FIVE STRATEGIES FOR REMEDIATING SENTENCE-LEVEL WRITING DEFICIENCIES

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TWO TYPES OF sentence-level writing problems are often observed in student writing: (1) those that violate conventions of standard written English, such as subject-verb agreement errors and comma splices; and (2) those that involve a stylistic choice, such as beginning a sentence with an expletive structure like *There are* or using *if* rather than *whether*. Most readers are quite bothered by the first type of deficiency; only some are bothered by the second type. In any case, readers who are bothered by either will often focus momentarily on the writing rather than concentrating on the message, thereby increasing the opportunity for miscommunication. Leonard and Gilsdorf (1990), Gilsdorf and Leonard (2001), and Beason (2001) have reported on readers’ reactions to various types of sentence-level deficiencies.

A long history of controversy surrounds research on the effect of teaching grammar to writing students. Hillocks and Smith (2003) indicated “that research over a period of 100 years has consistently shown that the teaching of traditional school grammar (TSG) has had little or no effect on students, particularly on their writing” (p. 721). TSG focuses primarily on identifying parts of speech and the parsing of sentences; and according to Hillocks and Smith, it “presents definitions that cannot function with desired results unless the person using them has more information about language than the definition provides” (p. 723).
According to Hudson (2001), the antigrandm position found in the 1960s and 1970s seems to be reversing. Hillocks and Smith (2003) acknowledged that “ways to improve students’ ‘correctness,’ an issue important to teachers, has been largely neglected by researchers” (p. 731). In their meta-analysis of 14 research studies in which grammar was either the experimental or control treatment, they concluded the following: “Despite all the evidence of the failure of grammar instruction to have an effect on the quality of writing, many classroom teachers reject the finding and are suspicious of those who offer it” (p. 730).

Some are finding value in teaching grammar, and more enthusiasm exists in some educational circles for “the idea that conscious grammar (resulting from formal teaching) could have the useful benefit of improving writing” (Hudson, 2001, p. 1). Hudson (2001) mentioned that government directives in the United Kingdom call for “reintroducing the teaching of grammar” (p. 1). He concluded that “the idea that grammar teaching improves children’s writing skills is much better supported by the available research than is commonly supposed” (p. 4). Doniger (2003) concurred, indicating that “recently, the armor of the anti-grammar instruction stance has shown some chinks and dents” (p. 101).

Certainly, one aspect of writing quality is sentence structure, which is, arguably, developed through the study of grammar, including subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, correct pronoun case, and so on. Wardrope and Bayless (1999) reported that of the various content areas covered in the business writing course, instructors perceived teaching “correct grammar and sentence structure” (p. 38) to be of foremost importance; however, they also noted that other writing issues were actually receiving more coverage. Similarly, correctness-of-structure issues are the primary focus of two recent reports issued by the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges, both of which are critical of weak writing skills of recent college graduates (College Board, 2004, 2005). Gilsdorf and Leonard (2001) indicated that “the writing skills we teach need to be in tune with the expectations of business people” (p. 442).

To help students overcome correctness-of-structure issues, error labeling appears to be a viable remediation strategy. Quible (2004) reported on business writing students who were asked to identify and label deficiencies in a 35-line narrative during the 7th week of the semester. They were then asked to identify, label, and correct deficiencies on the same narrative during the 15th week of the semester.
The findings from that study indicate strong correlations (statistical significance: \( p < .05 \) to \( p < .01 \)) between students’ ability to label deficiencies correctly and then later to correct those deficiencies. The study used the same narrative for both the pretest and posttest, which could have created learning effects. However, it is likely that the 8-week span between the pretest and posttest was sufficiently long to mitigate any such effects.

In another study, business writing students who labeled and made corrections in remediation exercises that primarily focused on sentence-level deficiencies made fewer errors (statistical significance: \( p < .02 \)) than those who corrected but did not label the errors (Quible, 2006). In particular, students who both labeled and corrected deficiencies in remediation exercises had fewer punctuation and grammar deficiencies (statistical significance: \( p = .025 \)) on the last letter they wrote in a course compared with their performance on their first letter. When comparing students’ performance on these two tasks, Quible (2006) found that students who both labeled and corrected flaws reduced the number of punctuation deficiencies in their work by 55%, compared with students who corrected but did not label such deficiencies. Moreover, those who labeled and corrected flaws reduced the number of grammar deficiencies by 57%, compared with those who corrected but did not label such deficiencies.

This article complements the studies reported in Quible (2004, 2006) by presenting five techniques that help students overcome their sentence-level writing deficiencies by correcting certain mistakes marked on their papers. Each of the techniques requires that students identify and label deficiencies, especially those that violate the conventions of standard English.

A TRACKING SYSTEM FOR STUDENTS’ REVISIONS

In grading students’ work, I use the Writing Evaluation Error Code System outlined in Quible (2006, pp. 21-23) and reproduced here as the appendix; several popular business communications texts present similar schemes, typically using abbreviations for error labels. Using a highlighter, I identify the sentences (or sentence parts) I want students to correct during revision. When graded work is returned to the students, a record sheet is attached on which they write their revisions. Thus, I am able to check resubmitted work very quickly.
To illustrate, if a student’s sentence contains a problem in pronoun-antecedent agreement, the appropriate code is written at the location of the problem. The sentence is marked with a highlighter; and if this is the first deficiency I want corrected, I write “1” at the beginning of this sentence. The student rewrites all highlighted/numbered sentences (or sentence parts), placing work on the record sheet attached to his or her original paper. Suppose, for example, a student has six deficiencies marked on her paper, and I want her to correct four of them, each in a different sentence. Each highlighted unit is numbered sequentially, beginning with “1” and ending with “4.” She rewrites these four items, placing her work on lines 1 through 4 of the record sheet. After I have an opportunity to view her resubmitted work, both sheets are returned to the student. This process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Some deficiencies need not be corrected; for example, I typically do not have a student correct a compound adjective from which a hyphen is missing, although the error will be marked. On the other hand, if a student uses who in a sentence that requires whom, I generally have him rewrite the entire sentence so he has additional practice applying the who/whom strategy I present in class. (I have found students are more likely to learn correct use of who and whom when they are taught the following strategy: When you can substitute the word he for the who or whom in the sentence, who is the correct choice. On the other hand, when him can be substituted for who or whom, then whom is the correct choice.)

ERROR IDENTIFICATION IN WRITTEN WORK

Another helpful instructional technique has students identify and label deficiencies in a written document. Students are given a letter (or a portion) that contains a number of errors of the type identified on the error code sheet. Each sentence of the text is numbered sequentially, and students are asked to enter the error code at the location of each deficiency. The bottom portion of this sheet also contains lines numbered sequentially. On line 1, students enter the code of each deficiency they find in the first sentence of the text. For example, suppose that Sentence 1 contains a spelling error, a comma splice, and misuse of the word can. Students will enter appropriate deficiency codes on the lines to the right of “1.” Their papers can be
checked quickly if they record the codes of the deficiencies, line by
line. Figure 2 illustrates this process, using a portion of a letter.

I have begun using a Web-based course management tool, WebCT,
to facilitate this technique. Students work with two to three other
students, maintaining the same group membership all semester. The
material they are to “mark up” is placed on the WebCT server, and
they use the email function of WebCT to share their individually iden-
tified lists of deficiencies. To assess participation, I have each group
include me as a member of the group so I can access their email mes-
sages. And with WebCT, they also have the option of using its chat
function to discuss certain points in real time. Once the members of
each group have agreed on a composite list of deficiencies, one of
the group members enters the codes on the record section of the sheet
before submitting it on behalf of the group.
I typically use this technique at the end of each of the major letter-writing units in the course. The first unit involves request and inquiry letters, so the first exercise using this technique requires that students identify errors in a poorly written request or inquiry letter. Because this technique involves collaboration, I generally make the material available several days before it is due.

### IDENTIFICATION OF DEFICIENCIES AND “MARK UP” IN CLASS

This technique is similar to the one described in the previous section, with the following exception: Rather than have students work in their groups outside of class, we identify the deficiencies during class discussion. More often than not, the material involves a writing assignment the students just completed. To prepare the material, I sometimes take small portions from a number of the students’
letters to compile the material we “mark up” in class. When I “doctor” students’ work by creating a composite or by adding more deficiencies, I always inform the class that I am doing so; otherwise, they may get the mistaken impression that some of their cohort have a surprising number of deficiencies in their writing. (Note: If you have multiple sections, you may want to use the writing produced in one section as the basis of the material used in another section so students are unable to identify their own work. Even though student work is always used anonymously, using work from another section minimizes the likelihood that students will be embarrassed when their work is publicly critiqued.)

At other times, I create a poorly written version of the letter or incorporate several additional errors in the material, especially when I find a number of students making the same error. For example, after several students misspelled *accommodate* on a recent assignment, I misspelled that word in the material to be marked up.

Once the letter has been created, it is put on a transparency to facilitate its in-class “mark up.” Students are asked to identify deficiencies line by line, using the codes, while I enter the codes on the transparency as they give them to me. Generally, I will give students a few seconds to examine each line before we begin discussing it so they have time to identify each deficiency and determine the appropriate code. Also, I sometimes ask the class how certain deficiencies can be corrected.

Generally, during our use of this technique, when a deficiency is found for which I have taught the class a remediation strategy, I ask a student to explain the appropriate strategy for making the correction. A good example of this situation involves the *who/whom* distinction mentioned earlier.

**EDITING BUDDY**

Before an assignment is collected at the beginning of a class period, each student shares his or her work with a classmate seated nearby. Each “buddy” is asked to review a specified section of the letter (perhaps the opening or closing paragraph). If the buddy finds one or more sentence-level deficiencies in the section to be evaluated, he or she discusses it with the author of the paper. The author has the option of handwriting the correction on his or her paper before handing it in, although the student has the right of refusal regarding
the suggested correction. The use of this technique is limited by the skill of individual students.

EDITING EXERCISES

The use of editing exercises involves paragraphs approximately 100 words in length that contain several types of deficiencies. For example, a paragraph might contain errors in subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement, in addition to, say, including punctuation problems. Although this material is “contrived,” it should have a fairly natural “read.” Each sentence in the exercise is numbered, and students are asked to identify the code of each deficiency they find. Using the record section, they list the codes of the deficiencies in each sentence, a process that facilitates checking their responses. Sixty of these exercises are available as a Microsoft Word file on the following Web site: http://spears.okstate.edu/~zquible/exercises 20.doc.

Sometimes when using this technique, in addition to having students label deficiencies, I have had students rewrite some of the sentences. As noted earlier, some corrections (such as a missing hyphen in a compound adjective) are not especially meaningful unless the sentence contains additional problems. An example is a sentence that contains both a compound adjective that needs to be hyphenated as well as a problem in subject-verb agreement. An example of a completed editing exercise is illustrated in Figure 3.

A CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Because employers continue to be concerned about sentence-level writing deficiencies of recent college graduates, asking interviewees to prepare a writing sample during the interview process is becoming more common. Thus, individuals whose writing is plagued with sentence-level errors may be greatly diminishing their opportunities for employment. Employers who have hired college graduates with weak writing skills are well aware of the tangible cost of remediating the writing of these individuals, as well as the intangible cost of image degradation caused by employees whose writing is below par.

To help our students increase their opportunities for employment, we need to expend more effort helping them overcome their sentence-level deficiencies. Whether we should expend that effort
seems to be much less of an issue than what techniques are effective in helping students remediate their deficiencies. Exercises of the type presented here have been shown to be effective in helping business writing students remediate the kinds of sentence-level deficiencies to which readers in professional settings respond negatively.

APPENDIX A
Writing Evaluation Checklist

Punctuation Errors
A-01. Comma not needed.
A-02. Transitional expression.
A-03. Compound sentence.
A-04. Simple sentence with a compound element.
A-05. Comma splice.
A-06. Complex sentence with introductory phrase.
A-07. Complex sentence with introductory clause.
A-08. State.
A-09. Nonessential expression.
A-10. Essential expression; comma not needed.
A-11. Interrupting word, phrase, or clause.
A-14. Year.
A-17. Direct address.
A-22. Long, complicated series (semicolons needed between the elements of the series.
A-23. Compound adjective; hyphen(s) needed.
A-24. Incorrect placement of apostrophe (or lack thereof).
A-25. Incorrect capitalization (or lack thereof).
A-26. Incorrect word division.

Grammar Errors

B-01. Spelling error.
B-02. Subject-verb disagreement.
B-03. Pronoun-antecedent disagreement.
B-04. Incomplete sentence.
B-05. Mismodification.
B-06. Dangling participle.
B-07. Possessive needed before a gerund.
B-08. Words left out.
B-09. Incorrect verb tense.
B-10. Unclear pronoun reference.
B-11. Misuse of who or whom.
B-12. Misuse of that or which.
B-13. Misuse of because, since, and due to.
B-14. Misuse of between and among.
B-15. Misuse of fewer and less.
B-16. Misuse of may and can.
B-17. Misuse of would or will.
B-18. Misuse of believe or feel.
B-19. Misuse of whether or if.
B-20. Misuse of *while* or *whereas*.
B-22. Split infinitive.
B-23. Incorrect use of preposition at the end of sentence.

**Writing-Style Errors**

C-01. Lacks you-attitude.
C-02. Is awkward writing.
C-03. Has negative tone.
C-04. Has curt tone.
C-05. Lacks clarity.
C-06. Lacks logical development.
C-07. Lacks unity (sentence).
C-08. Lacks unity (paragraph).
C-09. Lacks coherence (sentence).
C-10. Lacks coherence (paragraph).
C-11. Lacks specific information.
C-12. Lacks variety in sentence structure.
C-13. Lacks conciseness.
C-14. Lacks correctness.
C-15. Lacks completeness.
C-16. Lacks reader-benefit material.
C-17. Lacks resale material.
C-18. Lacks sales-promotion material.
C-19. Is redundant.
C-20. Is a slow-start opening.
C-21. Lacks an action-oriented closing.
C-22. Is too long a sentence.
C-23. Is too long a paragraph.
C-25. Contains preaching tone.
C-27. Lacks effective topic sentence.
C-28. Thanks in advance.
C-29. Is an improperly used word.
C-30. Lacks needed apology.
C-31. Is not a gender-neutral term.
C-32. Is a trite expression.
C-33. Lacks sufficient emphasis on this point.
C-34. Has too fast a pace.
C-35. Uses passive voice.
C-36. Is an expletive.

REFERENCES


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