

## Helping Students Achieve Correctness in Their Writing

All writers simply goof now and then, and all writers have difficulty remembering the “rules” concerning some aspect or aspects, more or less arcane, of correct writing. When students display an inability to write correctly, as teachers we often feel irritated, frustrated, betrayed, or a variety of other feelings--we see red, in other words, and we want to write all over their papers in that color too. Sometimes we find it simply inexplicable: how could a college-level writer have failed to master apostrophe rules? But it’s helpful to remember that all writers make mistakes; students err as we all do; their problems are the same (though sometimes grossly exaggerated and/or excessive) problems that all writers face. They are writers too.

This handout offers advice to teachers wishing to help their students move toward habitual correctness in their writing, toward gaining those kinds of knowledge and strategies for writing which can help them identify and correct their own errors. Good writers are not writers who don’t make mistakes; rather, they are writers who know how, when, and why to fix mistakes and how to seek help in doing so.

### What Doesn’t Seem to Help

Two traditional strategies for helping students write correctly don’t seem to help a great deal:

1. Study of English grammar in abstract contexts does not seem to translate into correct writing.

Several studies (summarized in Bean, *Engaging Ideas*) show a disjunction between *performance* and *abstract understanding* in writers. Just as one might be able to play piano brilliantly while bearing little theoretical knowledge of music or, conversely, have the theoretical knowledge but not be able to play, writers sometimes can display a divide between grammatical knowledge and performance. Thus, while linguistic study can certainly be justified on its own merits, it has never been shown to automatically lead to writing improvement. Rather, students need to work intensively on their own “constellation” of error patterns and learn, in practice, to say what they want to say in correct language.

2. Obsessive correcting of students’ errors produces little improvement in writing performance.

Unsophisticated, inexperienced writers frequently have difficulty learning from corrections by editors, especially if they have little opportunity to revise their papers. The implications for teaching are great: there are better ways for us as teachers to spend our time than fussing excessively over students’ prose. We need to respond to their writing and offer good advice, but simply correcting all the errors haphazardly is clearly not the best use of our time.

### What Does Help

We as teachers can help our students attain correctness in several ways:

1. We can hold high standards, communicate our expectations clearly, and offer help to any student who wants it. Writers write correctly (and well in general) when they perceive a powerful need to do so. If we as teachers place a premium on quality work and point out resources (like the Writing Center) to help them attain it, many of them will rise to the challenge.

2. We can point out *patterns of error* rather than point errors out haphazardly. A student who misspells “elephantiasis” five times in a paper has committed one error rather than five. The lesson here is that errors are almost always *systematic* rather than haphazard; each student has his or her own internal logic of correctness and error. We can help our students attain a measure of

power over their writing difficulties by pointing out their broad patterns of error; this knowledge in turn leads them (or preferably a writing tutor) to ask questions about the internal logic by which those errors arise. Then the students can replace the incorrect internal logic with the right logic.

3. We can help students develop functional and realistic writing processes. All writing in the “real world” concludes with an editing process, and student writers need to understand this fact. Good writers keep track of the patterns of error they evince--sometimes by keeping an “error journal”--and making certain to proofread especially for those patterns of error (in an error journal, the student can record both the wrong and the corrected version of a particular verbal construct, organizing the journal to suit her in particular). We can also encourage a more functional process by instituting a drafting and editing process, wherein students learn from the corrective commentary you offer by making corrections in the practice of writing.

4. We can help students become better readers of their own writing. Several interesting studies have shown that writers correct many of their own errors as long as they can see them. A basic strategy in tutoring writers is to have the writer read his text aloud while the tutor looks on, offering positive reinforcement when the writer corrects his own errors and pointing out the patterns of missed errors. The tutor can also offer specific proofreading strategies:

- read the paper backwards, sentence by sentence, from the end
- read the paper very slowly, seeing and articulating each word as you do so
- read the paper aloud while looking for particular trouble spots (“its” vs. “it’s,” etc.)

5. We can show students how to use a grammar handbook. It helps little to simply refer students to resources like grammar handbooks--although we clearly must do so regardless. We can help more by patiently showing the student what’s in the handbook, showing how to find correct answers to the questions they have, letting them work with the handbook while we sit by to help, and showing them other resources for correctness as well, such as the online resources offered by the Writing Center (at <http://www.sonoma.edu/programs/writingcenter/>).

6. We can offer ten-minute mini-lessons in class on common errors and how to fix them. Because achieving correctness is in large measure an idiosyncratic process, different for each writer, it makes little sense to spend a great deal of class time teaching particular rules. However, ten-minute mini-lessons on common areas of error (apostrophe rules, comma splices, citing quotations correctly and effectively) can be very useful: they communicate to our students the seriousness with which we approach such matters; some students do learn the material this way; and the lessons establish class ground rules, which are particularly important for matters like citation style which differ somewhat from discipline to discipline.

7. We can point out resources like the SSU Writing Center. As several of the other suggestions clearly indicate, achieving correctness is for many students a long and difficult process that benefits from sustained, one-on-one interaction with a knowledgeable, skilled reader. We greatly help our students by offering such resources as the Writing Center and by being honest and forthright about how difficult achieving correctness can be and how much long, intensive effort is sometimes required for a writer to master all the arcana of standard edited American English.