

Reducing Errors Through Focus on Content and Revision, Lewis Sanborne, St. Ambrose University

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Abstract. In this developmental writing course, for the first half of the semester, voice and content are the sole areas of concentration. During the second half of the semester, sentence level conventions are addressed only in the context of student papers. The results are more confident writers making fewer errors.

Constance Weaver's *Grammar for Teachers* (1979) has had a significant impact on my approach to teaching writing. Her survey of the research showed little support for a connection between an individual's abilities to parse sentences and to generate effective text. Knowing that there is little relationship between these two skill areas, I have dispensed with grammar units in my developmental writing courses, and my thesis for this article flows therefrom: in developmental writing courses, back off; withhold attention to the surface features of writing and give your students the time, space, and freedom to find something to say, to discover that they do have worthwhile ideas, and that their struggles with commas or verb forms have very little to do with the value of their writing.

Each fall I teach two sections of English 100, Introduction to Writing, at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa. Students are placed into the course based on a writing sample that is scored holistically by the English faculty who teach the developmental and traditional first-year writing courses. The ACT English composite score for these students is usually 16 or below. About 20% of our incoming first-year students test into the course.

For the first seven weeks of the semester the students write a paper a week. I mark no errors, give no grades, and return papers with a printed response consisting of no more than three comments about specific parts of each paper and a summary statement. All of my comments are directed toward a single end: revision. What is it that I think each student can do with the paper to make it better, to make points clearer, to develop it fully, to make connections between parts clear, to

identify additional sources, to reorganize? Each paper is different; each student is different; and as the semester progresses, I learn how to tailor my comments to individuals based on their individual experiences and unique histories and approaches to writing. Some of that comes out in papers, some in conferences, and some in their journals, where a number of the guided entries ask them to reflect on various parts of their writing experiences.

My rationale for withholding any attention to surface features is simple: if one of our aims is to help students learn to revise, to rethink their papers and then to improve them, then why mark errors on the first draft? If students actually do revise, and if they make substantive changes to their texts, then what was there in the first version may be gone or significantly changed in the second.

During the eighth week of the semester we spend considerable time in class talking about revision strategies and audience, and students have some time to look back over their papers and decide which ones are worth revising. They are required to revise four of the six papers and are free to disregard two that didn't have what it took, however they define it. For the next four weeks, they revise a paper a week. This time around students have an opportunity in class to have others proofread their papers, and I encourage each writer to fix things that others have helped find. I don't count off for these changes even though the papers may be somewhat sloppier because of it. These papers get comments similar to the rough drafts, except that I also mark surface errors and assign grades.

It is during this first revision phase that we address surface features in the students' writing, but we only do it within the context of that writing. As I read these papers--the first revisions, I lift sample passages, especially those that illustrate problems with sentence boundaries or other errors common to the class. Then when I hand back papers, I do minilectures on whatever the most prevalent errors are. The students get their copies of the lifts and go to work cleaning them up. When we reconvene, we spend lots of time working through their corrections, paying particular attention to why they are fixing things the way they are.

The last couple weeks of the semester students select two of the four revised papers that they are still not satisfied with and run them through one more revision. These papers get very little in the way of comments from me, for there is virtually no chance the students will have any opportunity to revise them again.

There are many benefits to this process. The first is that after only a few weeks of class, it's not like pulling teeth to get students to write. Table 1 shows how the volume of writing increases over the course of the semester. For the draft handed in the first week of September, the classes averaged 638 words per paper. One month later, that average had only climbed approximately two and a half percent. By the end of the fourteenth week of class, however, the average length of drafts for both classes had almost doubled!

Table 1: Volume of Writing Over the Semester

Writing Volume Measures	9/4/96 Draft	10/2/96 Draft	12/6/96 Revision
Paragraphs per Paper	7.30	7.89	12.18
Sentences per Paper	42.78	39.56	75.73
Words per Paper	658.22	655.56	1,286.46
Words per Sentence	14.92	16.57	16.99
Sentences per Paragraph	4.80	5.42	6.22

I should also point out that I do not mandate length requirements. I tell students quite clearly, and believe me, they ask often, that the length of their papers should be determined by what they have to say, not by some arbitrary number imposed by someone else. Many of my comments are directed toward boosting length anyway. Because one thing that often frustrates us about student papers is all that is left unsaid and taken for granted, I put myself in the place of the reader and ask lots of questions in my comment sheets. When the students sit down to revise, with my comments and questions in front of them, they can't help but write longer papers. Furthermore, they are not inhibited by frequent marks on early drafts. What they have to say becomes the focus of their papers, and when their brains are free to focus there, they write more because they do have plenty to say.

It was my hope to be able to illustrate that in addition to longer papers, sentences within them would become more complex as students became more confident about their writing. Table 1 provides some of those numbers, and although there is an increase in average number of words per sentence, the jump is not particularly significant: just over 14 words per sentence in early September, to between 16 and 17 words per sentence a month later, and only just over that number by semester's end.

There is also no evidence here that paragraphs are becoming much longer, running between an average low of 4.80 sentences per paragraph and an average high of only 6.22, an increase of less than one and a half sentences per paragraph. The students did write more paragraphs, from an average of 7 to 8 per paper early in the semester, to over 12 paragraphs per paper by the end of the term. This is probably attributable to two things. First, the nature of my comments probably leads to the insertion of paragraphs. Second, students still struggle to revise what they actually put on paper the first time around: It is easier to add material than to revise what is there.

My second primary hypothesis was that ignoring surface errors during the first half of the semester would bring about a decrease in the number of sentence boundary mistakes by the fifth week of the semester. What I found initially did not support that hypothesis. Overall there was not a significant reduction in sentence boundary errors between the first rough draft, handed in during the first week of September, and the fifth, handed in the first week of October. Table 2 shows that sentence

boundary errors decreased by less than half an error per paper.

Table 2: Sentence Boundary Errors Over the Semester

	9/4/96 Draft	10/2/96 Draft	12/6/96 Revision
Fragment Errors	1.22	1.07	0.45
Comma Splice Errors	1.63	1.33	0.18
Fused Sentences Errors	0.44	0.48	0.45
Total Sentences Boundary Errors Per Page	3.29	2.88	1.08
Sentences per Page	42.78	39.56	75.73

The improvement in error control between those first drafts and the papers students handed in later in the semester, however, was as impressive as the length increase. In the September drafts, students were averaging one sentence boundary error in almost 13 sentences; in the October drafts, they were averaging one sentence boundary error in almost 14 sentences; but by December, the rate had dropped to one error per paper: only one in almost 70 sentences.

I have not formally studied nonsentence boundary errors in student writing, but my sense is that error control is consistent across all features of student papers. We do address other issues in class, subject-verb agreement and homophone spelling errors among others, and they are covered in the lifts exercises as well.

My conclusion is somewhat different from what I expected when I set out on this project. It is not so much that students will naturally stop making mistakes, but that students who have a broader context for their writing, and who have had an opportunity for their confidence to grow, will, when given instruction in fixing sentence boundaries, learn how to fix them. This study did not control for all variables, and there certainly are other factors. One is that many students took advantage of writing tutorial services in our Academic Support Center. Because I direct the writing phase of that program, including training of writing tutors, I can say with confidence that tutors do not "fix" student errors in papers. They do, however, reinforce my methods in the classroom, and when students do want help with punctuation and grammar, tutors know that they should be looking for patterns of errors, helping students identify their errors, showing them how to fix some, and providing feedback as the writers work through others. Students also learn fairly quickly which students in their class have a knack for sentence error spotting, and those people are busy during in-class proofreading sessions. Students also get help from friends in the residence halls, from teachers "back home," or occasionally from their parents.

The point is not necessarily that the methods in my classroom are perfect, but that this method allows students to gain a level of confidence in their writing and to identify strategies that will help them generate quality content and make their papers look the way faculty want student writing to look.

Reference

Weaver, C. (1979). *Grammar for teachers: perspectives and definitions*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
