

## Providing Feedback about Sentence-Level Issues

Many writers struggle with sentence-level issues, such as sentence structure, word usage, grammar, and mechanics. Although you may find these issues more pronounced in L2 students' writing, all writers seeking to improve their sentence-level clarity and correctness can benefit from the approaches and strategies outlined here.

### First, expect imperfection

It is neither realistic nor productive to expect “perfection” in students' sentence-level writing. In particular, errors in language use and punctuation among some L2 writers (students who use English as their second language) may stem not from a failure to proofread carefully, but from a gap or gaps in their knowledge of the language. Keep in mind that second-language acquisition is a long-term, developmental process that cannot be achieved in one semester, no matter how rigorously errors are marked.

### Mark errors selectively

It is unproductive for both you and the writer to call attention to – or penalize for – every single error in the paper. We suggest that you overlook or suggest alternative text in the margins for errors that students are *unlikely* to be able to correct independently. We suggest that you mark patterns of errors that students are *likely* to be able to correct on their own. The documents linked below will help you tell the difference between these two kinds of errors. You can also contact one of the specialists in multilingual writing at the Sweetland Center for Writing for assistance in making this judgment.

<https://lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/instructors/teaching-resources/providing-feedback-and-grades-to-second-language-students.html>

### Model American formatting conventions

Some students may struggle to produce papers that conform precisely to American formatting conventions. Thus, it may be necessary to explain and provide models of formatting conventions for your students. In particular, formatting conventions that frequently prove to be problematic for international L2 students include, but are not limited to, the following: formatting of dates; ordering of a person's first (given) and last (family) names; indentation; and line spacing.

### Evaluating students' writing for content

If your learning goals and criteria for evaluation include sentence-level issues, we suggest that you assign separate grades for content and grammar. The “content” grade is based on factors such as clear articulation of claim/argument; relevance of the evidence used to support the claim; quality of the analysis of the relationship between claim and evidence; organization; and appropriateness of style for the intended audience. For L2 students, a good deal of leniency should be allowed, as their difficulty in manipulating the L2 may substantially weaken the effectiveness of transitional devices, style, and analytical portions of the text.

If you need help reading beyond sentence-level errors to the meaning that the student wants to convey, any or all of the following strategies can be useful:

- *Individual conferences*: Meet with students between drafts of the paper, so that you can discuss their ideas; discuss the point that they want to make; and explain how you interpreted their ideas, as they are currently expressed.
- *Focus on ideas*: Provide some suggestions for sentence-level revisions that will help to

make their claim or the relationship between ideas more clear.

- *Annotated outline:* Ask students to submit an annotated outline of the paper. An annotated outline describes the goal of each paragraph and may also explain how that paragraph relates to the preceding and/or subsequent one(s). You may need to help students make their first annotated outline; after you provide a model, you can ask that students work independently to create an annotated outline for each paper.
- *Structured questions:* Ask students to fill out and submit a worksheet on which they address (at a minimum) the following questions:
  - What is the claim/argument of the paper?
  - What is each piece of evidence used to support that claim/argument?
  - Why did you choose each piece of evidence?

If you've opted to make sentence-level corrections, do so after students are satisfied with content and the content grade has been assigned.

#### Evaluating students' sentence-level writing

The "grammar" portion of the grade should be based on the student's corrections, not on the student's original draft. Allow a fair amount of leniency, because a particular student may not possess all of the lexical and grammatical knowledge needed to correct all errors, even after they have been brought to their attention and discussed.

Give students time to look through your markings, correct errors that they can, and incorporate suggested sentence-level revisions. Then, meet with the student to discuss the corrections made; to explain how to correct remaining errors; and to discuss the reasons behind suggested revisions as well as the student's understanding of why the suggested revisions are more reader-friendly than the original text.

#### Helping students develop flexibility and fluency in English

Encourage students to seek out models for reader-friendly sentences that use the kinds of vocabulary they want to use. Write a short note in which you suggest that the student engage in one or all of the following practices for finding models of reader-friendly sentences:

1. Keep a vocabulary journal based on the reading done in classes. In this journal, the student should record between five and seven sentences from each reading that use verbs, nouns, or grammatical structures that they would like to use correctly in their own writing and refer to the journal for models as they write.
2. Refer to online dictionaries like the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (<http://www.ldoceonline.com/>) or dictionary.com (<http://dictionary.reference.com/writing/>). Most entries in these dictionaries contain sample sentences that will help the student determine how to use a new word correctly in context.
3. Refer to the instructor-created models for using selected words from their essay correctly.