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ABSTRACT

Since students enter college with a basic knowledge of the mechanics of writing, including grammar, spelling, and punctuation, most student writing mistakes amount to a failure to see what they have actually written. Thus, instructors must help students to apply knowledge they already have and to see their own errors through careful proofreading. Textbook techniques for teaching proofreading skills are academic and impersonal, and therefore not very useful. Getting students to recognize problems in their writing is an important challenge which is best dealt with in class exercises. Small group work, in which students read and comment on the work of the other group members, is effective. In a directed class exercise, students exchange and read papers that have not been marked. They read individually without discussion with the writers, after which they must answer objective questions about the papers, such as identifying issues, topic sentences, thesis statements, and the overall organization. Then -- still without discussion -- the papers are returned to the original writers so that they can see what their readers have determined. The restriction against talking is then lifted and discussion between student and writer is encouraged. This interchange of ideas reveals strengths and weaknesses, but more importantly, students have the immediate feedback that only a class exercise can provide as to how well ideas have been communicated in writing. This kind of work does not address mechanical mistakes, but deals with the more fundamental concerns of proofreading for logic and content. (HB)

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James Conely

A CLASS EXERCISE IN PROOFREADING:
GETTING STUDENTS TO READ WHAT THEY WRITE

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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I begin with two debatable premises: The first is that in general, students enter college with basic knowledge of the mechanics of writing. Their mistakes of punctuation, spelling, and grammar result from carelessness or indifference moreso than ignorance of what is "correct." This is not to say that they have the knowledge of a grammarian nor that their knowledge is complete or always accurate, only that having qualified for college admission, their experience with the language is extensive enough to have at least a sense of how it works and an awareness of most of the basic mechanics of how to write it. This premise may be a leap of faith, but I believe it to be true nonetheless.

The second premise is that writers--in this case our students--should be their own best teachers with ability to evaluate and improve their own writing. In other words, they should be competent proofreaders. This is fundamental because competent proofreading, meaning looking for more than just mechanical mistakes, reveals the success of all the other steps of the writing process. Therefore, the ultimate objective of a college composition course should be to develop this ability in our students. Otherwise, they remain dependent, unable to write successfully on their own.

I arrive at these premises because most student misstatements, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies I see do not show inadequate knowledge of

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their subjects or of writing mechanics but failure to see what they have actually written--i.e., failure to proofread carefully, completely, and objectively. Overcoming mechanical problems is relatively easy for them when these are noted in their papers. Correcting such problems is often essentially a matter of helping students to apply knowledge they already have. But the much more important concerns of logic, organization, and unity are not easy for them to recognize.

Some students, of course, are indifferent to the concerns, a condition no teaching technique can be sure of overcoming. Still, students can be guided to see how proofreading applies to them directly. Whether they choose to act on that application is another matter, but their choice to do so is not likely to occur if they don't first see relevance to their own writing.

Because it is a critical culminating step in the writing process, every composition textbook addresses the importance of proofreading, usually with suggested tips and checklists. But most of my students, especially freshmen, don't see the relevance of textbook checklists to their papers. Moreover, the procedure seems to them too tedious to use systematically. Checklists in particular are too long for students to use voluntarily; their tendency is to check the items as satisfactory or just overlook all but a few of them. In other words, the textbook techniques, while valid, are too thorough, impersonal, and academic for students to apply on their own. What they need is to have the process and its significance personalized.

Here, then, is a two-part challenge: first getting students to recognize problems other than just mechanical mistakes, and then having them understand the importance of finding their own problems before a reader does. The first of these is the more difficult and more important challenge. It is also one that can probably only be dealt with successfully in class exercises.

Textbook proofreading assignments alone are too perfunctory; class discussions are better, but without practice, nothing is internalized to have meaning. Actually, all approaches work together. Specifically, I have found that group work that some may call cooperative learning works well in my classes to help students sharpen their sensitivity to the success of their own writing. Working in small groups of two to perhaps four students, each student reads, reviews, and comments on the work of others in the same group.

This shared analysis of each other's writing is not a new approach. Group work and peer review has long been a common teaching technique, so much so that it may be taken for granted. Gefvert, for example, in the "Acknowledgements" of her writing handbook refers to the "collaborative process" of writing and notes that she encourages students "to get helpful feedback from peers and teachers" (xxix). Millward is another who advises students to "ask a friend to read the paper" and to "Be sure your friend knows that you want an appraisal, not praise" (355). Hunt cites peer review as an integral part of class activity, not just a friendly suggestion left to individual initiative: "Students in composition classes often act as 'peer editors' or 'peer reviewers' of each other's papers.... Learning to master the give-and-take of peer review is one of the more practical goals of a composition class." He then offers specific guidance on using peer review, including suggested items for reviewers to look for (65-66).

So it is not a new technique I present, but rather an endorsement of it and procedure to capitalize on it. My approach is a directed class exercise designed to determine objective findings in papers before considering subjective responses that may be just matters of opinion. I have students exchange and read papers that I have not yet marked. My instructions are to read individually without any discussion with the writers, doing so since the

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purpose of writing is to communicate completely by the written word rather than spoken. This, then, is an opportunity for students to find out if they have done so.

Then I ask students to write brief answers to questions I ask about the papers they are reading (not their own). The questions ask for only objective observations--not judgements of quality nor interpretations of meaning: For example, identify the thesis statement (if it is a thesis assignment); identify the topic sentences of paragraphs; label the overall pattern of organization if it can be determined--if not, say so; cite any place in which the idea of one sentence is not clearly related to the ideas of the sentences before and after; note any conclusion, assumption, or generalization stated without support; note any "support" that doesn't in fact support or that is expressed too poorly to understand; determine whether the conclusion of the paper concludes what the introduction introduces; and so on. At this point, none of these items asks for suggested corrections, only identification of what the reader finds. Besides providing an objective response for the writers, this has the additional advantage of reinforcing basic writing principles since this kind of reading involves analysis of those principles.

Students then return the papers with their written responses to the writers, and still without discussion they see what their readers have determined. If, for example, a reader identifies a thesis different from the one the writer intended, then the writer knows that it is not clear or well stated. It could be, of course, that the problem is with the reader rather than the writer--always a risk with this technique. But even if this occurs, the writer has the real experience of finding out how another person reads what they have written and then considering whether and how to write more

clearly, accurately, and convincingly.

At this point, I remove the restriction from talking and encourage discussion between writer and reader to explain what was found and share suggestions for improvement. The interchange of ideas reveals strengths as well as weaknesses, but more importantly, students have the immediate feedback that only a class exercise can provide about how well they have communicated in writing. Because their readers in this exercise are fellow students, they are more receptive to the reports on their papers than comments from the instructor only, who they may think is just being unreasonable or unnecessarily demanding or whose comments just may not make sense to them.

Variations of this exercise are useful throughout the course with the directed questions varying according to the schedule of particular elements or types of writing studied. But timing in the course does need to be considered--not before students understand the writing principles they will review in their fellow students' papers, and not after the last opportunity to demonstrate in another assignment their own ability to proofread their own writing.

This approach is only a first step toward independent proofreading. By itself, it clearly does not guarantee that students will have the desire and ability to handle the problems of writing on their own. It specifically does not address mechanical mistakes. I leave that for the moment to others. But this kind of group work does deal with the more fundamental concerns of proofreading for logic and content in a way which makes sense to students and which they accept. Without guarantees, it at least increases the likelihood of sharpening students' awareness of their own potential. No teaching technique can overcome sloppy thinking or careless preparation, but I find

that this class exercise is an effective way to help students recognize their own problems and the need to resolve them.

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