



## **“BUT GRAMMAR & NEATNESS DO COUNT!”**

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Few of us expect absolutely perfect papers from students. After all, most of us have omitted a comma every now and then or misspelled a word. However, no one likes reading papers filled with mechanical errors. It is frustrating to explain yet again why a comma needs to be replaced with a semi-colon or what the difference is between “it’s” and “its.”

The bad news is that that marking every error or instituting extensive grammar instruction has little effect on student learning. The good news is that when students know they are accountable for their mechanical errors, they tend to make fewer of them. Listed below are various ways to make students more attentive to sentence-level aspects in their writing.

- In your syllabus, list your 5 major grammar and punctuation pet peeves. Explain how to avoid them.
- Direct your students to a good handbook or one of the websites listed below to learn how to avoid particular errors.
- Set aside 10 minutes during each of the first few classes of the semester to explain the grammar and punctuation errors that you do not want to see on papers. A well-known study of student writing conducted by Lunsford and Connors showed that only 20 types of errors account for 91.5% of all errors.
- At the beginning of class on the day a paper is due, set aside time for each student to proofread his or her paper. Make it clear that penciled-in corrections will not be penalized. While silent proofreading works, asking students to read aloud—to themselves or to a classmate—invariably works better.
- Have students put a wiggly line under suspected errors, and then get advice from you or other students. Most people suspect their own errors, and you want to encourage students to be alert to their own patterns of error.
- At the beginning of class on the day a paper is due, set aside time for each student to go over another student’s paper to find errors (the second student signs his or her name to the paper and gets credit for identifying or correcting errors).
- When you find a mechanical error in a draft, do not correct it. Put an X at the end of the line, and make the student responsible for detecting, understanding, and correcting the error.
- Delay recording the grade. If a grade is given, students will ignore marginal corrections you have made. Deferring the final grade until students have made corrections says, “This is important, and you need to be accountable.”
- On the first paper of the semester, mark all the mechanical errors in the first four or five paragraphs. Then tell the students they have to find and correct the errors in the remainder of the paper before you will grade it.
- Explain that once a certain number of errors are found, the paper will be returned ungraded. For example, you correct the first ten errors and then draw a line where you stopped responding. When the corrected version is submitted, the grade will be lowered by half a grade. If you use such a method, you should mark only clear and well-characterized errors, not issues of style or preferred usage. And you should be reasonable.
- Tell students that a paper with more than a certain number of errors will have its grade lowered by a certain percentage.
- If you find a common thread of errors in many of the papers, teach a mini-lesson on those errors and hold students responsible for correcting them in later papers.
- Don’t mark errors in individual papers, but keep a list as you respond to writing and discuss the common patterns during class.
- Show students how to do an error analysis of their own papers. Then direct them to a good website or to the Writing Center, if your campus has one, to learn how to correct the errors.



- If the Writing Center on your campus holds workshops on specific grammar or punctuation issues, ask for a presentation in your class.
- Tell students that—as authors—they are responsible for both content and presentation. Your position is that students who are sloppy with grammar, punctuation, and spelling are just as likely to be sloppy with content.
- Explain that handing in a paper filled with mechanical errors insults the professor. Such a paper says, “You are so unimportant that I am not going to spend any time on mechanics.”

## **USEFUL SOURCES:**

In developing this tipsheet, we are indebted to Colorado State University for its informative site on this topic:

<http://writing.colostate.edu/references/teaching/grading/>

Lunsford, Andrea, and Connors, Robert. “Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research,” *College Composition and Communication* 39 (1989): 395-409.

The following sites contain useful tips on grammar and student writing:

<http://www.dianahacker.com/bedhandbook>

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

