

How to Help Students Turn in Error-free Writing

1. Build editing into the writing process

Emphasize to students that writing is a process with several stages: planning, drafting, revising, editing & proofreading. Inform students that they must spend enough time working in each stage to produce a final product that meets both content and language standards. [If a student turns in a final version that contains too many errors, you can return the paper (ungraded) and allow the student a day or two to correct the errors.]

The basic writing process:

1. Planning the message the writer wants to convey
2. Drafting the text
3. Revising the draft
4. Proofreading and editing the final draft before submitting

Tip: Confirm that students proofread and edited. Require that they edit on a hard copy and then submit that copy with handwritten edits along with the final, clean copy.

2. Provide proofreading strategies

Require that all students proofread and edit their revised drafts. Below are several useful techniques:

Read aloud

Native speakers have an “ear for language.” Capitalize on this by asking students to read their revised draft aloud. Tell students to read exactly what they have written (using a pencil to point at each word or using a blank sheet to reveal one line at a time is helpful). When they stumble, hear a problem, or notice a typo, they can fix it and then continue. After they have made changes and reprinted, students should carefully reread each sentence that they changed.

Start at the end

Proofreading requires close attention to words, sentences, and punctuation marks. When students proofread from the last sentence to the first sentence, they are less likely to get “fooled” by their familiarity with the content. Students proofread the last sentence of their piece. Then they move to the second-to-the-last sentence, and so on until they reach the first sentence.

Find a friend

Nonnative speakers in particular have difficulties writing in standard English. Ask students to find a competent writer to proofread. When students find a friend to help, they should tell their friend to focus on the grammar and punctuation instead of the content.

3. Encourage use of spell check, grammar check, and “look up” (dictionary)

Encourage students to use their word processing program’s spell check, grammar check, and dictionary. Inform students that they must use the program wisely. Remind them that checkers can identify possible errors, but they cannot “read.” Students need to make the final decision whether to use the program’s suggestion.

4. Use minimal marking

When students submit their drafts, resist the urge to correct every error. Instead, put the burden on the student by making a notation on the draft to indicate an error. Options:

- Explain to students that they will find a check (“✓”) in the margin for each error in that line. Tell students that they are responsible for finding the error and correcting it.
- Correct one or two representative paragraphs and then use check marks (as described above) throughout the remainder of the piece.
- Explain to students that each error is circled or underlined. Tell students that they are responsible for correcting the error.
- Focus on one or two types of errors and demonstrate how to correct them. Require that the student proofread the paper for those types of errors and fix them. (See also #6.)

5. Discuss common errors as a class

If most students in your class make the same type of error, you can photocopy several examples (from their writing) and distribute them or put them on an overhead. Show students how to identify the error and how to correct it. Tell them to proofread for this type of error on their next paper(s).

If there are errors that bother you, let students know. Show them examples and how to correct the problem.

6. Have “zero tolerance” days

Get your students to focus on specific errors by having a Zero Tolerance Day. Before a revised piece of writing is due, tell your students that on the due date it will be “Zero Tolerance Day” for X (e.g., comma errors, fragments, subject/verb agreement, its/it’s and there/their). Students must proofread and they must pay special attention to these types of errors.

7. Arrange in-class editing sessions

Writers are usually better at identifying errors in someone else’s writing than they are at identifying errors in their own writing. After students have revised their drafts, set aside class time for an in-class editing session. Explain to students that the purpose is to proofread and edit a classmate’s draft, not to respond to the content. Give them tips on how to proofread (see #2 above). You can assign students to pairs or you can have students take a paper (or two) from a pile and edit it anonymously.

Alternatively, this activity can be done as homework and outside of class.

8. Refer students to campus and web resources for additional help