]. So during Jackson's *interviewed* [word form], he interrupted and used foul language toward his interviewers, and *a as* result he did not get the job. However, with the *institute* [word form] of moral values as part of the school *academic* [singular/plural], *it will* [sentence structure] *improves* [verb form] or *built* [verb form] on to the moral values each student already *possessed* [verb tense].

After marking the errors as shown here, Judy might ask Tang to read the paragraph aloud, correcting any mistakes he sees.¹¹ Judy is quickly able to determine that words such as *suck* instead of *such* and the word order problem of *a as result* are typographical mistakes, but Tang is not able to correct any of his other errors. After glancing through the rest of his essay, Judy notices many more *word form* errors like these two, so she decides to focus on those first, marking them throughout the essay.

After Judy shows Tang his pattern of word form errors and reviews the Word Form Grammar Resource Sheet with him, they are ready to begin editing Tang's paper together. Judy points to the first error, reads it aloud, and asks Tang, "How can we correct this?"

during Jackson's *interviewed*

This point in the session is frequently one of the most difficult for the tutor because she must suppress her urge to give too much help. I suggest that tutors put down their pencils and wait patiently and silently for the student to give a response, prompting the student only when he cannot offer an alternative on his own. This is quite difficult, but very necessary. It is important for tutors to remember that an unhealthy dependence on the tutor will be formed if the tutor is too willing to supply the correct answers (see Chapter 5 for more on this).

After a few moments of silence, Tang gives the answer *interviewing*, which of course is not quite right. Even still, Judy does not supply the correction. She directs Tang's attention back to the example and rule on the resource sheet and asks him to determine what part of speech the word should be (verb, noun, adjective, or adverb). On the second try, Tang gets it right: *interview*. Judy then asks Tang to write in the correction and double-checks to see that he wrote down his correct verbal answer. They proceed onward exactly this same

way until all of the word form errors are successfully edited. If there is more time, Judy and Tang can move on to verb tense or verb form. After repeated sessions like these, the student can be led to recognize his own errors and correct many of them on his own. Editing sessions like the one portrayed here become the foundation on which students become proficient self-editors.

Granted, this method of editing is excruciatingly slow. In order to follow these suggestions, tutors will need to fight down their own sense of urgency. It is only natural to feel that too little is being accomplished in a session as slow-moving as this. Yet simply by marking a pattern of error and providing Tang with the information to correct those errors, Judy is providing a valuable service. By refraining from giving corrections, Judy affirms Tang's ownership of the paper, encouraging him to become a proficient self-editor. Tutors must be convinced of the benefits of this approach in order to implement these strategies. If a tutor is not sure that he *is* convinced, I suggest he discuss these ideas with a tutor trainer.

The scenario described here between Tang and Judy is a successful one. At times the session will be faster-moving because the student is already skilled at correcting his own errors once they are pointed out. But more frequently, a session can move even slower than the one described. A tutor might wonder how slow is too slow. What can a tutor do if, after waiting patiently between each guess and reviewing the rules several times, it becomes clear that the student is not able to correct her own work with the tutor's assistance? That is the time to bring out the ESL referral sheet and point the student toward a class or lab that can help her learn the skills she needs.

The tutor might say something like this, "It looks to me like you need to brush up on your English grammar before we can edit together. Here are some places where you can do that." Again, role-playing outside of the session can help tutors navigate difficult situations like this one. If the tutor is convinced that it would be unethical for him to correct the student's errors and that teaching ESL grammar exceeds his limitations, he will be confident in referring the student elsewhere. However, that doesn't mean the session has to end there. If the student is willing, the tutor can then refocus the session on rhetorical issues.

More often than not, however, tutors will find that their line-by-line editing sessions with students *are* successful. After the student has become aware of what his frequent patterns of error are, has learned the rules needed to correct those errors, and has become fairly proficient in correcting the errors his tutor marks for him, he is ready to begin finding errors on his own. An interim step toward that goal is for the tutor to be less direct in pointing out errors. In a future session between Judy and Tang, for example, Judy might say, "I see several word form errors in this paragraph. Can you find them?" If Tang has trouble finding them, Judy might say, "I see two on this line." If Tang still doesn't spot them, Judy could read that line out loud, exactly as it is written. Again, patient silence is needed while the student struggles to find the errors. Gradually, the

student will become more proficient in finding his own errors; then he will be ready to learn how to proofread his own papers.

Clearly the student won't be able to proofread for every kind of error, so knowing her most frequent patterns of error is important. The tutor can ask the student to underline the types of words she has the most trouble with. For example, if the student has difficulty with subject-verb agreement, the tutor can ask the student to single-underline every subject and double-underline every verb, one paragraph at a time. This is something that can be practiced together during tutoring sessions until the student gains proficiency. Once the student has no trouble marking the frequent trouble spots in her paper, she is ready to start proofreading on her own, assisted by the grammar resource sheets she has already been working with. When a student reaches this stage of independence, her tutor should rejoice in the knowledge that she has played a big part in fulfilling the writing center's mission of helping students become proficient, independent writers.

Sample Word Form Grammar Resource Sheet

Explanation of the Error

Word form errors occur when the correct word is chosen but an incorrect *form* of the word is used. For example, in the sentence, *Young people can be independence in the U.S.A.*, the noun form is used instead of the adjective form. The sentence should read, *Young people can be independent in the U.S.A.*

Most words in English have different forms for different parts of speech, but not all words have all forms. For example:

<i>noun</i>	<i>verb</i>	<i>adjective</i>	<i>adverb</i>
independence	X	independent	independently
bath	bathe	bathing	X
confusion	confuse	confusing	confusingly

Some word forms look the same for different parts of speech. For instance, *anger* can be either a noun or a verb.

Some words have more than one form for the same part of speech. For example, *bored* and *boring* are both adjectives, but their meaning is different. *The student is bored* indicates that something outside the student is causing the boredom (such as the classroom lecture). *The student is boring* indicates that the student herself is causing the boredom (possibly by talking for too long).

Some word forms have a different meaning than expected. For instance, while *to intimate* is a verb form of *intimacy*, *to intimate* does not mean to become more intimate as might be expected. Instead it means to imply something, to hint at secret information. Consult a dictionary to be sure of word meanings.

Word endings often indicate part of speech. For example, words that end in *-ly* are usually adverbs. *Quickly, slowly, and happily* are all adverbs. Consult an ESL handbook or dictionary for more examples. Attentive reading is the best way to improve fluency with word forms.

Corrected Examples

The politician *emphasis* the need for more funding for education. (incorrect)

The politician *emphasized* the need for more funding for education. (correct)

In this example, the wrong part of speech is used.

My daughter *independences* daily. (incorrect)

My daughter *becomes more independent* daily. (correct)

Here, a nonexistent form is used.

I have two best *friendships*, Hung and Le. (incorrect)

I have two best *friends*, Hung and Le. (correct)

In this example, the correct part of speech (noun) was chosen. But *friend* has more than one noun form, and the wrong form was chosen.

Practice Sentences

I just finished *decoration* the house for Halloween.

I feel very *healthily* today.

Sue whispered *quiet*.

After reviewing my notes, I still feel *confusing*.

We helped raise funds to *beauty* our neighborhood.

Notes

1. Ferris (1995).
2. Olson, Moyer, and Falda (2002). Olson dissents from this view, however.
3. For a summary of error correction studies see Leki (1990) and Ferris (2003), chap. 3, 42–68.
4. North, 28.
5. Ferris (1995), 45.
6. For example see Harris and Silva (1993), and Ferris (1999).
7. An excellent comprehensive reference for such study is Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983).
8. Lane and Lange (1999).
9. Also useful are Master (1996) and *Longman Dictionary of American English* (2003).

10. I recommend these interactive grammar websites:

The ESL Quiz Center, www.pacificnet.net/~sperling/quiz/#grammar

The English Page, www.englishpage.com/index.html

Self-Study Grammar Quizzes, <http://a4esl.org/qlhl/grammar.html>

For more links go to:

Ruth Vilmi's Links, www.ruthvilmi.net/hut/LangHelp/Grammar/interactive.html

11. This method is suggested by David Bartholomae (1980).

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