

Thinking About Mechanics across the Curriculum

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(with wisdom drawn from David Klooster, Maura Reynolds, David James, and others)

How can instructors — particularly in fields that may not always focus heavily on written products — help students adjust to college-level expectations concerning the mechanical aspects of their own writing? And more importantly, how can instructors do this without tearing out their own hair?

We've all encountered the problem: the students in classes right across the disciplinary spectrum frequently turn in papers that are riddled with mechanical errors. Spelling errors are less common than they used to be, given the presence of spell-checking software, and even some grammar errors have disappeared when they are perfectly machine-checkable. Even here, however, it's surprising how many very basic spelling and grammar errors show up in spite of the available technology. And in any case, the kinds of artificial intelligence that are available to most students cannot always catch misplaced or misused punctuation, disorganized paragraphs, or hopelessly tangled sentence structure. And some errors are simply a result of our students' stage of intellectual development: a tendency to use words that mean something entirely different from what students think they mean, efforts to emulate writing they consider good, and the absence of regular and intensive writing practice.

More than once, I've sat in my chair, staring at a paper, wondering how this student ever graduated from high school, let alone gained admission to Hope College.

The mind boggles as to where, even, to begin. Should I really correct every error on the page, including things like the failure to capitalize the first word in a sentence? Can I find a word that adequately describes this level of disorganization? Should I just tell the student that this is unacceptable and that she or he needs to start from scratch? Or should I just ignore the mechanics and focus on the content? Often I find it impossible to do that — and even if I could, I don't want to send the signal that punctuation and grammar are irrelevant. In short, I often find myself unsure of how to proceed.

One of the central observations in Tim Clydesdale's remarkable book *The First Year Out* is that most college students are so busy trying to navigate the basic elements of living life on their own — everything from negotiating relationships to figuring out how to do their laundry — that they really have very little time to attend to even the most basic elements of the educational process. They learn very quickly that there are only

assignment at the eleventh hour and still get an acceptable grade (however they define “acceptable”), then that is precisely what they will do.

What our students need from us, more than anything else, is to get a clear signal as to the standard to which their work will be held. They will typically rise to meet those standards, but only if we’re clear about them. If we do anything to suggest that minimal effort is acceptable, they will typically offer minimal effort. This isn’t laziness or stupidity; quite the contrary, they are very good managers of their time, their desires, and their worries. They will put in more time and effort where they must, and less where they need not.

The challenge for instructors, however, is to hold the bar high without committing themselves to spending more hours than they actually have. You could decide to edit every single paper, require revisions, mark up the revisions, send them back for more – in short, you can turn yourself into a copy-editor, if you wish to do so. But that’s a full time job, and you probably have a few other things that you need to do this semester. So here are some strategies that may help.

1. Clear Expectations. I make it very clear in the sy

of my son's teachers in Germany had three: check, X, and skull-and-crossbones.)

Now, although minimal marking is a great strategy, I will admit at the very outset that I have a great deal of trouble putting it into action. I find myself unable to resist enlightening my students and deploying my profound grammatical knowledge. It seems as though my pen just corrects mechanical errors by itself. Still, it helps me to remember something that David James put in a memo to faculty some years back:

At least at the level of mechanics (grammar, spelling, and punctuation), many students can write better than they sometimes display. . . . Moreover, research shows that usually such feedback doesn't teach a writer how to write better next time – it doesn't transfer as we'd hope – so the time and energy spent doing it are wasted anyway. And there's double waste when the writer knew better to begin with but just didn't bother to edit and proofread.

Minimal marking addresses this problem by letting the students decide whether they have just been spending too little time on the mechanical aspects, or whether they really don't understand how to use a comma. If the latter, we have some good resources where they can get help, including their English 113 course (if enrolled), and the Klooster Center. Our Writing Assistants won't proofread the paper for the student, but they will offer explanations of grammar and punctuation rules in ways that are tailored to a particular student's needs.

3. Follow Through. Be sure that whatever you've put in the syllabus about the relative weight of mechanical details aligns with how you grade. And make the problem clear: don't just write "C" and leave it at that; instead, observe that the paper would have received a B+ but for the seventeen mechanical errors in the space of three pages.

4. Bailing Out. If the mechanics are really horrendous – if, after one page, there's a mark on practically every line, or at least one per sentence – I just stop. I then speak with the student (I usually do this only if enrolled) – if enrolled, I let the student know that the paper would have received a B+ but for the seventeen mechanical errors in the space of three pages.

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of the relationship change. The instructor is relieved of the need to play the grammar expert, while the students are required to take responsibility for their own learning. At the same time, this approach emphasizes that mechanical matters are important in writing; students cannot succeed in college without attending to them.

More resources

We're in the process of accumulating various handouts and presentations on the topic of working with student writing. Most of these have been done at Hope College faculty workshops over the years. You'll find them at <http://www.hope.edu/lib/kc/works.html>; this is on the Klooster Center website, which you can reach from the Library's site (click on "Writing" in the left-hand menu), or from the new hope.edu site (in the directory under "go to Academics > Resources and Support, then Klooster Center). Once you arrive, in the lower right-hand corner is a box marked "Posters and Presentations"; click "More..." and you'll reach the page. Describing all this is making me realize that we need a separate "faculty resources" page that's easier to get to! I'll work on it.